Testimony of David W. Anderson

Nominated to be Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs

before the

United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

October 22, 2003

I want to thank the Senate committee for the opportunity to appear before you this morning regarding your consideration of my nomination by President Bush to be Assistant Secretary for Indian Affairs. I feel both humbled and honored to be considered for this important position.

My father is an enrolled tribal member of the Great Choctaw Nation and was born and raised on the red earth of Idabel, Oklahoma. My mother is an enrolled tribal member of the Lake Superior Band of Lac Courte Oreilles Ojibwa located in the beautiful northwoods near Hayward, Wisconsin. Both of my parents were raised in BIA schools and met at Haskell in Lawrence, Kansas. I was born and raised in Chicago but spent my summers and later years on the Lac Courte Oreilles reservation in northern Wisconsin.

Throughout my life, I have served tribes in the business and commercial development of their resources and I now look forward to serving at the national level. I felt that my calling in life was that of an Indian businessman. Creating businesses is where I have been the happiest… so I have had to do great soul searching and I have spent considerable time in prayer to consider this request by the President.

The reason why I am here today is because if I am given the opportunity, I sincerely feel that I will make a positive difference both in the Bureau of Indian Affairs and throughout Indian Country.

Some time ago, I determined that if my life was going to be different that I needed to accept 100 percent of the responsibility for changing the character of who I was. I realized that as an American Indian it was no longer acceptable to blame others for my position in life. I came to believe that I had metaphorically won the biggest lottery that anyone could hope for, by just being born into this incredible country. Once I fully understood this, I made up my mind that despite being an academic underachiever early in school, that I was going back to school to complete my education.

Today, I have a master's degree from Harvard University. I have gone from being bankrupt to creating and helping found three publicly traded companies on Wall Street. I have created over 18,000 new jobs in America.

I started my latest business, Famous Dave's of America, on the boundary of the Lac Courte Oreilles Indian Reservation in northern Wisconsin. Famous Dave's of America is a nationally recognized restaurant company with 88 restaurants and nearly 6,000 employees. Each restaurant annually averages between $2.5 million to $5 million for a yearly run rate of over $200,000,000. We have over 100 new restaurants that are signed up and ready to be built in the near future.

I appear here before you as a sober person even though I spent some of my younger years drinking. I have been through alcohol and chemical abuse treatment and today I am not embarrassed to publicly own up to these things because I believe that leaders like myself need to stand up and be the role models to others. We must show that the high alcoholism conditions that we face in our tribal communities can be overcome and put us on the red road of recovery.

In preparation for today's Senate hearing, I have studied many documents that have described the significant problems facing the BIA and its relationship with the tribes. I believe that the reason why I am here today is not because I am the most knowledgeable person in American Indian and Alaska Native issues, but because in my lifetime, I have overcome many formidable adversities and I never quit.

I firmly believe that many other Native people, given the opportunity to seek their vision, acquire their inspiration, and activate the real essence of teamwork, can find the fulfillment of self-determined lives.

Today, I live a life of gratefulness and believe that God has had his protective hand over my life. I have been given a number of second chances in life and I feel that my higher purpose is to make a positive difference in the lives of our Native youth.

The high suicide rates, drop-outs, alcoholism incidents, and unemployment rates within our tribal homelands are occurring not because the federal government is non-responsive or that

the BIA is inefficient, but because many of our youth are growing up without much hope of living lives of achievement or accomplishment. This is where I know that I can have the greatest impact for the future of Indian Country.

Let me be clear early in my comments about the framework from which I would view my leadership role in the U.S. Department of the Interior. From the earliest days of my entrepreneurial and business development work with various Indian tribes, I have gained a working understanding of and an appreciation for the fundamental powers of tribal self-government.

Self-government and self-determination are deciding one's own fate or course of action without threat. It is also the governing of a nation by its own people. Perhaps it is simply a matter of an entire group of people one day just pronouncing, "I am going to do it," and then going out and doing it.

I see a time when Native Americans will innately tap into their deepest, most personal resources, to become all that they truly desire and deserve. There will be a time when all American Indians and Alaska Natives will drive their lives with the extraordinary power of positive thinking, a firm belief in their ideas, and a self-mastery of personal achievement strategies to truly change the face of Indian Country.

As Chief Executive Officer for the Lac Courte Oreilles tribal business corporation, I experienced first hand the difficulties in promoting economic business development and

economic self-sufficiency. I am also very knowledgeable about the opportunities available to Indian tribes. For example, I successfully negotiated the first gaming compact between the Lac Courte Oreilles tribe and the State of Wisconsin.

In recent years, I founded the LifeSkills Center for Youth Leadership, a revolutionary development program that profoundly transforms the lives of American Indian youth and was featured for an Angel Award in 2002 by Oprah Winfrey.

As mentioned earlier, I have a fundamental belief in the personal worth and dignity of each Native American person. My life today is about giving back. I have personally invested millions of dollars in the support of powerful programs and services to promote the re-creation of healthy tribal nations. I have a firm resolve that through the personal development of each Native individual, one person at a time if necessary, Indian Country will once again assume its rightful place of honor as the shining light in America.

I look forward to meetings with tribal leaders and Bureau employees to solicit their ideas and build dialogue about how best to achieve their mission and goals. I will actively seek the advice of those people who, on a daily basis, serve American Indians and Alaska Natives. Communication with them is the key to facilitating any Bureau of Indian Affairs reorganization that will help the Bureau redouble its commitment to improve economic development, transportation, education, and infrastructure development.

I anticipate a positive working relationship with the Senate Committee and its members, the Indian nations, Bureau employees, and other leaders in the field of business, education, and human development as we strive to improve economic conditions and improve the government-to-government relationship that is the cornerstone of Indian self-determination and self-governance.

Thank you.