Good afternoon, I am grateful to have been invited to speak here today at the tenth anniversary of this beautiful center. As referenced in my introduction I have had a long history with this University, as student, alum, faculty, advisory, consultant, and volunteer. It has been a relationship that I believe many American Indians can identify with. In many ways the history of this building and its relationship with the Native community parallels my personal experience.

I am grateful for the unique and enriching experience of my graduate education here at the School of Social Work. The mid 70’s, when I attended, was an exciting and tumultuous time for American Indians. Wounded Knee and other occupations had recently occurred. Ground breaking legislation were being passed and funding for Indian education was available opening many professions to a first generation of Indian social workers, psychologists, educators, and attorneys. Portland State had one of five federally funded social work programs in the nation for American Indians. There were 14 of us in the graduate program, another 15 in the undergraduate program and many more in a PCC feeder program. For the first time in my life, I experienced classes with 40 other American Indians with guest speakers like Dennis Banks, and Vernon Belcourt. But as exciting as those classes were, American Indian students had to fight for legitimacy, contend with open discrimination, they even occupied the president’s office on two occasions to protest poor treatment by the University.

In those early days, PSU graduated dozens of leaders like Anthone Minthorne, Lyndon Bohanan, and Luanna Paul, who would go on to bring change and healing to their communities. The United Indian Students for Higher Education (UISHE) became a proving ground for developing leadership. Dale John, Jay LaPlante and Jillene Joseph come to mind. By the way, the memorial for Dale is here on Saturday at 1 p.m. Faculty and staff like Rose Hill demonstrated that if you could get Indian youth and families on campus for cultural events, salmon bakes, and pow-wows. As high school students, they would come to campus for recruitment events and eventually enroll here. We knew that the education we received here was vital to the health and well-being of our communities, and so we asked our communities to send their sons and daughters here despite knowing that they too would experience much of the same discrimination that we fought so hard to overcome.
I reference this history because it is the ground from which this Center grew. The Native American Student and Community Center was conceived by the alumni, students, Indian faculty, and American Indian community members and built with the collaborative fundraising efforts of the University and the community. Our dream was to have a beautiful place shared by the community and PSU as an outward and visible representation that Indian people are welcome at Portland State University. This building was to be the anchor for getting Indian feet on the ground at this University, further building the connections and familiarity that would bring more Indian students here. We also held out hope that a center like this would be a hub of education to build awareness of our culture and diminish the degree of discrimination that many of us have felt here.

I am now in my 6th decade of life. I have fought many battles on many fronts. I have provided training and education on Indian culture in hundreds of venues and served on more boards and commissions than I can count seeking to raise awareness and gain the respect of the non-Indian world for our people. If there is one thing that I have learned in that time, it is that we live in a post-colonial society where colonial privilege is so deeply engrained that you can count on the non-Indigenous population to oppress the American Indian. We are an inconvenient remnant of a failed genocide. We are a painful reminder that if you build a nation on stolen land and slave labor, you will build a wealthy nation. Colonial powers across the world have controlled the Indigenous populations in the places they conquer, by taking the land, controlling natural resources, usurping the governance, de-legitimizing thought, and taking the children. All of this was done in our country and all of it is still going on.

This building represents a reclaiming. It is a small beachhead on the shores of non-Native thought where our thoughts can have legitimacy, even in a stronghold of the colonial power’s worldview. And, as Native people, we can count on the University and its employees exercising their privilege to have short memories, to forget the vision that gave birth to this facility, and, if we are not diligent, to treat this building as simply a University revenue stream. Just as almost every Native person that has engaged this Institution, has had to struggle to retain their Indian identity, so do we as a community have to always remember to not take this building for granted. Last week I called on President Wiewel to discuss with him the history I have shared with you. I also shared with him concerns that have been expressed to me that we are losing the original intent and the Indian community is wondering why. I asked President Wiewel to investigate these concerns and I am asking the University publically to recommit itself to living up to the name of this beautiful facility, the Native American Student and Community Center. Finally, I also challenge our Indian community, urban and tribal to also recommit to this facility. It cannot survive without our advocacy and support. It deserves our resources and our energy.

I have come to believe that the only way for our Indianness to survive in the post-colonial reality that we live in, we must fiercely hold to the validity of our own culture. We must stand and demand to be recognized for who we are today as Indigenous people and we must hold our post-colonial occupiers accountable and call on them as allies to help us mitigate the harm their oppression has done to our
people. This building is just one outward and visible representation of the successes that are possible when we each bring our strengths to the racial healing needed in our nation.

As we celebrate this anniversary, please let us remember that what has been done here to have this building is no small accomplishment; one we should all support and protect it long into the future.

Thank you.

Terry L. Cross