

# Tribal employee attends State of the Union

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has been chosen as an example of how the Recovery Act is working in America. Housing Authority employee Deborah Powell, whose position with the tribe is funded 100 percent by stimulus funds, was invited to sit in First Lady Michelle Obama's box as the President of the United States gave his first State of the Union address on Jan. 27.

"We are very excited for Debbie and honored that one of our employees has been invited to attend such a prestigious event," said Chief Gregory E. Pyle. "The National Congress for American Indians recognized our efforts to participate in the Recovery Act, to provide more jobs and to ultimately improve the economy in Southeastern Oklahoma."

Chief Pyle attended the State of the Union as the guest of U.S. Congressman Tom Cole.

NCAI works hand-in-hand with federal programs and was able to provide the White House with the information on how the Recovery Act is succeeding in Indian Country.

The invitation was extended to Pow-



**DEBORAH POWELL**

ell because she is an example of how federal stimulus funds have retained and provided jobs in rural America. The Housing Authority has received two awards totaling over \$8 million through the Native American Housing Block Grants program. The grants are targeted primarily toward building additional Independent Living Homes for low-income Choctaw senior citizens. The construction plans were a perfect fit for Recovery Act allocations.

Dante Desiderio, NCAI Economic Development Policy Specialist for NCAI, spoke with Powell and her executive director, Russell Sossamon, on Jan. 26 at the NCAI building in Washington, D.C.

"The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma was chosen because of the cultural aspects and the fact that this project has been over 10 years in the making," Desiderio said of the tribe's project to build Independent Living communities for its elders. "It really affects three generations."

As Development Specialist, Powell tracks how the stimulus funds are being spent. She tracks bids and advertisements for bids as well as following the contracts and their completion dates.

"I am so proud to be representing the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma," said Powell. "Our program has helped reduce the unemployment rate in the area. It has made it possible to give our elders a safe community to live in. We are beginning construction in four sites across Southeastern Oklahoma – 19 additional homes in Poteau, 15 in Hugo, 12 in Talihina and nine in Idabel.

Bids open in February for 15 additional homes in Durant."

"As a result of the Recovery Act, construction continues in the Choctaw Nation," said Sossamon. "We are able to continue Chief Pyle's vision of achieving self-sufficient lifestyles for Choctaw tribal members. We have two Independent Living communities located near schools, one at Jones Academy and one at Idabel where the elders live in an area behind the Choctaw Nation Child Development Center that houses a day care and head start. This provides many opportunities for the youth and elders to interact. It is good for our kids to see how we respect our elders."

Moving to Oklahoma from her home state of Arizona, Debbie and her husband, Billy, live in Fort Towson. A former railroad dispatcher, she began working for the Housing Authority in 2007 but as funding ended for her position in Maintenance, Modernization and Rehabilitation (MMR), she had transferable skills and was able to move to the Development Program.

The Powells' whirlwind trip to our Nation's capitol will never be forgot-

ten.

Billy was allowed to accompany his wife as far as the White House on the night of the State of the Union. They attended a small reception before Debbie was whisked by motorcade amid blazing lights and sirens to the U.S. Capitol Building.

"It was so awesome," she said. "I had my picture taken with President and Mrs. Obama. It was a very emotional moment for me. I never imagined that I would one day be standing in the White House." Debbie said that the President and First Lady were very gracious, making their guests feel comfortable and welcome.

Billy was invited to stay in the theater at the White House with a small group who watched the State of the Union address on a large screen. He saw his wife standing behind Mrs. Obama, saw her shake the First Lady's hand, and heard the President as he spoke of how important small businesses and jobs are to our country.

"We can put Americans to work today building the infrastructure of tomorrow," said President Obama.