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Two Outstanding Leaders are Recognized for Commitment to Building Economies in Native Communities at the 13th Annual Native Awards Ceremony

CHICAGO, IL – Two leaders were honored Tuesday in recognition of their commitment to excellence in the Native CDFI industry at the 2018 Native CDFI Awards Ceremony, part of the 15th Annual Native CDFI Convening hosted by Opportunity Finance Network (OFN) and First Nations Oweesta Corporation (Oweesta).

The **Circle of Honor Award** recognizes a Native CDFI that is successfully increasing access to capital and financial resources in Native communities by developing innovative loan products, promoting community development, and overcoming challenges. The 2018 Circle of Honor Award winner is **Mazaska Owecaso Otipi Financial, Inc. (Masaska)**, a Native CDFI serving the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and adjacent communities. Mazaska demonstrates outstanding leadership within the industry by creating safe and affordable housing opportunities by providing home loans to first-time and existing homeowners, development services such as free financial literacy and homeownership classes, and financial insight to empower Native people to build assets and create wealth. Mazaska's Executive Director, Colleen Steele, is an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe with over twenty years' experience working with Native organizations and has served as Mazaska's primary staff member since 2005. Ms. Steele has been instrumental in raising funds and building the loan program.

In the past two years, Mazaska has: started providing a bridge loan product to veterans on the Pine Ridge Reservation, as well as the USDA Rural Development 502 Pilot Program, a partnership in the works for several years designed to deploy \$1 million to provide low- and moderate-income households with the opportunity to own adequate, modest, decent, safe, and sanitary housing in eligible rural areas. Mazaska is also working with the partner organizations on additional reservation homeownership initiatives, including projects that will pass through \$100,000 for down payment assistance and utilize \$1 million from a capital pool for affordable housing. Additionally, Mazaska is working with the Oglala Sioux Tribe Home Improvement Subsidy program and the Federal Home Loan Bank to provide up to \$10,000 in down payment assistance to qualified borrowers. Finally, Mazaska is partnering with Lakota Funds to

provide mortgage lending at Eagle Nest Housing, which includes 30 units of rental housing currently converting to mortgages, providing the tenants with an opportunity to become homeowners.

“Mazaska was selected from a highly competitive group of Native CDFI nominees and was awarded for their hard work and dedication in working with their community members to support asset building through homeownership, building key partnerships close to home and farther away to support their work, and bringing in diverse sources of capital to then invest in their communities,” shared Chrystel Cornelius, Oweesta Executive Director.

The **Visionary Leader Award** for Outstanding Achievement recognizes a person who has made a long-term contribution to the Native CDFI industry and whose local financing and asset building efforts make them an inspiration for others. **Tawney Brunsch**, Executive Director of The Lakota Funds (TLF), is a trailblazing visionary leader exemplifying a level of commitment to the Native CDFI industry and TLF, where she has served as Executive Director since 2010. She has led TLF through many history-making accomplishments and is a tireless advocate for the Lakota people and for capital access throughout Indian Country. She was a founding board member for the Native CDFI Network and currently serves on Mazaska’s Board. She Chairs the Credit Committee for the Council for Native American Farmers and Ranchers and serves on the Federal Home Loan Bank’s Advisory Council. Tawney is also actively involved with the South Dakota Native Homeownership Coalition (SDNHC), where she chairs the Physical Issues Committee and serves on the Executive and Veterans Committees.

Under Ms. Brunsch’s leadership, Lakota Funds started the Lakota Federal Credit Union (LFCU), the first federally-insured financial institution on the Pine Ridge Reservation, which as of 2018 also offers checking accounts (250 people opened one in the first two weeks). TLF has also developed an innovative partnership with Lakota Federal Credit Union and First Peoples Fund to take services to communities throughout the reservation with the Rolling Rez. Rolling Rez is a mobile unit which delivers financial literacy training, artist business development training, and financial services through Lakota Federal Credit Union and allows TLF to reach the most marginalized individuals in all 9 reservation districts.

In 2017, TLF deployed over \$1.1 million in loans, creating 105 jobs and starting or expanding 46 small businesses on the Pine Ridge Reservation. They helped prepare 326 tax returns returning almost \$900K in tax refunds to Tribal members. In fall 2015, TLF was the first Native CDFI approved as a USDA Farm Service Agency guaranteed lender. This allowed TLF to offer more financing solutions for reservation farmers and ranchers. TLF has also seen growing assets totaling over \$6 million and in early 2018, the organization was approved to participate in the first-ever Native Capital pool through Oweesta.

Additionally, growing efforts to increase residential housing stock have led to increased demand for contractors and local inspectors on the reservation but the largest barrier is lack of a qualified workforce. In summer 2017, TLF partnered with SDNHC, Oglala Lakota College, and Four Bands Community Fund on the Cheyenne River Reservation in South Dakota to launch the Construction Internship Pilot. This innovative program delivered an intensive hands-on work experience to participants from the Cheyenne River and Pine Ridge Reservations. Twenty-three students from both Reservations participated in the program, in partnership with local contractors. Upon completion of the program, nine local students received offers of permanent employment. To further support contractor business development, TLF also provided two home inspector certification trainings and contractor workshops to build skills for the validation process required when building using HUD 184 funds. More than 70 people attended the inspector certification trainings, several whom either obtained jobs or started their own home inspection business upon certification.

“Tawney Brunsch is a true example of how hard work, dedication, collaboration, and innovation come together to best serve the community. Tawney’s persistent pursuit of doing better and creating more opportunities for her clients is what we all aspire to do in the Native CDFI industry and I feel so honored to have the chance to celebrate such a strong leader,” added Chrystal Cornelius, Oweesta Executive Director, First Nations Oweesta Corporation. “We are genuinely excited to honor the success of our award winners. And we appreciate OFN for recognizing the achievements of these recipients.”

“Congratulations to this year’s wonderful Native Award winners. OFN values the opportunity to recognize Mazaska and Tawney for their amazing and dedicated work serving Native communities,” said Lisa Mensah, President and CEO of Opportunity Finance Network (OFN), a leading national network of CDFIs. “Each year, OFN is impressed by the positive economic impact of the Circle of Honor and Visionary Leader award recipients. And both of these remarkable honorees are at the forefront of positive change in their respective communities.”

The awards ceremony capped off the 15th Annual Native Convening in conjunction with the 34th Annual OFN Conference where Native economic development practitioners and Tribal representatives from across the country joined hundreds of other opportunity finance experts to share and learn about new ideas, strategies for change, and innovations from the field.

For more information on Mazaska Owecaso Otipi Financial, Inc., please visit their website at www.mazaskacdfi.org.

For more information on Tawney Brunsch and The Lakota Funds, please visit www.lakotafunds.org.

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First Nations Oweesta Corporation provides opportunities for Native people to develop assets and create wealth by assisting in the establishment of strong, permanent institutions and programs, leading to economic independence, and strengthening sovereignty for all Native communities. Oweesta is the oldest Native CDFI intermediary offering financial products and development services exclusively to Native CDFIs and Native communities. Specifically, Oweesta provides training, technical assistance, investments, research, and policy advocacy to help Native communities develop an integrated range of asset-building products and services, including financial education and financial products. For more information, visit www.oweesta.org.

About OFN Opportunity Finance Network (OFN), the national network of community development financial institutions (CDFIs), strives to ensure low-income and other under-resourced communities have access to affordable, responsible financial products and services. Members of OFN are CDFIs that deliver responsible lending to help low-income communities join the economic mainstream. Through 2016, OFN’s network originated \$54 billion in financing in rural, urban, and Native communities. This financing has helped to create or maintain more than 1,202,000 jobs, start or expand more than 256,000 businesses and microenterprises, and support the development or rehabilitation of nearly 2 million housing units and more than 10,000 community facility projects. For more information, visit www.ofn.org.