



Pamala M. Silas (1959-Present)

Executive Director

National American Indian Housing Council

"The need is great and we need you." Pamala Silas, 2005.

Overview

Silas is the Executive Director of the [National American Indian Housing Council](#). There she represents housing interests of Native people who reside in Indian communities, Alaska Native Villages, and on native Hawaiian Home Lands, promoting and supporting Native housing entities in their efforts to provide culturally relevant and quality affordable housing on behalf of Native people. She advocates for their housing opportunities and increased funding for Native American housing and community development programs; providing training in many areas of Native housing management; providing on-site technical assistance for Native housing professionals; and conducting research and information services related to Native housing issues and programs.

This interview was conducted in 2010.

Early Life and Education

Pamala Silas was born on September 1, 1959, to Marilyn and John Silas. She spent much of her childhood in various Milwaukee-area foster homes until, at age 14, she went to live with her birth mother in Chicago. Silas says her experiences as a foster child sparked a strong desire to make social programs work better for the people who use them.

Silas graduated from DePaul University in 1991 with a degree in economics, and immediately joined the [American Indian Economic Development Association](#) (AIEDA) as the housing coordinator. In this position, she assisted the Chicago American Indian community, 94 percent of whom are renters, with their housing needs. She also gave workshops on tenant rights and home ownership, and provided crisis mediation and intervention services. The organization grew during Silas' tenure, and she was eventually promoted to program director where she oversaw programs in Housing, Research and Advocacy, and Cultural Arts. Silas' experience with the organization helped her eventually earn a position with the [Metropolitan Tenants Organization](#), where she worked on aggressive grassroots campaigns defending and promoting tenant rights. Through both jobs, Silas was introduced to issues of lead poisoning and mold in low-income housing, which sparked a broader interest in environmental impact on vulnerable

populations. Silas is currently the executive director of the [American Indian Science and Engineering Society](#) in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Throughout her career, Silas has relied on a number of mentors for encouragement and support. She met the majority of these mentors, whom Silas credits as central influences on her future grassroots organizing efforts, through a project designed to build grassroots-organizing capacity in communities of color. She notes that she benefited from their experience and wisdom in developing organizing strategies; but equally important, they challenged many of her beliefs, and helped her to reflect on some of the more difficult periods of her life. Silas also depended on other members of the Chicago Native American community, who shared with her Indian history, showed her how government policy has affected current conditions in Native American communities, and helped re-enforce her cultural identity as a Native American.

Mentoring Others

The benefit Silas has derived from mentoring has led her to mentor others. She has provided pro-bono consulting services to start-up non-profit organizations, while mentoring the volunteer board and staff in organizational development and grassroots organizing. She has also worked with AmeriCorps Vista volunteer organizers. Silas advises her mentees that there are many roles in the environmental movement, from law to activism to hard science, and says the need for people with varied experience and areas of expertise is great. Silas notes that as she ages and gains experience, she is spending more time mentoring others.

Highlights

As for career highlights, Silas is especially proud that a program she helped found received a prestigious national award from the Harvard School of American Indian Economic Development. The program, the Menominee Community Center of Chicago, was recognized for its success in bridging the Reservation tribal community with its urban members in Chicago. Silas says this project allowed her to utilize her organizing skills to achieve something many believed to be impossible.

Challenges

While Silas says her career high points definitely outweigh the lows, she has also experienced the occasional obstacle. She recalls one instance in which she was recruited by a large national foundation to create a demonstration project. After devoting three years of intellectual effort, community resources, and fundraising to the project, Silas was let go before being able to see the project materialize. She believes her race and community values played a role in that decision.

Despite such instances of discrimination, Silas maintains a career in the environmental field because the environment is so important to American Indian communities economically, socially, and spiritually. In following with the American Indian tradition, the environment cannot be seen as isolated from other issues: it permeates all elements of society, and, indeed, of life.