

LAKOTA LEATHERS | BY ALEX HARRELL

BELIEVING IN BUFFALO

Ken Bohling was mopping his kitchen floor one day in 2007 when “Three Chiefs” by Marty Stuart came on Knoxville, Tennessee’s local radio station. By the end of the 9-minute song, Bohling found himself “crying like a baby” on his couch. The song inspired Bohling to research the Lakota people of the Dakotas.

What he found was troubling. So troubling he began bringing personally-collected donations to South Dakota’s Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in an effort to help the Native Americans through tough times. He made the 2,800-mile drive two more times before having an idea that hit him like “a stack of bricks.”

Bohling was playing banjo for a living back then and was using a buffalo strap he was given 25 years earlier. “Man, they can make these out there,” he had thought at the time. “If I can get the necessary tools, we can start making straps out there.” And thus began Lakota Leathers.

Nine years later, the company produces guitar, mandolin and banjo straps assembled by families on the Pine Ridge Lakota Sioux Indian Reservation that are made out of bison and elk leather. The straps are sold in approximately 150 stores, with retailers in Switzerland, Germany, Canada, Italy and Korea. In mid-November of 2016, OMG Music, a manufacturer and distributor of guitar straps and accessories, became the company’s exclusive dealer wholesale, worldwide.

OMG, A DISTRIBUTION DEAL

“OMG Music is known for its strap sales. When I



From left: OMG Music's Chester Myron, Mark Blasko, Darren Roberts and Brett Marcus; Lakota Leathers' Kenny Bohling and OMG Music's Ben Myron.

An exclusive distribution deal opens doors for its customers and South Dakota’s Pine Ridge Indian Reservation

was looking to expand, it was the first on my list to contact,” Bohling said.

And OMG Music was aware of Lakota’s presence, too.

“These straps not only have a special look and feel, but a very powerful story that resonates with customers,” said Mark Blasko, partner/director of operations at OMG Music. “Being able to offer a U.S.-made product can really be a differentiator for dealers.”

For Bohling, the deal opens new doors for both his company and his workers, who have become more like friends and family over the years. “[OMG]

has a broader market than we do, which will hopefully bring a bigger production to the reservation,” he said. “We could give [them] a steadier income, which is what I hope OMG will help us bring to the table.”

But the big win, according to Blasko, is that current OMG customers now have direct access to the Lakota line without paying more than they would have if purchased directly.

“Lakota customers who are new to OMG can take advantage of the benefits of having direct access to one of the most diverse strap offerings in the industry,” Blasko said.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

“When I first started going out there, I thought I was going to change the world and help fix the reservation,” Bohling said. He quickly realized, however, that a “500-year-old problem” can’t be fixed. But what he can do is help. And for Lakota Leathers, this philosophy has been working for the past 10 years.

“That’s the most I can hope for at this point: To continue to be very close with a couple of families and make a difference in their lives. And they’re making a difference in our lives, it’s a mutual benefit,” Bohling said. “And so that’s what we do.” **MI**