Interview with Potawatomi Women Leaders

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Bozho, dear listeners. I greet you in the language of my Potawatomi ancestors and my tribe today. I am Randy Kritkausky, host of this show. I am an enrolled tribal member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation.

This episode of Indigenous Perspectives originates, not from my tribal homelands, but from N'dakinna, the un-ceded traditional territory of the Abenaki people who for thousands of years were and continued to be stewards of the lands to be found in the state of Vermont in the northeastern United States and across the Canadian border in southern Québec Province. I always begin by acknowledging where we come from, as this program focuses on understanding our roots in Mother Nature and our connections with our ancestors.

On this show, we have two guests who are Potawatomi: Paige Willet is talking with us from Oklahoma in the southwestern United States where our reservation is located; Eva Marie Carney is talking with us from the east coast of the United States, far from our tribal reservation. Paige is a journalist who works on our tribal newspaper. Eva is a tribal legislator. I will have each of them tell you more about who they are, and what they do, during this program.

Let's lead off with Paige. Can you give us a quick overview of who the Potawatomi are, for those who maybe have never heard about us before? Except in my intros!

Paige Willet: You know, that's a very common thing when I'm talking with people, even here in Oklahoma, they say 'You're a Citizen Potawatomi? I've never heard of them before'. So: Citizen Potawatomi were actually originally a Great Lakes tribe, of the Aninishinaabe people, part of the Three Fires Council. And so originally in the Great Lakes region, back before in the 1600s.

Basically the Potawatomis' first connection with Europeans and European contact was actually French fur traders. So, many Potawatomi surnames are French actually. When the French fur traders came over, we sort of helped them, kind of taught them how to hunt in our area. So really kind of think, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, those areas.

Most people don't think of there being tribes in the Great Lakes. But of course, one thing I always try to remind people of, is that before the Europeans were here, there were an entire continent full of people. So, you know, it, it wasn't just people magically appeared or something, or that this was only land that was just free and open.

No, there are people here, you know! And so through forced removal – in the 1800s, Potawatomi actually were forced down - on what we refer to as the Trail of Death - down to Kansas and, settled on a reservation there. Later, through many, many treaties with the government, eventually taking allotments in Oklahoma, and much more history after that as well. But, basically forcibly removed three times in 75 years.

Randy: Eva, you can help us with this. What does it mean to go from being a tribe in the upper Midwest to be - by treaty - relocated on other land? What legal status does that give to the current Potawatami?

Eva Marie Carney: Well, actually before I answer that question, I just want to give a little illustration to you of where we were, and what we were at one point. So we controlled what is now the city of Chicago, for example, and those waterways. Land that we hunted on and lived on is now the land that's under the University of Notre Dame.

My own direct line - my sixth great grandfather and his wife - were the original settlers of the city of Milwaukee. And he, you know, illustrating Paige's remark about the French fur traders, his last name was Juneau. And at one point I got to see his citizenship application and papers sitting in the museum, at the Milwaukee in Milwaukee.

So, you know, my Potawatomi ancestor, his wife was a very beloved person, very sophisticated family as were our families generally. I don't think people understand that. I saw a letter from her at that same museum telling their girls to continue studying their piano and their French. Those were not, you know, what many people think of as poor Indian people

So to get back to your question, Randy, what it means is dispossession. It means, you know, when we - I have been to Sugar Creek in Kansas where we were forcibly removed at gunpoint from our homes, at that point in Indiana, people that were particularly walked down. And what you see there is open area, hills, cold dank environment, because they arrived in November. And, when you understand that they had to dig their own wells, they had to find, you know, figure out a way to keep themselves sheltered. Some 40 people died on that march. But beyond that, you know, first being in Kansas and then, you know, the removal or the agreement to move, I guess, to sell land and moved to Oklahoma really was, you know, a choice that was not really a choice.

It was a decision that was made by people who knew that they needed to protect their families; in the main that was their big consideration. And, you know, and people who Paige and I stem from, were of the mind that it was better to make arrangements with the *[United States]* federal government, and to take citizenship and individual allotments of land, than it was to stay on a reservation, living communally with an ongoing risk that that reservation land was going to be taken from them as well.

And one of the things that's so interesting is now, you know, we have a whole tradition of - our art, for example, is the art of a Woodlands people. You know, in Oklahoma, there are those flowers and plants, the maple syrup that, we used to, you know, the maple sugar that we used to harvest from a sugar bush and all those things, none of those things are where we are now, but you know, those are traditions that in many ways have been lost to the Citizen Potawatomi because of the terrain and where we wound up having to live.

Randy: Before we dig into the dislocation, let's try to explain a little bit to the

listeners. What it meant to have these treaties? What kind of status did that give us on these little pieces of land that we ended up holding in Oklahoma? And what kinds of power, influence , authority does that give the tribe currently in Oklahoma?

Flag of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation
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Eva: Okay, well, I think we say that we are the most "treatied" of any of the Native nations. I think we signed over 40 treaties. So on the one hand, that means that we had significant resources. And I guess you would say bargaining power at some level. A treaty is supposed -is supposed to be -a contract between two equals with obligations on both sides. Previous treaties have not been respected. But you know, because of the treaties that we have signed, we do have the right to certain things like medical care.

We are recognized as a separate sovereign entity when it comes to dealing with the federal government. For example, if we ask the federal government to take land, that is our reservation land, that was our reservation land, but kind of, you know, dropped off the reservation. If we buy it as a people, as a nation and ask the government to put that into trust, that then becomes land that is our land to do with what we wish. We can tax people who buy products done in businesses that are on that land. We can assert legal

authority over businesses and individuals who contract with us on that land. You know, and so on.

Randy: So if we are a nation, as well as a tribe, does that mean that we have dual citizenship? What, how does that work?

Eva: Yes, in fact, it does mean that we are dual citizens of the United States and the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. We, as a people, have our own constitution. We've relatively recently reformed our constitution and in the *[19]*80's, I guess it was, and again in the 2007 timeframe, and in that respect, we have our own governing body ; you mentioned that. I said, as a legislator, we have three branches of government just as the *[United States]* federal government has three branches of government. We have an executive branch, legislative branch and a judicial branch. And those of us who are Citizen Potawatomi subject ourselves to the laws and regulations of the nation.

Randy: So, Paige to turn this back to you, just for a moment, we've previously talked about your job, trying to communicate with the members of the nation. And for listeners, it might be slightly confusing because they now have a visual image of a reservation, and then they have an image of private allotments in Oklahoma. But you have another image of our tribe, which is people scattered all over the face of the earth, who are nevertheless members of the nation. How do you work to keep all of us connected?

Paige: Oh, absolutely, it's one of the best parts of my job, if not the absolute best part. I love talking with tribal members from all over. So as we were mentioning how, you know, we have been forcibly removed and dislocated for hundreds of years. Basically what that means is that tribal members have spread all around. You know, there was a really hard time during the Great Depression when a lot of Oklahomans moved to California. So there are actually a significant number of Potawatomi in California. But, you know, I've also talked to people in, Germany and Paris and Australia, just all over.

So we are everywhere. And I think that the *[Hownikan, monthly tribal news]* paper is one of the best ways that we keep in touch with everyone and let

them know what's going on. Because as a tribe we have, especially in my lifetime, have really focused on being able to be there for tribal members no matter where they are.

And I think a big part of that too, is our legislators and things that Eva does, hosts meetings with the Citizen Potawatomi in her district. So I love talking with people from everywhere. I think it's great to highlight to other people who aren't in Oklahoma, that there are CPN members next to them. You know, there are CPN members who take great pride in their heritage and in their culture, who may not be directly on or near tribal land or work for the tribe, or are able to participate in every single thing that's going on.

Randy: So our listeners would probably be a bit surprised to know, because they have Hollywood movie images of where and how Indians live, they would be surprised to know that 70% of people in the United States who identify themselves as Indigenous don't live on a reservation, they actually live in what, from the census perspective is called a metropolitan area.

So what kinds of challenges and opportunities does this create for the tribe, when you have so many people who like me, the very title of the book I just wrote, "Without Reservation", meaning outside of the reservation, what kinds of challenges are there for governance and building identity?

Eva: Well, I think that there are real challenges. And I think one of the things that I think we've done, that's very ingenious to seek to address that at some level, is to create this, the legislature that we have, which provides for representation by locally - by people who are living locally - all around the country, in this legislature that is for a tribe that is based in Oklahoma.

So in other words, you know, I live in Virginia. With my election to the seat that I hold, I became responsible for providing constituent assistance, information and sort of community building to all of the Citizen Potawatomi that live in the thirteen mid-Atlantic and southern states and the District of Columbia. So that's a very wide swath of land. The reason I have such a big district is that there are not so many Citizen Potawatomi that live in this area.

There is a legislator that simply represents only everyone in the state of Kansas. There are two legislators that share the state of California. So within the realm of being a legislator, I think it's an obligation to work to bring information to people who are far from the seat of government in Shawnee, Oklahoma, so that they understand what the issues are. They feel connected. They begin to understand their opportunities to learn the language that they've perhaps never heard spoken and only have read words of the language in our Hownikan newspaper, for example. That there are, as Paige was saying, surprisingly perhaps, people who also are Citizen Potawatomi who live within driving distance of them.

So when I have the meetings that I hold throughout the district, you know, my goal is to build in effect these mini communities of Potawatomi who - they don't need me to convene them to share information and ideas and to start building, building community. And that's truly one of the sort of the best parts of my job, I think, and over - I've been doing this now, we reformed our constitution. We started this new legislature in 2008. I was fortunate enough to be elected to that inaugural body. And I continue to serve. So, that kind of continuity, I think, has helped me to get the message out to more and more people.

But I would tell you- I mean, even yesterday, I got a phone call from someone living in Florida who expressed that he was feeling disconnected from his tribe. He had moved from Oklahoma. There was much more going on for him in Oklahoma, not just Citizen Potawatomi, but other Native people. He knew where he could go to attend a sweat. He knew people he could ask who were elders, about things that he was becoming interested in learning more about, but he didn't have that down in Florida. Now I can't provide all of those things to him, but I can, and I did, kind of connect him up to the community by telling him about, you know, some resources and opportunities that were available, inviting him to come to the next, you know, our next meeting that we'll have in Florida. I think just, you know, I think he left the call feeling that there was a community to which he could connect and engage.

Randy: I can testify that you're more than a legislator; you're an ambassador.

Because I first met you when you traveled to Vermont, out of your legislative district, to give us an update on tribal affairs and you participated in a naming ceremony of one of our family members. And that, that moment in our family history was totally transformative and made us feel connected in ways that are almost impossible to express in words.

And I think that's the value of the work that both of you do in very different, but coordinated ways, which is keeping those of us who are off the reservation connected with those threads of culture that are the richness of our heritage. And I just want to take this opportunity to say thank you very much, because our lives are greatly enriched by that. We're going to take a quick break and come back after the break and pick up the conversation. Thank you.

Segment 2

We're picking up the discussion by looking at the background of our guests, Paige Willett and Eva Marie Carney. Let me ask both of you how it was that you came to be involved with tribal affairs? How and when you awakened to being Potawatomi?

Paige: Well, I know for me personally, you know, my Mom is my Potawatomi side of my family. And she grew up in Shawnee, Oklahoma, which is right near where CPN is located. And I really think her life story is kind of a testament to how harsh colonialism can be, and how culture can be, you know, taken from a line of people so quickly. So when I was young, I was not really that involved - hardly at all, I will say, I will admit! But my Mom always read the paper, always, always, always. And I was in college and she said, Paige, there is this great program for college-aged kids called the Potawatomi Leadership Program. And it's going to be all summer for six weeks and you should really do it. And she really, really encouraged me.

And so I decided to apply and thankfully I got accepted. So that summer I spent - that was in 2010 - I spent six weeks learning absolutely everything that I could about the tribe. It was extremely hands-on and I met so many amazing people. I learned so much culture and history and just everything that you could possibly imagine. It taught me better how our federal

government functions, because I got to look at how our tribal government functioned. And also I got to meet the editor of Hownikan newspaper, which is the newspaper that I write for now. So it was just a real blessing that I got to do that. And afterwards I stayed connected. I got to write for the paper more.

Randy: And you met Eva.

Paige, And yes, I met Eva.

Randy: Eva, so what was your journey? What was your path?

Eva: So, like Paige, I trace my Potawatomi heritage through my mother. She and her family were from the Topeka Kansas area - we have many, many tribal members in Kansas - but they had been - she had relocated as a teenager to New Jersey. And so I actually am, you know, I was born in New Jersey. And as someone who's lived in the East, I always knew that we were Citizen Potawatomi. That was something that was very important to my mother's mother and my grandmother, and she enrolled all of her grandchildren, and that was extremely important . I was, it was something that I always was intrigued by and proud of, yet not particularly knowledgeable about.

And then- you know, I'm a trained lawyer, I went to law school - I stayed on the East Coast. And at some point - I guess it was in the early to mid 2000s - the CPN executive branch started a program of coming out to the regions of different regions of the country and talking about the tribe, talking about sovereignty and, talking up this idea of reforming the government and the constitution. And I attended a couple of those meetings, when our chairman had them, not too far from me. I remember taking my children and being so excited that they were going to have the opportunity to meet the chairman of our tribe and to learn some, some things about our heritage.

Sort of fast forward a few years. And then that talk about the constitution became a reality. When our people, we put that question to a vote and we approved the changes. And then, you know, I basically was not so connected

that I even really understood that I could have the opportunity to, you know, seek the position in my area.

But because of the paper - we keep coming back to this paper, which is kind of the connective tissue for our tribe - but because of the paper, I saw an announcement and I thought - I was nervous. I've got to tell you. I'd never been to Oklahoma. I didn't have a sense really of what it would be, but I thought, you know, when am I going to have this opportunity to meet so many fellow Potawatomi and to be part of something that is so new and, you know, and so important. So I threw my hat in the ring at that point. And then when I got elected, that was the first time I actually got on a plane and stepped foot in Oklahoma. So unlike Paige, you know, I still don't know that much about those - about Oklahoma. We meet virtually as a legislature and so, you know I come back maybe once a year for our family reunion festival, but over this last 13 years, I guess it is, you know, my knowledge of the people and our history and heritage has just grown exponentially.

Randy: So there's a unifying theme that the three of us share, which is we didn't necessarily grow up in households steeped in Potawatomi culture. And we have discovered it more recently in our lives. And a lot of that discovery and the thread that has kept us anchored to the tribe is the newspaper. It's wonderful in this day and age of electronic social media, that this wonderful, folded paper that comes with all kinds of stories about who we are, once a month, has, you know, kept the fires burning.

Paige: Well, a lot of my job is digital! I will say that!

Randy: Maybe we need to talk about that for a moment because that's, again, that's outside of my generational, you know, frame of thinking. And let's, let's try to pick that up after the break and go a little deeper into what you do and what the tribe does to keep, you know, keep us connected.

I just want to say that, I think what we're getting out front here, and clarifying for listeners, is how this widely scattered nation is full of many, many people

who are in the process of rediscovering and deepening their connections, not just with the reservation, but with our history. And for me, it's with our ancestors, and with place. So we'll, we'll pick up that theme after the break.

Segment 3

We're back to discussing how the Citizen Potawatomi Nation has maintained some continuity with its history, and is developing new ways of keeping its widely diverse and scattered population involved. Paige, before the break, you were correcting me quite rightfully, generationally, saying that it's not just about this paper, but there are many other media resources that you're involved with that keep people involved. Can you talk briefly about some of those avenues of connecting us culturally?

Paige: Oh, absolutely. I mean, obviously, you know, this is 2021. (I can't believe I'm even saying that year number now!) But you know, social media is so huge. And a lot of my job is digital. You know, we put out the paper digitally. So even wherever anyone is, they're able to access the paper from our website. You know, I help run our social media accounts. We have a lot of interaction over Facebook with tribal members asking us all sorts of questions, loving all of the articles that we're posting that either teach something cultural, a bit of the history highlights, something that the tribe is doing, or, you know, showcasing another tribal member, who could in reality be very, very close to them or be one of their relatives. So I love seeing people really dig in online and learn as much as they can.

The Cultural Heritage Center website as well is a great resource for genealogy. Learning the language: there are all sorts of online resources for learning the language as well, which our language department does an amazing job. And then we get to showcase that on the Facebook page and everything, and put those out there for people. So they're able to learn. So yeah, just a lot of, a lot of connection. We get to highlight the events that Eva and other legislators hold as well, inform people that those are going on, whether, you know, now whether they be a Zoom call, or whether they be something in person.

Randy: So Eva you've carved out, I think a very, very special niche, which I only recently learned about. You created a support organization aimed at helping women. Can you talk a bit about the work of the Kwek Society, how it came about, and your collaboration again with Paige?

Eva: Sure. I'd be happy to do that. And, I must say that I have to thank you, Randy, for showcasing us in the PSA's you have on this radio show. So that's something that I think has gotten the word out about us.

So, the Kwek Society is a 501(c)3 charitable organization. It is a nonprofit. I started it about four years ago. I don't know if people know what period poverty is, but about four years ago, more people started learning about it. And what it is, is when you do not have sufficient resources to buy the period products you need, when you have your *[menstrual]* period. You could miss work, you can miss school. And a number of people around the country have become aware of this issue, vocal about this issue. But what I saw was that, no one was thinking about it for Native people in communities.

And with that knowledge I started the Kwek Society - "kwek", by the way, means women in the Potawatomi language - to address the issues across North America. So, I thought that it was important to do it myself and with other Native people, because I wanted to be sure that we addressed the issues and approached those that we were going to help in an appropriate way, in a way that was respectful. And in a way that was a listening mode: What does the particular community of menstruators need? What do they want?

And so, what has been very heartening is the amount of support from Native people in terms of providing funds, conducting drives for the supplies, and spreading the word. So, we've really formed a community of donors as well as a community of partners, schools, and organizations. So we're up to 57 organizations and schools at this point that we're supporting with supplies - over half a million supplies given out since we began.

And Paige has taken an important role in our work. She can't stop being a journalist apparently, because she is the editor for our newsletter, that we've

been able to get out. This will be our third edition. And if your listeners are interested, I'd love for them to go to our website, kweksociety.org, and sign up for the newsletter. You can do that right on the website.

One of the key things we're doing that I love, is showcasing different traditions, traditional teachings about puberty and menstruation, which many Native people call Moontime. So, if you go on the website, you will see information about the Berry Fast, which is something that some traditional Potawatomi people will engage in during first period - that's a girl's first period - and other traditional approaches to menstruation as well. So we're trying to blend the traditional information with education about this need, in a way that makes it clear that these are not poor, native people. These are people that need a hand in order to be able to be who they are ready to be, with the right support.

Randy: I love the fact that you're talking about rites of passage, which is an aspect of mainstream society that is relatively absent. Indigenous people have always had rites of passage, to mark and help the transition between various stages of life. And -

Paige: I had someone tell me the other day, you know, Natives can't stop celebrating, and I love that.

Randy: Wow.

Paige; I love it.

Randy: Wow. That's beautiful.

Eva: Well, that's the theme of the Kwek Society is "celebrate Moontime". That's, that's it in a nutshell. Right there!

Randy. Wow. Thank you. Thank you. That's a beautiful summary of what you do. We need to take another brief break and then we'll be back to carry on the conversation.

Segment Four

We're back for the final segment of Indigenous Perspectives, with our guests Paige Willett and Eva Marie Carney. And we concluded the last segment on a upbeat, wonderful note, talking about the tendency of Native Americans to celebrate.

I'd like to pick up that theme and connect it to a theme that is really at the heart of who we are, and must be right now: the notion of resiliency. So could either of you start off by talking about how we use celebrations to maintain our tribal culture and communicate it and to build enthusiasm?

Paige: Well, I feel like so much of tribal culture is focused on celebration. You know, even celebrating being able to be together in hard times, you know, no matter what that looks like. And I think another big thing in speaking of in the current day, another huge part of celebration, I feel like, surrounds Native resiliency. You know, that's one thing that people who are not familiar with tribal cultures or, you know, indigenous cultures, think that Native Americans are not here anymore. And that is just absolutely not the truth.

And when I am writing for the paper or when I am interviewing people for the podcast, lots of different parts of my job, I always think about how resilient everyone is. I don't know; it just seems to be a whole theme through everything that I'm running in and everyone that I talk to, is that we're still here. People are doing amazing things. I think the Kwek Socety is just, you know, a huge, amazing example of that. And, people are really taking their culture into their own hands and getting what they want from reconnecting. And I think that is definitely something to be 100% celebrated.

Randy: Eva, can you talk about your work? Because we think of a legislator as someone who comes and stands in front of us and gives us a report on pending legislation. But my acquaintance with you, as I said earlier, is from a naming ceremony, sharing food, being around a fire, learning about our culture, celebrating our culture. I think of you as an ambassador before I think of you as a government legislator. Can you, can you elaborate?

Eva: Well, actually, thank you for that. But I think of myself as like a, I guess

I'm a lifelong learner, and there's so much that I continue to learn, as I go along and meet so many people. But the goal I think for so many of us is to connect to our past and move into our future. And I think we all, you know, hearing the stories about the loss and the suffering of those that have come before us, we owe it, I think, to those in whose path we're now walking, to be our best selves and to carry on for the next seven generations.

And so what I love most about my position of being able to travel around and meet people is just that – is to meet people where they are, to share with them what I have learned. Whether we're talking about telling our traditional winter stories that have been passed on from our elders that we only tell during the winter time, to talking about what the significance is of the eagle in our particular tradition. And how we might learn how to build a fire with flint and steel, and why that's something that we might want to do to connect up to the past and to pass on to people, to - into our family.

And, yeah, you are so right about the meal. One of the most critical things of any Potawatomi meeting I think is, you know, sharing food together. And I just had a meeting, unfortunately over Zoom, this past weekend to talk with people about connecting up through our Cultural Heritage Center to ancestry research, what's available in our family records, how you can learn more about your past and - dang it! We had to stop at 12:30, and nobody got to eat! So, you know, that was unfortunate because after it's over, it's over those kinds of communal, you know, that communal time of sharing of a meal that I think we really do connect up with the past.

Randy: I love the idea of community and sharing food, and Paige, I have to thank you. You just ran an article in the newspaper about maple sap gathering written by my cousin. And she explained how it's a vibrant part of our Woodland culture. And here in Vermont, the sap has begun to run. And I have to say in the last week, which has been a difficult week - the national and global news hasn't been the most cheerful - I have found that going out and gathering the gift that the trees have to give us has raised my spirits in ways I've never experienced before.

So I think part of our tribal community - which we haven't talked about much on this program, but I've talked about on other programs where the topic was animism - part of that community is our kin, who are the rooted ones, the winged ones. And I will admit, I didn't tell Carolyn this earlier, I actually hugged a tree the other day! I've been accused, I think, of being a "tree-hugger" because of my lifelong work on the environment, but I just, I just felt intimately connected with this maple tree that was giving me its gift of sap. And I felt that making maple syrup was a celebration of life.

Paige: Oh, yes. I love, I absolutely love seeing my Mom around water. You know, women are the water keepers and the water protectors in the Potawatomi tribe. And she just goes absolutely giddy anytime she is around water. And I love it. I love watching her.

Eva: Yeah. And I think that's one of the things that, you know, in this time of pandemic that I've taken a great amount of solace in, is the outdoors. And I think that's true of being outside, being in nature. And that's something I think that many of us share in the sort of Potawatomi tradition.

Randy: I thank you. And I think that is why so many people are now interested in our heritage and who we are. They understand intuitively, and sometimes intellectually, that that's where we came from and maybe where we can lead people back to.

It's time for us to wrap up. I want to thank both of you for your contributions. This has been a gift, and I want to thank the listeners: migwetch; thank you for listening.

I hope that this broadcast has given you time and space to reconnect with your roots in Mother Earth and with your ancestral roots. Before your busy day distracts you from this moment, I encourage you to take a few minutes to reach out and feel the presence of living flora and fauna, and perhaps that even of your ancestors. allow yourself to touch their presence, capture that moment and hold onto it.

And if you might write to me and let me know about your experience, I can be reached at randykritkausky@hushmail.com, or through my website at randykritkausky.com Until the next show, goodbye.

For audio: (57 minutes)
http://www.ecologia.org/news/5.PotawatomiWomenMar2021.mp3

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