

Interview Transcript: Sheena Puls and Princess Bass-Mason

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Sheena: [00:00:16] My name is Sheena Francine Puls, and I am a tribal enrolled member of the Fort Belknap Indian community. My tribes are Arapaho, Assiniboine, and Gros Ventres, and I work currently at the Lane Education Service District. I work for the Native Youth Wellness Program.

Princess: [00:00:34] Would you like to tell us a little bit about the work you're doing at the Wellness Program?

Sheena: [00:00:39] Yeah. So what I do is, I support the Bethel Eugene 4J and Springfield School District's Native youth programs or NASU [Native American Student Union] programs that they currently have, and I go and try to encourage children to learn more about the culture, the traditions, and keeping those fundamental curriculum available to those children, and letting them know that they're there. We also hold community nights and things like that [on the] last Tuesday of every month at the LCC Longhouse, and we do tabling and outreach to the community as well so they know who we are and what our program is about.

Princess: [00:01:25] Right. So I was wondering when you're doing these activities with the kids, are you specific to the local tribes, or is it more geared to whatever majority tribes that are within that group?

Sheena: [00:01:39] It depends. It's usually like student-voice led, so whatever they're interested in learning about or talking about or wanting to know. We do associate with the local tribes, there are nine in Oregon, and so we do try to reach out with those, but also again the NASU programs within the colleges or within the schools, high school or middle school right now is where you can find us. And we also give out books to the tiny tots at pow-wows and things like that, so it's just very [centered on] helping the kids, like, grow and learn—doing beading, or basket weaving, or learning about regalia, making ribbon shirts or ribbon skirts, anything that has to do with first foods—oh there's just so much, and the list can go on so long, but that's mainly,

like, you know, where we are with helping the community and the kids and the teachers, and making sure that the students are actually able to learn and know about their culture or their identity.

Princess: [00:02:59] Are these activities mostly led by volunteers or community members or are they mostly people that are already hired on?

Sheena: [00:03:07] So, sometimes we do community events throughout the community, sometimes the schools have their own events held also, where they have summits. Again, the pow-wows, we attend and things like that. There's Native American Arts and Crafts Makers, they also have jewelry and things like that. So I try to send out fliers whenever I hear about anything coming up and get those into the students' hands, always announcing and just making sure that they know what is happening in their local community, so that they're able to attend. Because when I was in school we didn't have these types of programs, we didn't have anybody that was Native coming into our schools and teaching or helping us learn anything about our culture. At that time they were trying to erase the identity of Native American people and so it wasn't something that I was taught or learned growing up.

Princess: [00:04:15] You already touched on in your response, but what do you think is the difference between the generations that are receiving these outreach and these activities and these programs, versus Native kids that didn't in previous generations?

Sheena: [00:04:30] So a lot of it comes down to, like, the elders. The elders in our community that are Native are either passing away, or they're no longer going to be here soon. And so it's up to us as the next generation is coming up to be able to know and learn what they have to teach us, so that we're able to help and give this information back to the students that are coming up for generations to come. Because that's how they're going to learn and [how] they're going to be able to teach generations to come, is through the things that they learn through our elders, and the elders are the ones that are teaching us.

Princess: [00:05:15] Do you think it's important that there's programs like this, knowing that Native children used to go to boarding schools and had to be assimilated?

Sheena: [00:05:25] I think it's very important. I think it's important because of the identity of who you are as a person. It can help with so many things and struggles you may overcome, just knowing who you are and where you're from. But also, you know, just for me, I have had to do some of my own research. And that's something that I will always recommend, is always doing your own individual research of whatever it is, because, you know, there's a lot to learn and there's a lot of knowledge out there to know about. So reading, writing, whatever it is that you feel is going to help you throughout your journey. I had to go do my own research about my

tribe. I've never been to the reservation and my tribe is located in northern Montana / southern Canada. So I discovered that they considered us the "White Clay People" because they lived by the Milky River up near Montana and Colorado—things like that, and I didn't know that growing up. A lot of these things I didn't know growing up, because I wasn't enrolled until I was an adult. But my mom, she always tried to instill and engrain things into our lives to let us know, like, you are Native American, so you need to also know who you are and identify with that as well. She'd take us to pow-wows, and I remember growing up going to pow-wows with my mom. That is something that is so nostalgic for me because, you know, I am able to take my children to the pow-wows and show them, you know, that they are dancing. There is music, drumming, and the way that the music and the movement just make you feel inside is just amazing, and it's so indescribable. But you can feel the presence of your ancestors, and you can feel everything through Mother Earth and everything she has to offer you, and it's about every living thing, not just us as human beings, but also, you know, the plants, the trees, the life outside, the animals, and all that is all for us to be able to know about.

Princess: [00:08:04] How did you come to work for the Native Youth Wellness Program, and what is your work like? You touched on it a little bit, but if you want to expand?

Sheena: [00:08:11] So, I actually started working for the Native Youth Wellness Program in March of this year, 2024, and I'm part of the 24-25 school year. What got me my position is because I was in a, I'm, my prior career was managing the UPS store in Junction City. And I started just applying for other positions that I felt were more, the salary would be better and things like that. But I had spoke to someone who had told me, you should start applying for things that you love or something that you, is going to be more important to you, where it's going to make an impact for you, that you're going to love getting up and waking up to go do. And I applied for this position, and I got interviewed. It was very, I don't want to say "very," it was difficult for me at that time. Because one year prior to me, my starting of this position, my mom had passed away. And so, I knew this is something that she would have been proud of to see. And she would always tell me, go try applying with the Natives or with tribes and things like that for an opportunity, to look for that. And I was just thinking, you know, I'm in Eugene, there's not very many opportunities for Native people in Eugene. Like, I know you live in Hillsboro, so Portland, like, has a more broad area of things to be able to get into and things like that. But out here, not really. And I fell into this, and it was, for me, it was my calling.

Princess: [00:10:11] Do you have a favorite part of your job?

Sheena: [00:10:14] My favorite part of my job is helping people, working with people. I've always wanted to help people growing up. I'm not really, I don't like hospitals or anything like that, so I didn't, ever think, like, being a nurse or being a doctor or something like that was going to be something that I wanted to do. I don't like hospitals, it's just not my thing, so I never went

down that route. But I love helping people, and I love helping younger people, older people, it doesn't matter, like, as long as you're helping somebody else be their better self, then for me, that is just so, that is warming for me, that's what I love to do.

Princess: [00:11:05] When you were younger, did you have any Native role models, or were they just broad role models, or...?

Sheena: [00:11:11] My mom was my biggest role model. She was a beautician, and she went to a cosmetology school when I was young, and she got her cosmetology license. So I tried to take that approach as well, follow my mom's footsteps, and I realized that wasn't something that I was too interested in. I found out that it was hard work on your body, and it just didn't stick with me. So I moved on from that, and I did other things in between. And I have children also, so I really wanted to learn how to do their hair, and stuff like that. But no, where I'm at right now is literally the best opportunity for me, and for my family, so I'm sticking with where I'm at.

Princess: [00:12:07] I think you already answered this partly, but how long have you been in the Eugene Springfield area, and do you see yourself living here for the rest of your life, or do you think it's more what feels comfortable now?

Sheena: [00:12:20] So I was born in Springfield, Oregon, in 1984 at McKenzie Willamette Hospital. And when I was born, I had jaundice, really, really bad. And my parents, they had went home to go change their clothes, and they came back, and the nurses had shaved the sides of my head, and my parents, they saw that my hair was gone, and they were so angry because they thought I had the most beautiful hair as a baby. And so they were upset. My dad specifically said he wanted to kill everybody. But they had to put the IVs into my head, because they couldn't find any[veins for] IVs on my body, so I started really rough, with jaundice. They put me under the incubator and all that kind of stuff, in the hospital, and then after that, yeah, I got to go home. So I had grown up in Springfield the first decade of my life. I went to elementary school at Mount Vernon, and my sister went to Head Start. My brother, he went to Briggs Middle School, and Thurston High School. And I eventually moved away at 10. We moved to Central Oregon, so I grew up in Crooked River Ranch in [the] Redmond area. And then we ended up moving back down here to Eugene, and that's where I graduated from, North Eugene High School. For me, anytime I leave this area I get homesick. And I could be gone for literally like two or three days and just want to come back to Oregon. It's literally what I know, where I'm from, and I plan on raising my kids also here. They're going to school here and so for me I don't plan on leaving anytime soon.

Sheena: [00:14:25] So I think that working in the position that I'm in with Native Youth Wellness, as a navigator, we are trying to outreach to those rural areas and we are trying to create NASU's. And if we don't have a NASU available because there's not enough Native students in

those communities, then, like, we are offering, like, BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] clubs and things like that for other students. So the Black population, the Hispanic population, the Native population, to all come together in those rural areas. But in the city areas there are enough students for there to be NASU's put together, and there are students that are attending. And a lot of these students, they want to know, they want to know who they are, they want to know about their traditions. They want to know about their culture. How were their ancestors raised? What did their ancestors eat? How did they live? You know for me, my people lived in teepees, they were hunters, they were warriors. They hunted buffalo. And so just knowing that for me, you know, that should be something that we, like, look into. [That] is, like, the way that our ancestors ate helped provide sources of things for their bodies, like, just from roots or just from plants and flowers or things that were grown outside. Which nowadays a lot of things we are unable to just go get and outsource outside, because it's gone, right? We have cities being built, we have trees being taken down, the animals, you know, there's fires and things that are happening. A lot of global, or climate change globally, and things like that, so we don't have the same type of attributes walking out our door like they had back then.

But those things are still here. There's still things outside that we can use, that are gonna help us and our nutrition inside of our bodies. And if you look at the tribes that are on the coast and things like that, what they ate, they fish, you know? Their food came from the water, from the ocean, things like that. So that's important to know for your people or from your people. That, you know, it's just so important. Because if you're having something wrong with you, you're diagnosed with something with a chronic illness, I promise you if you investigate it enough to find out what your tribe ate, that there is something out there that will probably heal you, get you away from whatever that chronic illness is that's trying to take your life.

Princess: [00:17:18] Do you see a connection between food sovereignty and language revitalization or and also culture?

Sheena: [00:17:25] Of course, of course. So with language, language is something that has always interested me. I've always wanted to know other languages, not just English. And I feel like that obviously comes because our ancestors spoke in a different language. And those languages were taken from them, you know? As they were growing and trying to become "civilized" and things like that. Well the language, like, for me, I feel like even if it isn't your own tribe's language, try to find the local tribes around you that have language, learning those languages. At least then you would still be able to communicate with other people in your area where you live with that language or even teach somebody else who wants to learn that as well. But also like for me, just because I'm not in Montana where my tribe is or my reservation is, it doesn't mean that I don't want to learn their language as well. I would love to learn their language. I would love to learn Spanish just to be able to communicate with indigenous people out of Mexico and things like that. Because that is also a part of who I am. There's just so much

that language is, not just words, they use pictures, they use their hands as symbolization and things like that as well to be able to speak and communicate with each other. A lot for us as Native people is more keeping your mouth closed and using your ears to listen. And I think that's important, because nowadays a lot of people, they want to just be able to speak so much about, you know, things and sometimes we have to just learn, or listen to the wind.

Well, I'll go back to your food sovereignty [question] also, your question about food sovereignty. The importance of that is, so we held a culture night in April about First Foods pre-colonization. And it's so important to know that these First Foods are there. A lot of our foods have been taken from us in Oregon, like from the reservations or from the tribes, to use the land for farming and things like that. And so that's where— the dams, they were put in, so that they could take that water and like, create farmland, right? Because this area was all water, was all water sources and things like that, water life around here. So the salmon right now are not able to swim upriver anymore, because there's not enough water in the rivers to keep the salmon to staying alive. And to be able to feed those tribal members, right? So in that way, that is complete genocide to the tribal members here. But also with the economy and the way that it is, their farmland that is available, they're no longer able to hunt now either right? And then all the cattle and things that are farmed on that land are stomping all over the berries, or stomping all over the roots and things that native or tribal members used to be able to live. And that in itself is genocide to those Native people.

So just because they're living, they have an area on the reservations, the economy for that, they're not able to survive. Because the stores that are local to them, that are like mom-and-pop shops, where they go buy a head of lettuce, that's gonna probably cost them about four dollars because they don't have a Safeway or a Winco or Albertsons that are close to them. So they don't have food sources that are on sale and things like that. So they're not able, they have to— how are they supposed to support themselves with the economy that they've been given? It's been all taken. Everything has been taken, to take and destroy who we are. But now it's our time to be able to tell everybody we are still here and we're not going anywhere.

Princess: [00:22:02] Do you think that the food sovereignty and language revitalization [issues] are interconnected in some ways?

Sheena: [00:22:11] Oh definitely, definitely. Like I said, being able to communicate and draw pictures, or just knowing that there's images and things that are still, you're able to still go and see at monumental [national monuments] or like, certain parks and things like that. To know that that came from our ancestors, and things, their stories, there are things there that are able to tell us, this is what they went through, this is how they did it. And maybe that would be able to help us with things like the global change of climate and things like that. I think it's very important to

look into, like, studying or researching and knowing about the Native people where you live, Native people in our nation.

Princess: [00:23:08] Thinking of the up and coming generation in the native community, what are some of the challenges that you think they will face?

Sheena: [00:23:15] So it's just, because it's a different time and I'm not growing up in this generation, I'm already at my adult age and things like that. There's a lot of difference, a lot of things in our social media or like, you can find it online, there's the internet and things like that which I didn't have growing up. I notice for me, a lot of kids don't go outside anymore like they used to. And I did a little bit of my own research and found that we are known as the generation to be inside. We do everything inside. So we read inside, we cook inside, we exercise inside. There's just so many things that people do now indoors, when we as people are made to be outdoors. We were meant to be able to go outside to gather berries and fruit and foods. We were meant to be outside to go hunt or fish or be by the water. And so I think taking kids and making sure that they're getting back to their roots of who they are, and learning those things, because that's what their ancestors did. And that was the way that they were taught. That, you know, being outside is where everything is for you, your abundance is outside. I think getting outside, being outdoors, getting into Mother Nature and just exploring and learning about the wildlife or things that are in your area or around you. You know, take a look, it's all there.

Princess: [00:24:58] It's really good advice I'd say. What was going to school like when you were younger—in elementary, middle, or high school, and were you able to connect with other Native students or the overall Native community in the Springfield and Eugene area?

Sheena: [00:25:13] So growing up in Springfield and going to school, I mean, they didn't really offer programs. At least I never was told about programs for Native youth or Native students and things like that. My mom, she took us to pow-wows, and so that was really where I was able to learn about my culture and traditions and things like that. And so that's something that still is with me, because I take my children to pow-wows and things like that. But as far as going to school, like, my reservation is in Montana, like I mentioned. So I never got to go to my reservations since I'm in Oregon, born and raised here. And so my mom just to keep it culturally appropriate would just take us to pow-wows locally here. And it didn't matter to her, like if it was at a local tribe or if we would drive away, you know, going to Portland or things like that to go to pow-wows and stuff. She just wanted to make sure that we knew, like, our Native heritage and things like that. And so as far as going to school and growing up, like, I didn't get to, I didn't really know any other Native students. The only [Native] people that I knew were my brother and my sister. And we didn't know, they didn't teach us about, like, our culture. They didn't teach us about our heritage or anything like that. Everything that I've learned, I've learned independently on my own and done my own research basically. But it is very important that we

continue to teach students in school about their culture, about their heritage, about their identity and things like that, that will help with the prevention of things like suicide or addiction and as they grow up and, you know, find their journey as they go.

Princess: [00:27:30] Do you remember if there was a lot of Native students in your classes in like elementary or middle or high school?

Sheena: [00:27:34] Growing up in Springfield there were not. I honestly hung out with Hispanic people a lot more, because that's what I identified as. They had dark hair and dark skin just like me, so I didn't know about, like, my Native culture, my identity, as a 10 year old growing up in Springfield or different things like that. Yes, my mom took us to powwows. And we were still learning. I'm still learning to this day more about who I am and about my people and what they went through and things like that.

Princess: [00:28:13] Do you think that there's an increased amount of Native students in the Springfield, Eugene area now? Or do you think it's about the same?

Sheena: [00:28:23] I think that with the way that the structure is currently, things can be reevaluated. For me currently, I'm an enrolled tribal member through my reservation, but I'm the last descendant of my mother. And so my children are not able to be enrolled tribal members, which to me is a problem because they are not able to go to community events or get certain types of scholarships or offers and things like that. But they are, because there's not enough blood quantum in them to be able to be enrolled. So I feel like that is something that could be... readjusted? I don't know. I'm not a tribal leader, like a tribal council. But I think that as we move forward looking at it, there are a lot of kids who are Native and need to know who they identify as, and who their culture is, or who their heritage is, and be taught that. It's really hard, I think, for a Native kid to be told that you're Native American, but we don't know what tribe you're from. And the enrollment process, just, I feel like there's something, a better way out there. And I get the question all the time in my work of how do you enroll through your tribe and things like that. I just feel like there should be more accessible ways to be able to come across those types of things.

Princess: [00:30:18] If you could say anything to a younger version of yourself, what would it be?

Sheena: [00:30:25] I would say to love myself. To learn to love myself and not just like in a romantic love type of way. To love who you are and everything about you. Because you're not able to love and care for somebody else if you don't love yourself first. And then that will bring more people to love who you are, but also it will help you to be able to help love everything around you and to love other people, other things, your relatives. [It] makes you a better friend,

all those kinds of things, if you know who you are and if you're able to love and feel who you are and your identity.

Princess: [00:31:14] Right now I want to give you the opportunity to speak on anything that you want to get out there, you could go on for as long as short as you want.

Sheena: [00:31:24] I want to just speak a little bit about my immediate family. My dad is from the Lowell area in Oregon. My mom, she was actually born in Wilmington, Delaware, and she grew up in Detroit, Michigan. And [she] was relocated to her reservation when she was about 9 years old. When she got to her reservation, her family was there, her aunts and cousins and stuff like that. But she came from the city and so they put it into perspective for her that you're now not in the city anymore, so you need to be able to fight and protect yourself basically.

And my brother, he passed away in 2018. He was an addict and he had two children who he left behind. And their mother also passed away in September of 2021 and she was a Klamath tribal member also. So seeing what addiction has done to them and to my niece and my nephew, I think it's very important for people to know that there are other outlets and other things that you're able to get involved with and try to keep your community together. So I've been able to take my niece and my nephew with my kids to pow-wows and do fun events with them through culture nights and stuff like that.

And then my mom also passed away a year ago. And that is really what pushed me into wanting to really focus and be what I am supposed to be doing. And this is what I'm supposed to be doing. It's really important for me to teach my kids also and make sure that they know what they have and the community around them, especially in the Native community. Because it is there, and you can only outreach to so many people or do so much before, you know, you've got to realize, like, who your people are. So that's really important.

And my sister also—my father, he was in the Air Force when he met my mother—and my sister followed in his footsteps and she joined the Air Force also. And she was enlisted for about eight years. And so now my father still resides in Eugene, my mother, she's deceased, my brother is deceased, and I have my sister who currently lives in Japan. So I'm the only one left here in Eugene, Oregon to be able to continue to carry on for my [family] and honor my family. So that's what I'm doing and I am honoring my family by teaching my children and continuing to help other children.

An idle mind causes idle time. And if you're idle, that keeps you wandering and wanting to go out and cause mischief or get into mischief for being bored, right? So stay busy, stay busy by using your hands. You can use your hands to write. You can read, but you can also create new crafts and do new art and things that are important to you. And that will keep you busy, that will keep your hands busy. And you're also going to be able to contribute something, not just for

yourself, but for the greater good of your people. And remember to honor that because that is what is important.

Princess: [00:35:21] Would like to discuss the connection between historical trauma and individual trauma and community trauma, and its connection to substance abuse and addiction?

Sheena: [00:35:34] So ancestral trauma, you know, that is a very heavy subject because we weren't there, right? All we can do is read and research and find out what they went through. But spiritually, when you think about all that trauma, it is heavy and it will weigh on you. And so you've got to remember, again, that's one of those things, like, love yourself. Because you know that it happened. But that doesn't mean it has to continue to happen. It means that you're in a process of healing at that point, right? And once you start healing yourself, you also realize anything that you go through is something that might hurt you and it might, you know, alter something in your brain of thinking and things like that. But healing is the best way to get through anything. And if healing starts with the new, you have to want to heal yourself. And so if you are able to help somebody or do any of those things that I mentioned, then that is your way of healing and being able to get through that trauma that you've been in.

I grew up going through trauma as I was younger and things like that, living in Springfield, living in Oregon. Everybody goes through trauma, things like that. Nowadays, though, there's a different type of trauma, being homeless or food scarcity and things like that. I also had gone through food scarcity as a child, you know, we never knew what our next meal was going to be. We never knew how we were going to eat or where we were going to go get food. We would go to my neighbor's house and they would feed us, actually. But that is something that no Native child should have to worry about as we're continuing on our journey, right? They deserve to be able to play and be outside and have fun with their siblings or have fun with their cousins and knowing who your family is. Knowing who your siblings are, knowing who your cousins are.

And I think that is so important, because there are so many different things that students, or people, are going through that nobody even understands or realizes, because they haven't been there. Well, I've been there, and I've seen it. And there are ways for you to pull yourself up out of those situations. If you trust somebody, talk to them. If you have nobody you can talk to that you trust, write it down. Write it down and then remember, like, you can keep going. Remember that there's ways to heal and learn about those ways and keep going. Don't ever give up, and don't think that you are not important. Everyone here is very, very important. And you're meant to be here.

How I'm learning to navigate is just staying strong. My mom always told me, no matter what, you have to stay strong. Love your people. Love your people who love you. Know who those people are. And just always...I don't know...just always remember that there's going to be

bumps along the road in your journey. There's going to be trial and error, but that's okay, because we all go through that. That is a learning point of life, and it's okay. And give yourself grace, because I don't think enough people give themselves grace. But also we don't give ourselves enough grace once we go through something hard, or something that is tragic that happens to us, right? And that's okay, it happens. But we're on a journey, and we're all on our own journeys. Don't ever let nobody take you from your journey. And keep going on and striving to be the best person that you can be. For me, I always just try to be better than the day I was before, better than the prior day before me. I always want to just make sure the next day I'm being the best of the person I am and can be. That is very important, because if you know better, then you're going to do better. And so we should always continue to try to be the best version and authentic version of who we are.

Princess: [00:40:36] I was wondering if you have any tips for people that are going to enter grassroots organizations, or that will be doing jobs that are heavily geared towards community well-being.

Sheena: [00:40:52] I would just say, like, reach out and find out who those partners are for any organization, and [work] with anybody in those programs or in those partnerships that are available to you. There's so many resources locally, online, in books. There's so many things that can get you to where you want to be. If you really have something that you were set on in your mind, you can do anything that you want. It is possible.