

## Leilani Sabzalian and Princess Bass-Mason Transcript

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Princess: [00:00:12] Would you introduce yourself for us please?

Leilani: [00:00:14] [speaking in Aluutiq] *Camai'i, gui Leilani Sabzalian. Eugene, Oregon-mi suullianga. Ilanka Cirniq-miut.* My name is Leilani Sabzalian. I'm Aluutiq, or Sugpiaq. My family, my grandma was born in the Native village of Chignik [in Alaska], but I was born and raised here in Eugene, Oregon. And I grew up here. I also raised my family in Springfield for about 15 years, and so this is very much my home. I am an Associate Professor of Indigenous Studies and Education at the University of Oregon, and I also lead alongside Dr. Michelle Jacob from the Yakama Nation. We lead the Sapsik Wala Indigenous Teacher Education Program where we help future Indigenous educators go on to serve native youth and communities.

Princess: [00:01:14] Awesome, what drew you to the field of education?

Leilani: [00:01:17] You know, actually a lot of mistakes I made in college drew me to the field of education. I really didn't see it as a field or profession that I was gonna be involved in. I was a really avid softball player growing up, and I got a scholarship to go on and play softball at Portland State University. But I didn't really have a clear sense of what I wanted to do with my life, and I ended up not doing very well in school and I took a break for a while. So I was serving in restaurants, and I got a day job working in a kindergarten classroom. And I just fell in love with the students and I sort of found my way into the field of education. I ended up getting my Bachelor's degree and Master's degree in Education and my teaching license, and then eventually my PhD in Education.

Princess: [00:02:08] Did you anticipate that you would go back to school? Was that your goal or were you just kind of trying to figure things out?

Leilani: [00:02:17] I was really just figuring things out and having so much fun with the students that I was working with. And I ended up going back thinking, you know, this is a field I could see myself in. And that slowly led not only to a focus on educational studies, but I got really driven by the diversity and equity and social justice related work in education, and later much more involved in the kind of Indigenous studies and Indigenous education work, which is what I ended up doing in Springfield.

Princess: [00:02:52] Awesome. So, leading into that, can you share about your local work with Native youth and how long have you been working with students, and what age groups have you worked with over the years?

Leilani: [00:03:03] Yeah, I guess I owe a lot of my work with Native youth to Virgil Martin. He's a Siletz elder and educator who passed away, but he had run the Indian Education program in Springfield for many years, and I had approached him for a school assignment. Actually, I was in my PhD at the time and I wanted to learn more about Title VI Indian Education programs and how to serve local Native youth and everything he was doing. And he was so inspiring to me and so encouraging to me and told me that I could find a place within Indian Education if I wanted it. And he passed away the following year, and so I reached out to the district to see, you know, how were they going to continue the services that he had held down for so many years for Native youth and families. And so I approached them and just shared my interest in working with Native youth and forming, you know, like a Native American Student Union or something.

And [Virgil's] brother, Shane Martin, had been really involved in the program too, and so we worked together and started a Native youth group. We reached out to students, initially from one high school but ended up reaching out to students from high schools from all over the district and kind of formed this core of Native youth. And it was such a fun and exciting time, like we and we, you know, we were singing and drumming and dancing and, you know, we had elders involved who were helping us learn how to make fried bread and, um, yeah, we did the Native Youth Olympics. We did Alaska Native Games and Native Youth Olympics at some point.

And then we also got really connected to the University of Oregon. And so our NASA students would go and meet students at the University who ended up being really involved. And so, like, Stephanie Tabibian, she lives in Springfield, she's Shoshone Paiute, she and Carson and Jerome Viles, who are Siletz, used to lead our youth and handgame. And so I just remember us, like, singing and drumming outside, you know, the Brattain House in Springfield, which kind of became our home. Oh, the Brattain House was such a lovely place, you know, we just crowded in there and had so much fun. And eventually we had enough kind of momentum in the district with all the youth and families involved to really advocate for a youth center. And so that became kind of our next work.

Yeah, Rachelle Curry, she was at Springfield Education Foundation at the time, she helped write a grant, the Oregon Community Foundation, and then we had this actual, an Anishinaabe community member and she's now passed away, Nancy Webber, she came out and did a site visit. And our students just testified to why it was so important to have a community center, and why having, like, a space where they felt like they could belong, and it would always be there for them, mattered so much. And with her help and her continued kind of advocacy and support we now have a Native youth center, you know? And I'm telling the story of how the [Chifin Native Youth] Center came to be, but so many people were involved. And it's so many youth and community members and it's still there. And now it's run by Dawn Malliett, she's Cree and the Indian Education Program Coordinator. Um, yeah, so that's my connection,

kind of the beginning of my work with Native youth. And now I do that more from the university end but still try to stay involved in the community.

Princess: [00:06:53] What are some of the ways you stay connected with community?

Leilani: [00:06:57] So, many of the ways that I just shared right? Through these culture camps but [also] through social media, through phone calls, through visiting, like these are some of the ways. You know, there's also other ways, like right now is blackberry season. And so I am spending so much time at the park just picking berries, freezing berries, making cobblers, making pies, making muffins, and sharing them out with people, right? And so even though I'm not in Alaska and even though these aren't the exact berries, like, I would love to be picking salmon berries right now, I love salmon berries. I'm still picking berries, you know? And teaching my children that, like, we can look around us, and we can find the gifts that are in nature and then we can make stuff, and then we can share it with our community. And so to me that's a way I like, stay connected through my community, is [to] think about things I've learned in community and then think about ways I can kind of live out what I've learned wherever I am.

Princess: [00:08:00] Okay, our next question is, what are some of the benefits you have seen for Native youth when they connect with other Native students? What are some of the unique needs these students might have when they are going to school in the Eugene Springfield area?

Leilani: [00:08:15] Yeah, that's a good question. I would say the first benefit is just having a sense of community. You know, for some Native students in the Eugene Springfield area, they might be the only Native student in their class. And so having the chance to kind of connect with other Native youth from different schools and across districts is really important. And I think one of the key reasons that matters is because it just shows how diverse and vibrant Native communities are and you know, a lot of Native youth are really kind of comfortable and confident in who they are but some of them are developing their Indigenous identities in relation to really kind of static and stoic stereotypes about Native people, you know?

And when you're in community, you can see, whoa, that's not who we are, like, that's a white invention, that's a colonial imagination, like, we're diverse, we're vibrant, we're contemporary. And I think just having that, like, vibrant, diverse community really gives youth all types of role models they can look up to and kind of expansive futures and possibilities for themselves. So they can see that, like, it's just an exciting time to be Native, you know? And I just want Native youth to see, like, you can love Pokemon and you can love Minecraft, and actually there's Indigenous creatives who are making Indigenous versions of Minecraft, you know? There's, like, all sorts of things they can do. And I think that's possible when you bring people together and then you center kind of the exciting things that are happening across, across our communities, you know.

We try to do a lot of our programming where our college students are actually connected to and in community with K-12 youth. And so, like, one program we run at the university, it's a student-led event called Youth Movement and it's now a middle school field day event. But back when I was coordinating

the Native youth group it was for high schoolers who went to Nike headquarters in Beaverton. But anyway, that event's so fun because you have Native college students who are in community with Native middle schoolers, and so they all get a chance to be connected across generations.

And I just think we all need, like, youth who are our mentors. Oftentimes we think that we're the ones teaching youth but, like, they teach us so much and so finding ways to kind of be connected with them. Yeah, and youth are just, you know, joyful and are able to play and they're not as afraid to make as many mistakes as adults are.

Princess: [00:11:00] Do you have any thoughts about what is different for Native students attending schools in Springfield today versus 20 years ago? What are some positive changes you've seen and are there any challenges you think are specific to the up and coming generation?

Leilani: [00:11:25] Yeah, I mean, I can't speak maybe to 20 years ago but I would just say, you know, right now in Springfield with the Chifin Native Youth Center, it's, like I said, being led by Dawn Malliett. We have a center in the middle of the community, it's like a hub, it's a gathering spot for Native community and cultural activities and gathering. And so that's a big difference just to have, you know, former [Indian Education] coordinators like Virgil Martin, but then [also] Mitch Wilkinson who was running the program, they were operating out of, like, broom closets and boiler rooms in the district office, you know? And so to kind of go from the margins, to having Indigenous education be such a central place in the community and the district, I think that's a, that's a big change.

We're also, you know, on the heels of Senate Bill 13, Tribal History, Shared History, which is the Native Studies curriculum mandate that passed in 2017. And so, you know, youth today in K-12 schools in Springfield should be getting kind of accurate, honest, truthful experience about the nine Native nations in this state, written from Native perspectives. And so that's a big difference. You know, they're going to be learning about tribal sovereignty and governance and treaty rights and contemporary issues. And even though, you know, COVID kind of delayed the rollout of that, that's another kind of big change, is that, you know, they have accurate curriculum that is going to kind of shift the narrative about Native people. You asked about challenges?

Princess [00:13:12]: Yeah. Potential challenges.

Leilani: [00:13:16] Yeah. I mean, there's so many challenges facing this generation of youth. I would say in terms of Native youth, I think one challenge is, you know, just having the – being comfortable and confident in sharing who they are and expressing who they are on their own terms. I just know from my generation, generations before me, you know, we've often kind of identified ourselves in relation to oppression and harms that have happened in our communities—and those harms are really real, and the legacies of colonialism are ongoing, and really felt in our communities—but I think it's just an exciting time for Native youth today to be Indigenous. There's so many Native creatives out there, in Hollywood, and who are taking media and telling stories and, like, being so innovative with their cultures, and just really pushing the bounds of what it means to be Native. And so I think that's one challenge is just, you

know, getting rid of the “Indian” who's kind of been in the shadows lurking so long, like kind of narrowing who we think we can be, and [instead] really being who we want to be. You know, remembering that our cultures aren't just things that we inherit, but that we can create culture. So I think that's one challenge for youth.

I mean, the other challenge, and this isn't just for Native communities, but all youth, is climate change. Like, we have left youth with a world that is not balanced. And I think Native knowledge and Native communities are at the forefront of figuring out how to live in right relation to this place, you know? And making sure that we have a planet and lands and waters that are sustainable. And so, you know, making sure Native youth are in community and having access to the types of education that help them understand how to caretake the places that we live is a really big challenge.

And then, you know, making sure that, like, Native youth are in community and coordinating across kind of diverse landscapes in North America, but also beyond, like internationally. Native people have always connected with one another across nations and lands and waters, you know? Like the UN, the United Nations, and advocating for the Declaration of Rights for Indigenous people. Today, you know, we have Indigenous people here [in the United States], Palestinians, engaging in, like, solidarity efforts, and understanding that what happens in one place affects us all. And so I think that's a big kind of challenge confronting this generation. How to, you know, engage with other nations and communities doing on-the-ground environmental work and to learn from one another and strategize from one another.

Princess: [00:16:21] Do you have any stories or interactions from your time working with students that have been especially meaningful to you?

Leilani: [00:16:29] Yeah, yeah, I have lots of stories of working with youth. And that, you know, first group of Native youth that became kind of the foundation of our program and then led, you know, their advocacy and involvement led to the creation of the [Chifin] Center, they are so close to my heart. and I'm really grateful for that group of students. But actually I'm thinking about elders that have been involved in our program, and how much their participation has meant to us. One elder is Twyla Souers. She's a Lakota elder and educator and she's, you know, still involved in the community here in Eugene and Springfield. And anyone who knows Native education in this area usually knows about her and her work. Like, her impact is really far-reaching. And so I approached her when we were starting the Native youth group, just to get her advice, like how from all of your time and experience working with youth, what advice would you give me? She just talked about her work with Wilma Crowe. She's the late Standing Rock [Lakota] elder that passed away and was really also involved in our center. And [Twyla] and Wilma, you know, used to do beading and other activities with youth, and so she was telling me how it's really important to give youth, like, a shared activity and experience together, but then have each of them look into their own unique identities and cultures and bring something from their community and culture to that work. And that lesson really stayed with me.

You know, we can be in community with one another but we don't have to be one another. So it's really important to turn youths toward their own communities and cultures and also have a strong

understanding of who they are and the people and places they come from. So that's one, like, special experience I have that I think is still kind of felt in the center today. And then the other is Wilma Crowe, her family is still really involved in the center. Brenda and Bruce Crowe are actively involved, and their children have all been involved in the program. But Wilma, you know, she was born on the Standing Rock Reservation before, she was born at a time before Native people were U.S. citizens.

And so I remember, you know, somehow she was involved in all the communities around here. She was actively involved in LCC Longhouse, she was involved in the UO Longhouse and then when we were hosting stuff at the Brattain Center and eventually [Chifin] Native Youth Center, she was actively involved in that too, you know? But I remember one time she was telling the story of her experience when her dad became a U.S. citizen. And she remembers that he had, he was given an arrow and he had to symbolically break the arrow to say that he was going to renounce his Native identities and ways of life. And then he had to put his hand on a plow and pledge to be a good American. And I mean, it's a terrible story, right? Like, colonial policies and practices are just rooted in assimilation and wanting to "Americanize" Native people. But she also told the story of, she remembers that was the first time that she got to leave the reservation and she was excited because she got to go get ice cream, you know?

And just, I don't know, that story and the way that [the] Native youth really just gave her so much attention and they were listening so deeply to history really, like, affirmed the role and values of elders for me in education. Because she was speaking from her experience, right? It wasn't something in a history book or a textbook. But she was also talking about being a young child when that all happened and just wanting ice cream, you know? And it reminded me, like, these historical moments, that of course have so much harm in them, also have joy and humanity and that we have to remember that when we teach histories to not flatten the experiences. And so I'm really grateful for her involvement also, and her family's continued involvement in the program.

Princess: [00:20:48] Thank you for sharing that; that was...

Leilani: [00:20:50] I know, I'm—I miss, I miss Wilma a lot. People called her, my kid called her Grandma Wilma.

Princess: [00:20:57] Iconic nickname. [Princess and Leilani laugh together.]

Leilani: [00:21:00] And you know what, she also told my kid, "Always eat your dessert before your dinner, so that you make sure you have room for dessert." And so sometimes my kids would be like, oh, what did Willma tell us? Eat your dessert first...

Princess: [00:21:18] Okay, a little bit of a different segue, but in 2017, the Mayor of Springfield issued a proclamation recognizing October 14th as Indigenous People's Day. Could you tell us what you remember about this event and the work that led up to it? Do you see an impact from this proclamation in the present-day community?

Leilani: [00:21:35] Yeah, I remember that day and that movement. And there were so many people involved in passing that initial proclamation. Yeah, we were working with a group of Native youth in the district and we gathered together at the center, the Chifin Native Youth Center. The movement for Indigenous People's Day in Springfield and also Eugene. So a lot of our students that were involved in Chifin Native Youth Center were involved in both movements. Like, a lot of the Native youth group members went to City Council meetings in Eugene and testified in front of the Mayor and at City Council alongside NASA students from the University of Oregon. And so Eugene had passed their initial Indigenous People's Day first. But we also approached Springfield and attended City Council meetings. I remember before that, we were at the Chifin Native Youth Center, and we had an evening where it was, like, a Civic Education night. Like, we helped all the youth understand which ward are you living in, and who's your city council representative, and what does it mean to give testimony. And they had little cards and they wrote out testimony about why Indigenous People's Day mattered. And we showed up at the City Council meeting, and there were a lot of us. And the mayor [Christine Lundberg] had let a couple of us speak. And then she said that there were too many of us and that we couldn't continue speaking. And that was really upsetting to our community, because, you know, we were so civically engaged. We had all this momentum. We had youth who wanted to participate in local governance! Like when does that happen, right?

And so we left, the whole group of us left, and we went outside and, you know, this was a coordinated effort. Ada Ball, she's Siletz, she was a student at the time with the U of O and then students and leaders from Citywide MECHA. They were also involved. We took all the youth and community members, and we went outside. And we gave our testimonies to one another and we livestreamed it on Facebook, you know? Because it was like, who are you to shut us down? Like, we're excited! We have momentum. This matters. We're going to tell our stories anyway. And so we did that. And that kind of renewed people's commitment to try again. And so we came back again and were successful in passing the proclamation. We wanted a resolution, but we got a proclamation.

But that actually, Springfield, you know, did some really beautiful things afterward. Like, they held some Indigenous People's Day events at City Hall. We had our Native youth participate in a photo exhibit. And they had, like, an educational and art exhibit on display at the City Hall offices. Eventually, they raised flags for both the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde and the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians. And, you know, we had incredible people, Melissa Carino, was working inside Springfield government at the time. It was just really wonderful to see, like, when people live and embody their responsibilities, you can take action from wherever you're located. And so there were people inside the city helping kind of make that a reality. And so it kind of blossomed into a beautiful movement. And, yeah, I think it's an important day, but more than that, it's an important movement. You know, where people get to be engaged in their community and make change in their community and then see leaders understand those concerns and take action.

Princess: [00:25:16] So would you say that the Indigenous People's Day was a smooth movement?

Leilani: [00:25:22] Yeah, you know, like, I think the movement to pass it was challenging, because we had brought all those youth and community members with what I consider a gift of the City of Springfield. Right? Like, these people have invested time and energy and articulated why this matters so deeply. And then were initially shut down. And so that felt sort of like a betrayal. When people gathered again, right, and organized again and resisted again, and it passed and was successful, I think that was really beautiful. But I would say that the movement was just sort of uneven. Like, for example, the Tribal flag poles were such a beautiful and important project.

And for a city, a city hall and government offices to raise tribal flags is really important. You know, it shows the community that tribal governments are important and their presence and their sovereignty matters, right? And so that was really wonderful. But I kind of remember some of the backstory to that project, too.

Like, when the Mayor was wanting help with, you know, kind of the land acknowledgement and having a statement around why this matters. And so, you know, people reached out to me to [ask for] my help in that process. And I didn't help them. I worried that if I gave the Mayor sort of the right things to say, the right talking points, that she could appear supportive without actually doing some of the work to learn, like, why this matters so deeply. Why raising these tribal flags is so important. You know, like, people often do land acknowledgments, but they want a script given to them. And when you do that without engaging in the deep learning about your responsibilities and what it means to live a good relation to a place, that's just the performance without that deeper kind of politics. And so I remember being kind of nervous and saying, I'm sorry, I can't help the Mayor. That's actually her work to do. She needs to learn that, learning who the Grand Ronde and Siletz peoples are, you know, learning why it matters to raise tribal flags, crafting land acknowledgments from your own positionality of power, like that matters, and then that learning translates into responsibilities.

Yeah, and so I think as Native people sometimes we're put in really challenging positions where we have to discern, you know, should I help someone, or should I let them do their homework? And sometimes we need to let [non-Native] people do their homework. And other times we need to say, actually, you know what? No, my voice and perspective in this arena really can make a difference. And there's no right or wrong answer to that. Yeah, it's just kind of part of the work of being a Native professional and trying to make changes. And part of the work of change is not telling other people what to think or what to do, but helping them like, lean into their relational roles and responsibilities. And that's personal work, we can't do that for other people. So that's, you know, what I chose to do. And I think that, you know, she [Mayor Lundberg] lived up to the challenge.

Princess: [00:28:46] Okay, I was wondering if you could tell us what you think the importance of education is in the Native community.

Leilani: [00:28:54] Yeah, I think the importance is, you know, helping us understand our roles and our responsibilities as humans to the places we live and the life that those places sustain. You know, my co-director, but also my mentor, Dr. Michelle Jacob, she always reminds me that education—like, our people

have always done education. And our systems of education are so much older and more mature than the kind of history of Western schooling, which is really new, right? And so reclaiming those processes of education, I think is really important.

So learning from elders, like, I'm sharing the story about Wilma Crowe you know, like, we should be finding time to learn from elders, you know, we should be finding time to learn on the land, we should be trying to figure out what it means to live in right relation to the places we live. So I think that's kind of the power of education to me, is to answer those deeper questions, those bigger questions about what it means to be a human in the world. And how we each, you know, we each have like a gift to contribute to the whole. And so helping us, I think it's part of our responsibility is to figure out what that gift is.

Princess: [00:30:12] Awesome. Thank you. Okay, so our last question is a little bit of a fun one. If you could give any advice to a past version of yourself, what would you give her?

Leilani: [00:30:24] Yeah, I would tell her to not be so hard on yourself. You know, not be so hard on yourself. Like, life is too short and you are too precious. So just live, you know? Be the best version you can be, and make mistakes, and do better, and just always do your best.

Princess: [00:30:48] Awesome. Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

Leilani: [00:30:55] Yeah, you know, like giving an interview or an oral history in this moment, it's really hard to not talk about Palestine and what's happening to Palestinian people. Just as an Indigenous person, I feel so many similarities with the, you know, violence against Palestinians and their dispossession from their homelands. It just mirrors so much of what was done to Native people here in North America. And now it's our country, right, that's inflicting violence on others.

So I think I just want to share that, you know, we often talk about colonialism as something that happens in the past, but it's ongoing. And we're living in a place that is, you know, committing active colonial violence against Palestinian people. And so when we think about what it means to, like, live out our responsibilities and engage in anti-colonial work, for us as Indigenous people, yes, that means, you know, contesting colonialism that we experience here, but [it] also means finding solidarity and movement kind of across spaces and recognizing how the nation-state that we're a part of is committing violence. And, you know, this is personal for me— my sister's Palestinian—but that also shouldn't matter. Like, this is just an issue of human rights. And our duty as the United States to kind of, to prevent and put a stop to genocide. So I just wanted to share that in this moment, since we're speaking in a particular moment. And I hope that, yeah, we make, we all have courage and say what needs to be said, so that the violence stops.