



## Native Perspectives on Sustainability: Nichole Maher (Tlingit)

*Interviewee: Nichole Maher*

*Interviewer: David E. Hall*

*Date: 8/17/07*

*Transcriber: Price McCloud Johnson*

DH: Thank you, Nichole, for taking some time today to meet with us and as you know from our previous conversations this project is about the concept of sustainability from the perspective of Native leaders. Our goal today is to hear from you on the subject... If you could start by sharing a bit about yourself in terms of your heritage, where home is for you and the focus of your work?

NM (1:25): Well, I was born in Ketchikan, Alaska. I am an Alaskan Native. I am a member of the Tlingit tribe from southeast Alaska. I am also half Irish. I was born in Ketchikan and then I grew up for the first eleven years of my life in a very small community--village is kind of an exaggeration. There were literally only five houses, no running water, during the winter, no roads, no electricity. So, I lived there until I was eleven and then moved to the lower forty eight and grew up and went to middle school and high school on the Siletz Indian Reservation, and then left to go to college, and have lived in Portland for the last seven years, and have been the executive director for the past six years.

DH (2:22): Can you say a little bit about the connection between your cultural identity and the focus of your work?

NM (2:29): Absolutely, well first of all I feel so incredibly fortunate that I get to come to work every day and get paid to do work that I would do for free, don't tell my board. I'm very blessed to essentially be able to spend my time and energy every day advocating for our community and for a better life for our people and for equality for everyone, not just Native Americans.

DH (3:01): You mentioned "your community," and later I'm going to ask questions about your community; for now can you give us a definition of who is your community in terms of people and geography?

NM (3:18): Well, I belong to a lot of communities. I would say that my primary community, when I think of my community, when I say my community, I really am thinking about the Native community of Portland. I grew up in Siletz where I still have a strong connection and I believe that certainly southeast Alaska is part of my community too, but day in and day out my community is the Portland Native American community. I don't perceive that in a geographic sense, I perceive that in a cultural sense, or a connection sense. When I think about who I am going to ask advice from, it's going to be the elders here. When I think about who I spend my time with, who I plan for, who I envision. Really whenever I am doing my work who I am thinking about when I'm advocating for, quote end-quote, "my community", I am thinking about the Native community of Portland. I also perceive myself as a part of the larger communities of color that are very involved in building coalitions and uniting different ethnic communities in

Portland to advocate for all of our communities collectively, I perceive myself as part of that community as well. And I'm proud to be a Portlander, but that's pretty far down the chain for me sometimes. I definitely consider myself part of Portland, but the strongest connections are with the Native community.

DH (4:59): So when you say the communities of color, still in the Portland area?

NM (5:04): Yea, yea, I mean that's where I've done most of my coalition building so that is really where I have more of the genuine relationships with those folks. And I've done a lot of national work to bring all 38 of the large urban Indian community centers together, so I definitely see the Portland Native community as part of a larger urban community as well.

DH (5:32): Would you say anything else about your heritage, home, cultural identity, the focus of your work?

NM (5:40): I think that was it.

DH (5:44): The term sustainability is being used by a lot of people to try to capture aspects of the challenges we're facing in terms of economic, social and environmental difficulties and challenges. I'm wondering if this is a term that you use, and if so what it means for you, and if not, if there are other terms that come to mind?

NM (6:07): I do use the term, I enjoy using the term and I probably overuse it on occasion. I don't have one really fantastic definition. When I think about sustainability what comes to mind is our individual and our collective consciousness, that our resources and our land and our time here on earth don't necessarily belong to us, it belongs to our children and our children's children and it's really that consciousness and that thought of being stewards of whatever that resource is. Be it our culture, be it our values, be it our environment, be it the land, those are all resources that we have and how do we protect it and sustain it for our children's children. I know you're not supposed to use the word in the definition of the word but (laughter) so yea. That's kind of how I think about it.

DH (7:18): Can you expand on any pieces of that or say what else comes to mind when you think of these thoughts?

NM (7:26): Recently, I have been thinking a lot about the term cultural sustainability; that has been really exciting to me. Because, I think, a lot of times when we think about sustainability it's about the things we're doing wrong, or the things we're not being conscious of or mistakes that we're making and I really like this idea of cultural sustainability and really focusing on the gifts and the strengths and the values and the beliefs that we have and carrying that forward. I think that, particularly in the Native community, a lot of our culture and beliefs and values naturally support a lot of other behaviors such as conservation, such as environmental consciousness, involve those pieces and so what I think a lot about is how do we sustain our culture, how do we sustain our values how do we ensure that our children have a strong sense of who they are and what their responsibilities are. How do we make sure that our children know that they are our future leaders, how do we make sure that they have the tools to be those leaders, how do we

make sure that they belong to our community, that we show them we want them, that we need them and what do they need to do as a result of their important role in our society. Cultural sustainability is really something I have been thinking a lot about recently. The Portland vision project, I'm not sure how familiar you are, as a result of the Native community we have made cultural sustainability a priority. We're right now trying to do, sort of a little movement if you will, about making sustainability not just environmental, but culturally part of everything that planning does and every policy that the city does. That's one kind of thing we've been doing, I feel like I'm getting off topic here.

DH (9:35): No, that's great. Can you say how would cultural sustainability differ from how you think of sustainability standing alone? --*tech chatter*--

NM (11:56): I think cultural sustainability is perhaps a more specific or pointed area of sustainability but I see them as connected in that one is part of the other. Not interchangeable, but embedded in each other.

DH (12:11): How so?

NM (12:16): Well, I think that our cultures have so many values and have a lot of principles and a lot of world views mounted to them that really embody what sustainability is. But I think that those principles, those values, those ethics really come from a place of our culture and our heritage and so I just think it's so critical to build that heritage and to pass that on and to sustain those values and beliefs because if we can do that then we can really ensure that those same values that we're so proud about that protect our environment, that strengthen our communities will continue forward and we feel like that's the core of how we can contribute to those leaders today until tomorrow.

DH (13:29): If you're having a conversation with someone who is unfamiliar with the idea of cultural sustainability, how might you describe it, perhaps using any metaphors or stories or analogies?

NM (13:53): I would describe it as a series of gifts that we are giving as far as the gifts of our values, the gifts of our beliefs, the gifts of our principles to our children, to our descendants. And a series of tools as well, about to how to live.

DH (14:13): Are there any other stories that you would share to help them understand what those gifts are and what they represent and why they're important?

NM (14:27): Can we come back to that?

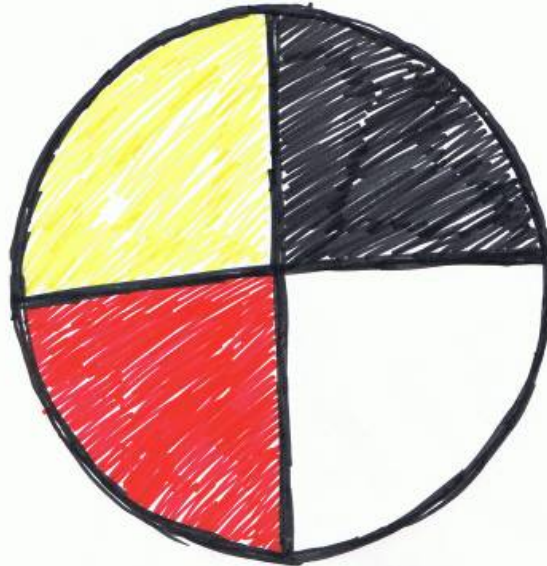
DH (14:29): Yea, sure. Are there any images or symbols that come to mind for you when you think about cultural sustainability?

NM (14:45): Well this is cliché, and very Pan-American Indian, which I try to avoid all of the time, but I definitely think the medicine wheel is certainly reflective of that, the balance, the connection, the space for everyone to be part of the circle. The idea of your mind, body, spirit

and environment being so connected. That is something that really comes to my mind immediately. What I love about the medicine wheel is that it includes everyone in the world and it talks about how all of us are a combination of how ever many different pieces of it. I think it's the way that it engages everyone and leaves a space for everyone but also gives collective responsibility which is exactly what we're talking about when we're talking about sustainability.

DH (15:52): Would you be willing to draw a medicine wheel?

NM (15:54): I can draw a great medicine wheel (laughter) (...drawing...)



DH (17:30): What does the outer ring represent, if anything?

NM (17:32): It represents all things being connected and it is always able to expand to include and that everything is circular. It is what I visualize and I like the idea of the medicine wheel print. It is a sort of intertribal, intercultural symbol as well. And it's very simple as well.

DH (18:36): Can you say more about why you think of it when you think of cultural sustainability?

NM (18:55): Well I think that I personally really connect and appreciate the idea of everyone being involved and having a role and I think the symbolism of everyone being in a circle is really important and that accountability piece of it is important, and I'm not sure why, but I see the circle as having some elements of accountability to it, and some elements of honesty. If you are going to have sustainability in any way, regardless if it's cultural, environmental, those pieces of honesty and accountability have to be there. There you go! (laughter) When you see the logo you'll totally know how I've cheated, we have the medicine wheel as part of our logo.

DH (20:10): I noticed that once you picked out the colors and drew the...

NM (20:15): Yea, it's not shameless NAYA propaganda, I swear. It does help me draw it better.

DH (20:25): Can you say a little bit more about the connection between cultural sustainability as your thinking of it and giving these gifts, and sustainability as you have the impression of a lot of people using the term. For example, you mentioned beliefs, and values and overall world view and how that is essential for maintaining and achieving sustainability.

NM (20:59): So the question is what are some of the beliefs and values that we pass on, or that we share or that we practice that will have impacts on longer term sustainability as a society, as a community?

DH (21:15): Right.

NM (21:20): Well, I think that sort of the emphasis and thought about the community and the collective before the individual is a really clear example of something that is really important to our community that we have done really well in the past that we have to be really, really thoughtful about how to pass that down to our children.

Another value is this idea of wealth not being measured by accumulation of goods, but wealth really being perceived and looked at as really the relationships that you have and the kind of relationships that you have and your ability to contribute to your community and give back. So this belief of wealth being represented in distribution as not how much I have but how much I give is a really important value and belief that I think contributes significantly to sustainability.

I think reciprocity, this belief about, its more than just sharing, its more than just an exchange, it's about really a balance of true partnership between your community and how you use the natural resources, your community and other communities, and all of those pieces are really important.

The commonly used word, but the word that is most important is really that really deep level of respect, it's not just about being polite, it's not just about saying you're being respectful. Our community, our elders take respect to a whole new level that the rest of society could learn from. Respect being, you know, being very thoughtful about your words to a point of sometimes being quiet, being very thoughtful about your actions to a point of taking significantly longer to do things because you are really, really thinking about the long term impacts you will have.

I think that the value of really, truly recognizing, respecting and taking care of your children is a really important one. And the world view of it's not just your children; it's your children's, children's children. And this idea that you're basically borrowing the land from your children, or you're borrowing it from your great grand children. That idea is I think absolutely something that is incredibly important when you think about sustainability.

DH (24:50): Other people have said the importance of spirituality?

NM (24:58): Absolutely, absolutely. It's probably because I spent the whole morning talking about spirituality that I am not talking about it now. I agree

DH (25:15): What's the connection between spirituality and sustainability for you?

NM (25:19): It's very hard to separate them for me; I'm struggling to even think about how to divide them to describe them differently.

--exchange omitted--

DH (28:23): Another thing that has come up, I'm wondering if you see it this way too, is the connection between sustainability and health. Is that a meaningful connection for you?

NM (28:36): Mmhmm, yea, absolutely. I think that health and wellness are really about a balance between that mind, that spirit, that body and that environment. I think that when you have that balance that's where wellness comes. I think that that can be, those for terms, can be applied to an environment, to an individual, to a community. I share that view of that connection.

DH (29:15): Another thing that has come up is the idea of restoration and it might be particularly relevant, you were speaking in terms of cultural sustainability, how much cultural restoration is a part of that?

NM (29:29): Absolutely, I think that we have a lot of culture and a lot of values that we need to reclaim and re-teach. We have lost a lot as a community, as far as our culture, our language, and our heritage. I think that we're in a positive place in our community where we are reclaiming a lot of those things. But I think without reclaiming that connection to earth, to the environment and to that sense of place, would be really difficult, so you have to do both at the same time. I also think that there has to be, that we have to evolve as a people as well. Not the sort of scientific evolution that you know, not getting a third kidney or anything (laughter), but evolving in the way that we recognize that we live in a different world today, and I don't know that it's more complex than it ever was before, it's just different. And there are different factors, and our communities change, so we have to think about things differently. We are not going to go back to living the way we did three or four hundred years ago, so how do we take our values and our beliefs into the future, and we have a self-determination about that. How do we manage that, and how do we balance that and how do we think about that differently, and how do we prepare our children to think about that too.

DH (31:26): How important then is environmental restoration to cultural sustainability?

NM (31:31): You can't have one without the other, would be my thought. The places where all of the important lessons that we pass on or share, when you're teaching someone how to weave a basket, or learning how to weave a basket, all of those things are critical to cultural sustainability. Well we know a lot of the places that we gather the materials to do those things are in jeopardy, or are not there, or are not the same, or are right next to a Texaco gas station. So certainly if we really want to reclaim some of our traditional practices and have that cultural sustainability we need to do the other work, which is environmental restoration so that we have those places, because as I said before, so much of it is your place in this world, and your place in this environment and your place in this community, you have to have those places. We need to have balance there as well. You should, as a side note, check out our environmental restoration project we had our middle-schoolers do. They ripped out all of the invasive species in our front yard and planted all indigenous species.

DH (33:09): Cool. Would you add anything else to this piece of the conversation of sustainability as a concept, and cultural sustainability, or anything we touched on?

NM (33:22): Not right now

--break--

DH (1:47): Earlier you identified your community primarily in terms of the Native American community here in Portland, and I would like you to allow your imagination to take you into the future and imagine a time and place where the concept of sustainability and cultural sustainability as you have just described has really taken form and is the way the world is for your community. What would that look like for your community, with sustainability really having taken form?

NM (2:37): I think our future will hold the Native community as being something that is valued and appreciated and respected by all of Portland. That means every park recognizes the heritage of our community, every neighborhood, and I also think that there will be great pride that our community holds as well. Not just in sort of recognition and in visibility, but also that the values and beliefs and the strengths of our core culture will be shared by other people as well. I really see that in our future, rather than being-I'm going to be careful not to describe this as how it's bad now and how it will be good then-but I think that our community will really have a lot more strength in our self sufficiency and our ability to provide for ourselves but do it on our own terms, and have self-determination in the way that we govern our community, in the way that we make decision and that we'll have that autonomy to do that. Part of that will be managing our own resources, part of that will be being more engaged politically, being more engaged as a voting population, being more engaged as citizens, and our community will broaden its own definition of who we are to really feel like we are full and equal members of Portland. I think that our children are going to have great pride and great strength in who they are. I think that our children will have a great sense of who they are from their individual tribes, but they will also know that they are very important members of a larger community and very important members of a larger Portland. I want our children to grow up and say "I'm going to be the executive director of NAYA," I want them to grow up and say, "I'm going to be the mayor of Portland," and I don't think that they should have to give up anything, as far as their culture and their identity to do that. I think, as that relates to sustainability, I think that we have very important values and beliefs that a lot of other people can learn from and I think that as we become more self-sufficient and more prominent and have a greater sense of voice to articulate that we're going to share that with a lot of other people and influence the future of the community.

--tech chatter--

DH (0:03): So the question was... remind me (laughter). Oh, right. In describing "influence" you mentioned that there is an exchange that would be of value from your community to the broader Portland community. How do you see that influence exchange occurring?

NM (0:31): Well, I want it to be... it will be (laughter). It will be city policy that no decision can be made, no planning effort can be made without including and engaging the Native community. So I think that deep level of engagement is going to influence because we'll be at the table and we'll be able to share our values and our world view, but also through that type of citizen

participation, be it through a planning process, a park design, a city strategic plan, be it through having elected Native American officials, bureau directors, all of those different things, I think that rather than being a side group that wants to give input occasionally, we have to have real influence, not in the way that is so much about power or decision making, but really about creating a community. Until we engage at that level, we will not have that influence. And so I think there is that influence of being there and being part of the conversation, but I think that every time we go out, and we talk and we participate and have conversations we gain something as a community and the folks we are participating with gain something. They add lessons to our life, and skills and ability to our life and we do the same for them, and I think that that is a sort of engagement that is very, very critical. I can't wait to see the day when our community is incredibly organized and able to mobilize. People have this perception that there aren't very many Native Americans, it's not true. The Latino community is the fastest growing population, but we're not far behind. We have, the average number of children that our families have is five children. We are only going to grow, and forty percent of our population is under the age of 25. That is significant, there is no other population that has that young of a constituency and so my hope and my vision is that we will take advantage of that youth, and those new ideas and those new abilities and really be organized and thoughtful about how we shape Portland's future as well. And I think that my assumption there is that if we do a really good job making our children be proud of who they are, helping our children see themselves in the future, helping them have the skills and tools that they need to be contributing members of our community and the larger community then I believe that will make a great contribution to sustainability as well.

DH (3:20): What else do you see in your vision?

NM (3:32): Well I think that we are going to have to have a lot more economic control as a community. I think that we are going to have to be very thoughtful about how we live in this world today, live in a country that is a capitalist country and practice our values and beliefs. Some of our tribes are very socialist, some would even be described as communist, you know there are a lot of different ways of being in this world and I think that it is very difficult to truly practice your indigenous values around economics. There is a lot of polarization that happens, and it's challenging. I would really envision that as a community we would find a way to practice our culture and values around thinking about the collective, but also have a much stronger sense of economic control, if that means home ownership, if that means a community land trust model for home ownership that benefits more people. There are a lot of different models that I can see our community, then really finding ways to control their own destiny and make decisions that reflect our values and not be subject to other peoples culture and values, such as capitalism, because that is very difficult for us. It hurts our culture to have to live in a society that is burdened by that system. I think that as we grow and become organized and more thoughtful as a community about controlling our own destiny, economic system and figuring out a way to do that and a way that is in line with our culture. It is very critical and I'm really excited for that day to get here.

DH (5:31): So what would be some of the institutional capacities that your community would have, in the future?

NM (5:41): Well I believe that Native organizations, tribal organizations, need to own our own



buildings, own our own land. I think that we need to own them in cooperation together and collectively manage the assets so that we are always making decisions that benefit the community, and not individual organizations or individuals. I believe that the Native community would benefit greatly when we develop and operate our own political action committee. I believe that it will be critical for our community to develop stronger relationships between leaders, so that we can work more collectively and in a much more unified way. So my hope and dream is that there will be some sort of organized, thoughtful way that that can take place. I would love to see the day when we have a leadership institute that is really geared up to really truly train future tribal leaders. There is a lot of small versions of that, that don't really produce the number or the type of leaders that we really need. I would love to see the day when we have a high school that is built on the principles of our culture, our values, environmentalism and math and science. I would love to have a k-8. We have a Montessori program; we just need to fill-in in between. We, not meaning NAYA, but this community. I would love to see every school in Portland teach about Native culture and values, not just to Native children, but to every student. I know there are a lot of other really important indigenous views and values that other cultures have to offer that we could certainly benefit from. I'm very excited about the day when we have, when we develop our own affordable housing that is built with the principles of sustainability, and built on the principles of our community and our values and culture as well. I mentioned before, that I want all of the parts to honor Native culture and values and teach about what those values are which I think would be really important for not only our community to take pride, but I want all of Portland to take pride in the values and culture that we have. They are a part of it too. I don't know if you have had a chance to visit New Zealand, but the entire country is proud of (Maori) culture. Every street name is in (Maori) and in English. I want that for Portland, I want that for the Northwest. I think that is something that we could absolutely accomplish and that could make us a really unique city, but it could also help us to sort of practice what we preach these days.

DH (8:43): A lot of good stuff there.

NM (8:44): Yeah.

DH (8:47): When you were describing relationships among leaders, I'm just wondering, were you thinking in terms of within Portland, or much broader among Native communities in the greater region?

NM (9:00): Both, I would like to see a lot stronger relationship and better support between tribal communities and urban communities. Both communities are struggling so much now that it is really hard to create those relationships. I think that would be really important. I need help to serve their tribal members that live here; they need help to serve their tribal members that live here. And I also want to be a resource to those communities as well, so really developing that strong relationship. But also, I think that there has been a mind set of poverty and a mind set of there never being enough resources and I think that we need to shift our mind to think about all of the opportunities that are out there and take ourselves away from that mind set of disparity and poverty because what it has done historically is made us fight over resources or feel tense because it has been so difficult for people to survive and because there has been a lot of oppression that has happened to different groups in different ways and that's very difficult. I think the day that we can shift our mind to really think about all of the opportunities and the

opportunities to share and support each other, it would benefit our community greatly.

DH (10:23): What would that look like, that shift and that mentality to opportunity in terms of relationships within communities and with the landscape?

NM (10:34): I think that there needs to be some effort, there are some really amazing organizations out there that organize tribes, there are organizations that are quite fantastic that organize the urban programs, and certainly NAYA has been tremendously successful because of some of our relationships. I don't know how we would have made it this many years if lots and lots of people didn't help us out. Our greatest moments of success have been when other Native organizations or tribes have really stepped up and helped us significantly and I think that perhaps a more institutional, organized way to create those opportunities. I think right now often times people think about "well there's never enough money; we can't do everything; there's not enough money; we can't do that; it's too hard," and I think that a lot of that is the oppression that we have experienced really speaking for us, rather than us really creating our own perception of what reality is. There is enough resources, if we're organized, if we're thoughtful, if we're conscious of how our actions impact other people, I believe that there are a lot of opportunities that our communities can take advantage of, collectively.

DH (11:54): Would you see a different relationship, you mentioned education, what about higher education and the relationship with the scientific community?

NM (12:04): I don't understand the question.

DH (12:06): What do you see, in terms of your vision, what would be the nature of that relationship between your community and institutions of higher education and the scientific community?

NM (12:18): Well I think that our community needs to reclaim our self-determination as it pertains to higher education. I think that we have been put in the position where we have to prove or document a lot of things that really reinforce a hierarchical kind of power structure. I think what we need to do is be accountable to ourselves, and define what we want, what we want our reality to be like, what we want our future to be like. Certainly, I want our children to go to school, and go to college and get their PhD as much as the next person, but I want it to be done in a way that is most valuable to our community, and I want our young people who go to college to go to college with the knowledge that they are going to help our community. It's really so important that they bring it back into our core community, or certainly if they want to work in another field I always want them to feel like they are a contributing member of our community and that we need them, in many different ways. I think that it would be wonderful to have more universities and colleges that were focused specifically for Native students, but I think it would be wonderful to really shape and help some of our current higher institutions and educational organizations do a much better job not only teaching Native students, but teaching all students.

DH (13:44): How about then, science as a profession and as an institute on its own?

NM (13:48): How do I want it to change?

DH (13:53): How would you see the interaction with your community, how would that operate?

NM (14:00): I don't know... right now I can articulate a lot of things that I don't like about what the scientific community does. Fundamentally there has to be a power shift before anything will change. I think there has to be Native professors, there have to be Native deans, there have to be Natives on the board of trustees. I think that we have a long way to go. I think that those changes need to be made in order to really have the fundamental power shift where, it's not... Like right now if there is a well intentioned person in the scientific community and they want to create that relationship and get to know the Native community then perhaps something positive will happen. It's really a choice for people right now. And I just don't see that as acceptable.

DH (15:08): What about traditional practices, what is their place and their role in your community in a sustainable future? How do you see traditional practices: are they the same, are they different, what is the day to day role in people's lives?

NM (15:32): Well, I hope that we're helping to create a new generation that traditional practices are a part of their everyday life. I hope that we'll be significantly increasing them, significantly increasing the knowledge that our children have about how to do it. I hope that my children will be doing a lot more of their traditional practices than I am able to do as a Native person today. I think that the other piece that's really important is helping the rest of our community, the larger community, to really recognize, appreciate and support those traditional practices as part of our inherent sovereign rights.

DH (16:25): What don't you see, in your vision of a sustainable future, what's not there?

NM (16:35): Well I don't see the level of infighting that we have today (laughter), I see a lot more unity and a collective effort. I don't see the invisibility that we experience today, I see us as a very visible population, and I don't see the marginalization that we face today.

DH (17:07): Can you say anything else about any of those? How they are not there, and what that means in terms of the quality of life?

NM (17:22): Well I think that we're at a place now and we are getting more empowered every single day to simply not stand for it anymore. So, I think that what that does to our quality of life is that it gives us a voice, and it gives us a sense of who we are and it gives us the strength and the belief in our self to decide for ourselves what we want, and to do it. I was just recently in Bolivia meeting with, they have the first indigenous president elected in South America, and we met with him and several other indigenous leaders and they wanted to know what we were doing that worked and we were sort of feeling like if we could just take just one iota of the self-determination they have, and the belief in themselves to control their own government and their own destiny, our community could benefit so much from that. He had such a strong sense that they could do anything that they wanted, they were organized and thoughtful and respectful to each other, and clearly its working, they just elected their first indigenous president, and have overthrown the oligarchy, and have more than half of their representatives are indigenous people today. Definitely they are inspirational for me.

DH (18:57): I'd like to have you take a minute to imagine yourself as just an average person of your community in this future place, this sustainable future. Think in terms of, what would be some of your core values and core beliefs?

NM (19:34): Well even though I was an average person I would know that I was important to my community and I would know that I was an asset to them and I would know that I have responsibilities as a member of my community. I would know what my role was, and some of the principles that I needed to behave with, and I think that they would really fall back to the respect and the reciprocity and the redistribution. And the thing that I would hold most dear is the relationship that I have to my community, my Native community, my larger community, my relationship with the earth and spirituality is molded into all of those things. I think those are the most important values that I would want any average person to have in our future community.

DH (23:34): Are there any beliefs that people hold today that you think are productive towards achieving sustainability. I guess a good example would be the belief that you witnessed of the indigenous people of Bolivia, and the belief that they really could take on anything and were truly empowered. What other beliefs might be guiding people?

NM (24:06): I definitely hope that people believe in their own ability to shape their own future. So I think that would be important. I want them to have the knowledge and resources to practice their own culture, and to practice their own tribal beliefs and to have those passed on from the elders in their communities. I think that's as far as I would go. I don't want to say what beliefs are wrong, or which ones are right.

--break--

*(During break an exercise was completed. Maher generated a list of "I am" statements that speak to the kind of self-identity she hopes members of her community in the future will hold.)*

NM: I am a Native American. I am a woman. I am multicultural. I am Irish too! I am a member of a community. I am an advocate for my people. I am a supporter of other communities. I am treading lightly on my path. I am giving more than I am taking.

NM (00:41): The significance of the "I AM" statements that I listed are really related to thinking about our future citizens, or future community members really being proud of who they are proud of having the values that they do, seeing them as assets and seeing them as something to share and give to the rest of the community. Having a collective consciousness of who they are and how they impact the world around them and the community around them and feeling empowered to practice their culture and to share it with others. One of the things I wrote was that I want them to give more than they take and I want them to tread lightly where they go and to be conscious of it. I think that those things are very important. I also think it's very important that they feel comfortable articulating it from a space of their indigenous heritage too. I also wrote that they are going to be proud of being multi-cultural, they are going to be proud of being Native, they are going to be proud of everything that they are and, I think that, seeing the children that we work with here every day, most of our children are multi-cultural, they are two

tribes, they are three tribes, they are four tribes and something else usually and they really need to feel not just good about it, they need to feel great about it.

DH (2:19): Anything else you would share about the vision that you hold for your community? Well let's talk in terms of how to move from here to there. What are the actions that we need to begin and/or continue from this day forward to bring about a sustainable future?

NM (2:42): Well, I think that as a community we need to have more conversations like this; internally within the Native community and externally with other allies and other communities. I think that we have to be very organized as a community and we have to take the time to set our priorities and articulate what our values are and be very thoughtful about what they are, and be very thoughtful about communicating them to our children. Anymore, we can't just assume that it's happening it has to be a conscious effort. So I think that is very important, I think we have to be very organized about voting, we should be very organized about getting our leaders to work together, and we have to be very thoughtful about how do we strategically put people in our community who do have these values in places where they can share and support any policy or discussion that will help us be better members of these communities and be better visitors on this earth. I think those are some things that I think are really important. I think that there has to be a much broader and better and more respectful dialog between the environmentalism community and the Native community, and other communities of color and I think that people have to come to the table with the belief that they are not there because they need a Native representative, or they need this community to get their agenda done, they have to be there with genuine respect and belief that it is the right thing to do, and we are not there yet. I think that's really important. I think that our community has to have a much stronger, and a much firmer voice. I think that we need to really invest our time and energy in having our own self determination about what we want for our future, and really following through about what it will take to get there as well. I'm not sure who said the quote, but he said "vision without implementation is just a hallucination". I think that will be really important for us to remember as well.

DH (5:06): Can you say more about the dialogues (with other stakeholders) that you would like to see happening, how the tone of them would be different, or the content of them?

NM (6:09): I don't think they are really happening, right now. I think they are happening far and few between and there are a few efforts here and there, but they aren't happening at the level that they need to be happening, and often times when they do happen it's more superficial. I think there has to be a collective buy in from all parties with the end result, and the buy in has to be really about coming to the table with mutual respect rather than just a process piece. That is what I see a lot of happening right now.

DH (6:48): Can you give an example of one issue that you see on the table that you would like to have an opportunity to contribute a much stronger voice to?

NM (7:02): There is the Planning Bureau; they are planning the destiny of this neighborhood. They, the planning and the parks bureau, have essentially taken city resources, which I always like to remind them that we are all taxpaying citizens too in this neighborhood which has this very important historical significance with multiple Native village sites in it, and they have

essentially gone through an entire planning about the future of this neighborhood, and failed completely to include Native people. The parks just did a planning process for the ten year vision of the Whitaker lakeside ponds which are the ponds in our backyard and are the site of the Neerchiki, Multnomah, Chinook village site and there was a huge effort by folks from the environmental community, and different stakeholders and we were never invited. Not that we should be the ones invited, but you think someone would be, and nowhere in the plan does it acknowledge or recognize the cultural significance of the area. It doesn't even mention it. And, those are one of a bazillion examples that I have. It's just not even in the conversation. From my point of view, I feel like they should be our greatest allies and our greatest partners, and the folks that would want to be just as engaged with the Native community as anyone else. That's why I have some frustration about some of those things. Is that helpful?

DH (8:43): In addition to dialogue what other actions and strategies need to be taken?

NM (8:47): Well, I think that we have to set new standards of how we plan and think about everything that we do in this larger city of Portland. If that's a planning process, I just think that there can't be a commission or a committee that doesn't have someone from our community on it. We are one of the largest ethnic populations in the city, we should be engaged. That is something that we are working very hard on as a community. I have mentioned voting a lot, because we are an urban community, we are not a sovereign nation, we don't have government to government relationships, we don't have the same capacities and ways to advocate for ourselves as a tribe does. We have to be very engaged with making sure our legislators and our city commissioners and our county commissioners have the right information and are not making policies that harm us, because it happens. Not out of ill intent, it's just ignorance often times, and the way that we have to be engaged around that is not only be good voters, but make sure they know we are good voters and being very organized about deciding who will run and how they will run as well.

DH (10:08): Any other actions, strategies?

NM (10:11): Around sustainability?

DH (10:15): Towards bringing about a sustainable future

NM (10:24): I think that sort of, my line of logic is that if we as a community get very engaged and have more influence, than that will put a positive impact on the sustainability of our future. I think that a lot of the suggestions that I am making are really more about how do we have more influence and autonomy so that all of the other things that we all know need to happen will happen. We know that we have to do environmental restoration; we know that we have several areas that have to be cleaned up significantly in Portland. We know what to do, it's not a mystery about what needs to get done, it's how do you get the political willpower and the right people in the room to make it happen. So, I think that's where a lot of my suggestions and where my point of view comes from; it's sort of wonderful to describe what steps it would take to do environmental restoration, or whatever, but if you don't have the power or the influence to do it, it's very frustrating. I also do appreciate and believe a lot in grass roots efforts. Our former building that we were at, at NAYA, we completely cleaned out an empty lot that was full of

broken glass and pollution and made it into a park, and it was beautiful. And we're now taking on all of the invasive species on this twenty acre piece of land as our next project. We are like one eighth of one acre yet, so I think there is really an important piece is the grass roots efforts, we took grade-schoolers and middle-schoolers and had them do that project so that they could really get engaged. It is one thing to say, the big picture is important, the political world is important, but you also have to get your young people ready for when they do have that influence that they will do the right thing.

DH (12:30): You may have already spoken in these terms, but what do you see as some of the greatest obstacles between where we are today and your thinking on what a sustainable future could be?

NM (13:27): Well, as a community, we are still in survival mode. Most of my day is spent focusing on advocating for homeless issues such as Native children who are the most over represented minority that are in the homeless population, we have the largest over representation of any minority in juvenile justice, our young people who are in juvenile justice are more likely than any other population to be tried as adults and are spending the longest time for sentencing. We are two percent of the state's population and we are fifteen percent of the foster care system. We have incredible challenges. I have families that come to this building every single day who need food, they need shelter, they need rent assistance, they need health care. We have a significant number of our population who is living in poverty at a level that is so unacceptable. It's very difficult to get out from underneath the despair, the loss of hope, and the big challenge is to even hold time aside and say let's go have a conversation about sustainability. That is really a place of privilege that most of our families are not in. So, we have this really tough side of how do you make sure that people's basic needs are met so they can even have a conversation about how do we learn our values and pass them on to our children, or how do we do those things, so that's a big struggle that we have, it is just a basic reality that we are facing every single day. What we've tried to do is really meet those basic needs and then infuse all of the culture and values and try to do them both at the same time, but it is challenging. I think that the other challenge that we have is that there are many, many prevalent stereotypes about Native Americans. People don't want to have a conversation with Native Americans about sustainability, they want to ask us how much money we are getting from a casino, they want to ask us why all Native Americans have an alcohol problem. There is just a lot of false and very negative stereotypes that preempt our ability to even have a conversation. So there's that piece...

DH (15:47): First, on that note, do you see any way of, how do we eliminate that stereotypical way of thinking?

NM (15:55): Well, I think that it's the coalition building, it's the conversation, it's the relationship building. I think that's the only way, there's no way that without time, and energy and effort spent working on those issues, and people having a lot of personal experiences with us, and being corrected and being shown accurate information, that's not going to go away. We're working on a project to bring all nineteen of the Native organizations together in Portland, to really make sure that we have one unified story about what our population is like, what challenges we face, and what our reality is to try to mitigate some of those stereotypes or break up some of those myths. You know that's one small piece, there has got to be a lot of other stuff

that happens. And we need other people to take this issue on as theirs, this shouldn't only be up to Native Americans to fight the fight of breaking down myths, we have to be allies, we have to get help. There is also just sort of the social justice piece, the fact that we are fifteen percent of the foster system, the fact that we are the most over represented in juvenile justice, and you know, name a hundred other horrible statistics, it doesn't seem to make anyone upset except for us, everyone else seems completely fine with it. If you tell them about the statistics, if you talk to them about it, they're sad, they're upset, but they're not actually moved to do anything. I think until we can get allies, and partners, and other people to step up as well and really help do something and take this issue on and recognize that if there are struggling people in our community, our whole community is struggling, it's not just a Native American problem. I think that that is important, that everyone sort of work on some of these social justice issues otherwise we'll never get to the point where we can really focus on the sustainable future. It's really hard to think about how we will really have the time and space to do what needs to be done if we are trying to handle all of these other issues, and you'll have those people who will say, "well poverty will always be there, this will always be there," and I don't know if I believe that. I think there are a lot of things that we could do differently, and I have a lot of hope for things being very different than they are now.

DH (18:23): You mentioned those potential partnerships, I'm wondering, what are the partnerships that you see that are closest, which partnerships are close to really forming to be effective to addressing those things you were speaking about?

NM (18:39): Is the question where are we on the brink of actually doing better? (DH: Yea) Well, not with foster care of juvenile justice I will tell you that much (laughter). I think Portland public schools has been a phenomenal partner in the last three years and has absolutely stepped up and taken many courageous risks to do things differently, and has really, for the first time, and we have had horrific educational achievement issues for Native students for as long as our kids have been going to school in Portland, and it has always just been accepted and allowed, and in the last three years, certainly community members were doing advocacy for years and years prior, but in the last three years largely due to brave and courageous leadership and leaders who came to the table and said "You know what, we could probably not do anything for Native kids for a long time, no one is going to make us, but it is the right thing to do, and if we don't do something for Native kids, Portland school systems are always going to struggle, because this is an important, and a large portion of the kids in the school system, and the proportion is going to grow, and we see these folks as a members of the larger community, and so we need to do something specific that will work." There has been some really phenomenal progress on that front, which is very exciting, but it really took that courageous leadership of saying, I'm not doing this for myself, necessarily, I'm not doing this to do a nice thing for the Native community, but this is something that we need to do for the entire community. That's one part that is really important. I think that our current mayor has really also done a lot of work to really engage the Native Community and do it in a really respectful way. As a result of that the Portland visioning process had, the highest ethnic group that responded was the Native community and we were very proud of that, in fact some people were concerned that we were over represented, which, you know it's fine that for a hundred years European cultures have been over represented but the second we are over represented it probably skews all of the data, right? So that's how cultural sustainability and sustainability actually made it into the city vision



project. I think those are two really exciting, positive things, I'll make sure and get you some more information, but on August twenty second we are having a big old meeting with the community and the parks bureau to try and overcome some of the institutional racism and the discriminatory behaviors that they have engaged in, and you know we have politely tried to engage them and get them to change, and they are not doing it and so our community, for the first time is going to step up and by a show of being very organized and being very thoughtful and just not allowing them to get away with it I believe the parks will change soon.

DH (21:54): If you had an opportunity to have a call to action for every individual citizen, Native and non-Native, particularly in the Portland area, what would you encourage people to do?

NM (22:07): I would encourage them to learn the Native history of Portland before contact, I would encourage them to make sure and learn the last one hundred years of federal policy that has made Portland the ninth largest Native community in the United States, and I would encourage them to be much more engaged about social justice issues, and to find a place where they can make a contribution, it's not my place to say what, or where or how, but to do something. It doesn't have to definitely be for the Native community, it could be for a lot of different communities. There are a lot of social justice issues that take place in Portland that most Portland citizens are blind to. That's my first crack, at a call to action.

DH (23:03): Anything else you would add to this piece about actions that need to be taken from this day forward to bring about a true sustainable future?

NM (23:15): Nothing additional to what I already said, I would just be repeating myself (laughter).

DH (23:20): I guess in terms of our whole conversation here, is there anything that I haven't asked about, that has been in the back of your mind that you're like, "I wish he would ask a question about this..." or something that we haven't been able to touch on?

NM (23:38): I don't think so, but if I think of something can I let you know?

DH (23:41): We will share a transcript of this with you and then you can add at that point. And then to give you an opportunity, and encourage you to repeat yourself, is there anything that you've shared that you would like to emphasize or draw extra attention to?

NM (24:04): I feel like I have just been repeating myself over and over and over again for the whole conversation. And I apologize, I'm in a lot of pain with my neck so I'm not on my best today, so please forgive me for that.

DH: No need to forgive, you've been very good and I want to thank you for your time today.

To quote this interview, please use the following citation:

Maher, N. (Interviewee) & Hall, D. E. (Interviewer). (2007). *Native Perspectives on Sustainability: Nichole Maher (Tlingit)* [Interview transcript]. Retrieved from the Native Perspectives on Sustainability project website: [www.nativeperspectives.net](http://www.nativeperspectives.net)