

Stacy Leeds Interview Summary
February 28, 2019
First Person Plural project

Intro - Jo Blatti interviewing Dr. Stacy Leeds in her office on the UA Fayetteville campus on February 28, 2019 for the First Person Plural project

JB Start – where you were born

SL Hospital Tulsa [Oklahoma], then home to Muskogee

Parents Jim and Sharon Leeds - Muskogee, father from Ft. Gibson [Oklahoma] from a removal family [Cherokee], U.S. fort there, family home place south of there, fifth generation Mom, Dust Bowl after WWII

JB Both Cherokee?

SL Mom Caucasian, Dust Bowl, don't know much beyond grandparents

I was second born, older brother

JB When people think of Oklahoma

SL Oil and Indians

JB Both in your family?

SL Mother – factory workers and government workers; father's family farm, he was the first to move off. Worked in a factory all my childhood.

5 min in

Later an electrician, now semi-retired. Mother first to graduate high school. My brother and I first to have college degrees.

All bright, hard working. We had opportunities they did not.

I wanted to be a history teacher and basketball coach.

Went to Washington University, St. Louis on sports scholarship

Very big break to choose great sports, academic school.

History undergrad, handful of other native kids, one on basketball team with me

A social work grad student had a washer-dryer, we hung out there –

Through that connection, I enrolled in a tribal advocacy and child welfare course - capstone was an 'aha' moment –

JB Was your family active in native American activities?

SL Never a moment not Cherokee, 1970s

10 min in

Cherokee nation starting to function again. Dormant from statehood [1907] to the 1970s.

Very much paying attention to the chief's election: Ross Swimmer and Wilma Mankiller burned into my brain.

Wilma Mankiller the first native woman on the national scene. I knew her and her husband by first name. Normalized women's leadership.

JB Your family is enrolled?

SL Means citizenship. Part Cherokee - U.S., Oklahoma embedded ethically, culturally

JB Complicated – based on blood, not exclusive. Return to later. Cherokee formal government –

15 min in

SL Not as if Cherokee government went away – dormant because state and federal crushing ability to function the way it had before – in the spirit of termination.

JB Can we hold for a moment and return to you in college, arguing on behalf –

SL Undergrad to law school exclusively Indian and tribal law, very homesick. Choose Tulsa, within 1 hour of parents and grandparents.

Had clerkships and internships including national advocacy center for tribes [Boulder, Colorado] Also saw by third year of law school that only two women were teaching in native programs and real need for women to be in that pipeline

20 min in

Describes progression into law school posts:

University of Wisconsin, post degree training ground on writing/teaching

Followed by several years in practice [Oklahoma] including Creek nation tobacco case

North Dakota – opportunity to build an Indian law program

Describes community at large as 'a bit behind the time' on racial issues circa 2000

Compares to the experience to growing up in Oklahoma and seeing grandfather and other native people as community leaders in the Farm Bureaus, school board, etc.

25 min in

Notes controversy over the university mascot "Fighting Sioux" stereotype, her role as a faculty member, eventual change due to NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association] rather than local conditions

Discusses move to University of Kansas [KU] law school and appointment to the Cherokee Supreme in Tahlequah, Oklahoma

30 min in

Describes changes in the court during her time [2002-2006], transitioning from 3 to 5 judges and also from original jurisdiction to a more mixed appellate function.

35 min in

JB Cherokee freedmen case-

SL Discusses the complexities of the case, which date to the fact some individual Cherokees held African Americans in bondage in the antebellum period. Subsequent legal documents including the U.S. treaty with the Cherokee in 1866, the Dawes enrollment lists [late 19th into the early 20th century], and the 1975 Cherokee constitution defining citizenship all bear on this.

40 min in

Leeds, who wrote the Supreme Court's opinion defining citizens – including freedmen – at the time the lists were made, comments on the subsequent Cherokee nation popular referendum that overruled the courts, comparing it to a hypothetical Reconstruction era vote in which say, Georgia, folks might have voted on the question of whether freedmen there were citizens.

JB You ran for chief after that –

45 min in

SL Term expired 2006. Ran against an incumbent in 2007. Very important to take on someone in power for a long time, 3rd term. I had the luxury, financially secure, no one in the family worked for the tribe at that time. Did better than expected. Most fun- number of people we have relationships with –
Politics is more community & family based
Ex. – if my brother & I voted in a state/ federal election; we'd cancel each other out in a tribal election – the same

JB Leeds values a tribal election?

SL Trust, transparency,
Level of engagement w/n the family, distrust government, strong libertarian on
Lot of money involved

50 min in

JB Controls a lot of money in oil, mineral, gaming

SL In 1870s, 80s, 80s – commodities, politically active

JB Your writings - what is this stuff about inferiority, dependency?

SL When you look at how the U.S. has legislated its power

JB Much of your alternatives – future, sovereignty – regain/redefine
Response internally?

SL A number of scholars who have that lens. If we can't criticize Cherokee decisions, who can?

55 min in

Always had reflective people. Laughable to imagine that we proceed with one voice. Always dissent. Sequoyah – literary, but also an effective politician

JB Role of women – historically guardians, pivotal moments in native history

SL Cherokee - romanticized notion, not true

60 min in

Freely able to enter/exit a relationship within five “civilized” tribes

Adoption of slavery, repression of women’s rights

Why women present?

1820s Cherokee men got equal rights [marrying Caucasian women they met at schools]

Citizenship matrilineal before then

Dilution social structure started then

Ex. - my parents, my mother head of household

Property law begins to change

I write about property my own family

My great grandmother got the allotment. When her land passed on, to her oldest daughter.

Also discusses other writings about native women and the law in this section of the conversation.

1 hr., 5 min in

When you look at legal documents, consistent with Cherokee practice – nine children didn’t inherit equally

Only two women on the Supreme Court

Look at the U. S. - falling behind

As an educator, native students overwhelmingly women

JB Continue to be interested in being chief?

SL Ten-year old, want to raise in peace

A gift not to win

Ten years of brain-dump writing ahead

JB Family -

SL My 10-year old son Hunter is in Fayetteville public school

Three years old when we moved to Arkansas, when the law school dean came open

Just started to do more administrative work at KU

1 hr. 10 min in

Close to home, mentors encouraged

Don’t get to control timing of opportunities

Combination of history + modern – Cyndi Nance [Cynthia E. Nance, Dean, 2006-2011] first woman and first person of color to be dean

JB Law school enrollment down – why?

SL Financial crisis. Substantial press: is our degree worth it? Student loan debt?
Started to turn around – immigrant debate. From the left – camped out helping people.
In the middle, right – a way to be involved in national dialogue, 3-5% uptick.

1 hr. 15 min

JB Your transition –

SL New chancellor – Joel Steinmetz, strategic plan, office to facilitate
7th year on campus – senior dean, had on the ground connections
Margaret McCabe came to the law school; I teach a class or two
Only research & outreach program indigenous food & agriculture
Interface grad program ag + food & law school

JB Sustainability, tribal law

SL All of the above

JB Export to China?

SL Largest working farm in the U.S. is Navaho

1 hr., 21 min in

With my own family – farming & ranching significant - federal law makes it difficult

JB More difficult native landholders?

SL U.S. continues to be the titleholder – postholes require permission, etc.

JB Oh, shoot

SL Pro – state can't take by eminent domain
Con – perpetually bound up in this supervision

JB Shawnee, Delaware = citizens? Hold land? Anybody ever gripe? [returning to freedmen issue
briefly]

SL Not a problem

1 hr. 25 min in

JB [Cherokee] Gaming Commission

SL One term, independent regulatory body, consistent tribal, federal law

Five-person commission appointed by chief, confirmed by legislature, 4-year terms
Balancing competing interests, a challenge

JB How does it work?

SL I think a lot of people think casinos breed organized crime. But very heavily regulated – about the last place, operated like a bank

1 hr. 30 min in

You want to support the employees – 4-5,000 employees
In 1980s, 90s, typical that tribes would hire Harrah's
Now Cherokees, Chickasaws = tribal gold standard, indigenous professionals

Trying to build that in many areas, ex. ag engineers.

1 hr. 35 min in

JB Benefits of citizenship – health service, scholarships

SL Explains scholarship magnitude generally \$2500, Cherokee students piece together as others do
Adair County, Oklahoma, in the heart of Cherokee country, unhealthiest county in the U.S.

JB Not all boats lifted –

Your work – Cherokee & educational community focus moving forward

SL 200 years from now, I would like to see, Cherokee in charge of their own decision-making,
Achieving best governance

Discussion of American exceptionalism follows

1 hr. 45 min in

Dual citizenship presumes wanted to be dual citizens. There is a history of patriotism and a veteran history.

Tribal/state citizenship perhaps in conflict

If we could freeze status quo, better than future I see

U.S. Supreme Court one more incursion

JB We have covered a huge amount

SL Three more hours, working through Arkansas project, great place to live, university -

JB I promise to come back next round. Thank you for making time for us now –

1 hr. 51 min in