Voices of Feminism Oral History Project
Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

CHARON ASETOYER

interviewed by

JOYCE FOLLET

September 1 - 2, 2005
Lake Andes, South Dakota

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with generous support from the Ford Foundation.

Narrator

Charon Asetoyer was born March 24, 1951, in San Jose, California, the youngest child of Virginia Asetoyer (Comanche) and Charles Eugene Huber. A student organizer as a teen, she dropped out of high school to start her own dress design business in San Francisco. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, she worked at the Urban Indian Health Center and became immersed in the cultural life of Haight-Ashbury and in the American Indian Movement. To escape an abusive marriage, she moved to South Dakota, where she enrolled in the University of South Dakota, earning a degree in criminal justice in 1981. She earned a master's degree in international administration and intercultural management from the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont, in 1983.

In the mid-1980s, Asetoyer created and briefly directed a health program for Women of All Red Nations (WARN) to address fetal alcohol syndrome on three South Dakota reservations. After marrying Clarence Rockboy, she settled on his Yankton Sioux Reservation in South Dakota, where they set up the Native American Community Board (NACB) in 1985. Their first project was "Women and Children and Alcohol." In 1988 the NACB established the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center (NAWHERC), which Asetoyer continues to direct.

NAWHERC gathers information on the health needs of indigenous women in the Aberdeen area (ND, SD, Iowa, Nebraska), provides referral services, runs a domestic violence shelter, and advocates Native rights. The Center maintains programs on domestic violence, AIDS prevention, youth services, adult learning, Dakota language and culture, environmental awareness and action, fetal alcohol syndrome, nutrition, and reproductive health and rights. The Center is noted for its community-based research and publications, which have influenced policies and practices of the Indian Health Service and other agencies.

The NAWHERC works at local and regional levels and also addresses policy issues that affect indigenous women nationally and internationally. Asetoyer has been involved in the Working Group on Indigenous Populations at the United Nations from the early stages of its formation and was one of the founding co-chairs of the Working Group's Committee on Health.

Asetoyer is an enrolled member of the Comanche Tribe of Oklahoma, and she is active in coalitions with indigenous women and other women of color in the US and internationally. She has served on the boards of the American Indian Center (San Francisco), the National Women's Health Network, the Indigenous Women's Network, the National Environmental Justice Advisory Committee (NEJAC) of the Environmental Protection Agency, and Honor the Earth. During the Clinton Administration she was appointed to one of the National Advisory Councils for Health and Human Services. She has two sons.

The Papers of Charon Asetoyer and the Records of the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center are at the SSC.

Interviewer

Joyce Follet (b.1945) is a public historian, educator, and producer of historical documentary. She earned a Ph.D. in Women's History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is Coordinator of Collection Development at the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.

Abstract
Asetoyer describes her family roots in Oklahoma, her childhood in a biracial family, and her involvement as a teen in the cultural and political life of the Bay Area in the late 1960s and early 1970s. She traces her work with Native women's health programming in South Dakota in the 1980s and her involvement with national and international women of color health activists around such issues as fetal alcohol syndrome and Depo-Provera. Asetoyer explains the workings and programs of the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center and the centrality of sovereignty to indigenous women's activism.

Restrictions: none

Format
Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Seven 63-minute tapes.

Transcript
Transcribed by Tape Transcription Center. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Revan Schendler. Transcript reviewed and approved by Charon Asetoyer and Joyce Follet. Transcript 100 pages + cover sheets.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

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Transcript

Bibliography: Asetoyer, Charon. Interview by Joyce Follet. Transcript of video recording, September 1 and 2, 2005. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote example:** Charon Asetoyer, interview by Joyce Follet, transcript of video recording, September 2, 2005, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 34–35.

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Transcript of interview conducted SEPTEMBER 1 – 2, 2005, with:

CHARON ASETOYER

at: Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center
Lake Andes, South Dakota

by: JOYCE FOLLET

FOLLET: OK. Finally. Here we are. This is Joyce Follet with Charon Asetoyer at the Native American Women's Health and Education Resource Center. 1:00

ASETOYER: Health Education Resource Center.

FOLLET: Health Education Resource Center, sorry, in Lake Andes, South Dakota.

ASETOYER: On the Yankton Sioux Reservation.

FOLLET: On the Yankton Sioux Reservation. Thank you so much for setting aside this time. Let me just make sure our voices are OK.

So, we talked about a couple of different ways of starting this oral history of your life and your life's work and the work here at the Center, and we talked about just going straight chronologically from childhood to the present, and then we talked about a more open-ended way of [asking, for example], where would you start if you were trying to, say, write an autobiography? Where would you choose to start now? So you can start wherever you'd like.

ASETOYER: Well, that's an interesting question. I think probably my activism and where that started, you know. And when I think about that, I go back to high school, when I was attending high school in East San José, California. It was during the '60s, the late '60s, and the neighborhood was mostly African American, Latina, low-income white people, and I'm pretty sure I was the only Native American in the school.

They had no hot-food service for lunch, and it was a closed campus, and there were these vending machines that we used to have to buy our lunch out of. And sometimes there would be, like, pieces of broken glass wrapped up in the food or, you know, some hairs and whatnot. And so, I said, you know, this is bullshit. We shouldn't have to be eating this stuff. There's no reason why they couldn't have a hot-food program — [or] a cafeteria, or open campus, so that we could leave and go home or go to a store or whatever.

And so I went over to one of the African American students who seemed to be really, really popular and I told him, I said, "Hey, you know what? When the bell rings for everybody to go back to class, let's just don't. Let's just not go back. Let's just have a sit-in until they decide they're going to have a hot-lunch program. We shouldn't have to put up with this. We're better than that, you know. We deserve better." So he said OK. So he worked his students and I, you know, went and talked to all the Chicanos and all the Latina students and word got around. And the bell rang and everybody stayed out on the playground, I guess you'd call it.

And so, I slipped out and went to the pay phone and called the media and told them, and they were right there, you know, like in no time, with the news cameras and so forth. And we had our spokespeople all in order and we told them. And the school really didn't know what to do with us. They were frantic and the media was there. We said, Hey, we're not going to go back to class until we're treated like human beings, with some respect and some dignity. We want a hot-lunch program or we want an open campus, but no more of these vending machines that are unsanitary.

And we got what we wanted. By the end of the week, they had cooks coming in and we had a hot-lunch program. So, you know, it didn't take us long to figure out that through organizing collectively, working together, that we could move little mountains, that we could come across some of these challenges and deal with them. So I think that's probably my first step at activism, yeah, where I could see what was going on.

FOLLET: What year would this have been?

ASETOYER: Um, '66.

FOLLET: And you graduated in what year?

ASETOYER: I didn't.

FOLLET: OK.

ASETOYER: Yeah, I'm a high-school dropout, and so, yeah, in my sophomore year, I dropped out. I would have graduated in '69, so that would've been '66, '67, right around in there. Anyway, I ended up dropping out and I used to sew a lot. And my father had said, "If you learn to sew, I'll buy all the material you want." And I did and he did.

And about that time, Haight-Ashbury was starting to flourish and there were all these boutiques on Haight Street and in North Beach, and so, I used to design clothes, you know, that were kind of hippie and Native American flair, and take them and put them — my girlfriends would hop in my car, I had a car, and we would go up to San Francisco. I mean, gas was, like, 29 cents a gallon, so we'd take our lunch money

or whatever, and have money for gas and go up there. And then I'd put these things that I had made on consignment.

And before too long, you know, my dad realized what I was doing and he said, "Well, why don't you just go into business for yourself?" And I said, "Well, I am in business for myself." And he said, "Well, I'll match whatever it is that you have and then you can expand your operation and so forth." And he said, "Well, how much do you have?" And I said, "I've got fifteen hundred dollars." And he was, like, What? And I'm still giving you two dollars a week for allowance? I said, "Yeah. That's how I got started. That and the material you said I could have if I learned how to sew."

So, we went into business. He kept his word. And I had a small line of clothes. I was a wholesaler and designer. And I wholesaled — it was called Charon of California. I had all the shops in San Francisco in all the communities like Polk Street, North Beach, Grand Avenue, Haight-Asbury, and so forth.

But you know, that was kind of boring, you know, always being in the background and delivering dresses and outfits and stuff. I wanted to open up a retail outlet. So I did, and I got a little storefront on Haight Street and moved into the city. And there I was, in business for myself, called Orpheus, a little clothing store on Haight Street, down from the Glass Onion and the Third Eye Bookstore.

FOLLET: At the age of, what?

ASETOYER: Oh, I was 17 — 16, 17, right around in there.

FOLLET: Wow.

ASETOYER: Yeah. And so I did that for a while and got involved in the politics of Haight Street and also what was going on — I mean, a lot of antiwar protesting. I was involved with that, and all the riots on Haight Street and over at San Francisco State. [I was] even involved, I remember, protesting against Nixon when he came to speak at San José State. So I was already out there, doing and being involved in political things. And of course, Alcatraz was, you know, about 1969, and so I was involved in that as well, providing supplies, because I knew a lot of the merchants and they could donate and we could get them over to the island and so on. So, I was very much involved in political work from — you know, other than reproductive health and rights work, there's a whole history there.

And so, I decided that I'd — well, in the early '70s, I closed up the shop and decided I wanted to go back to school. I ended up going to San Francisco City College for about a year and I worked in the financial district of San Francisco to survive for a little while after I closed up my business, because Haight Street really took a dive. I was kind of tired of it and didn't want to relocate and so forth or go over to North Beach somewhere.

So I went back to school and during that whole time, prior to closing, I fell in love and eventually got married and so forth. There were a lot of good things to the relationship, but there were a lot of things that weren't so good. He was an abuser, a physical abuser, and I wanted to pursue my education and he was very much against that and made it very difficult for me to do.

So I went, I dropped out of school and went to work in the financial district for banks and for Security Pacific National Bank, and I worked at their headquarters there, in the Embarcadero. And I had the very challenging job of coordinating the evacuations when there were bomb threats, which were all the time, because the Shah of Iran had an office in that complex. And my job was to stay behind and coordinate the evacuation.

So, when the police and the FBI were running around the offices, searching for a bomb, I was still sitting there on the phone coordinating the evacuation of the building and I said, hey, wait a second, you know, you're going through my garbage can, too, and my desk and my area, and you know, if there were a bomb, I'd be sitting here coordinating the evacuation and I'd go up in smoke. Chuck this, I'm not doing this for this amount of money. There's not enough money you could pay me to do this. So, I'd better get the heck out of here.

So, I went and got a street vendor's license and was a street artist there in Fisherman's Wharf area for a little while and a friend of mine, an attorney that was on the Board of Directors of the American Indian Health Clinic there on Julian Street there in San Francisco, said, "Charon, with all your experience, your work experience, why don't you come to work for us." I said, "Oh, OK." He said, "There's some jobs open, so go apply." And I did and I got hired in the WIC [Women, Infants, and Children] program. And we distributed WIC to nine counties. We'd go up on the different rancheros and reservations in the nine counties in Northern California and provide nutrition information and WIC information and so forth. You know, it's a nutrition program for –

FOLLET: Women, infants, and children.

ASETOYER: Women, infants, and children — exactly. And I did that for a while and decided I wanted to go back to school. But of course, all during that time, the American Indian Movement had really gotten very strong, as well as a lot of the other movements, and you know, I was very much involved in the activities that was going on.

I can remember when I lived in Haight-Ashbury, because my husband and I didn't have any children, there were the Black Panthers had these houses that they would, every morning, they would fix breakfast, oatmeal and bacon and eggs and toast and juice for the children in the community before they went to school. And that was really how the hot-breakfast program got started in this country.

And a lot of people don't attribute the coordination of the Black Panther Party in — they don't give them that credit. And so, we didn't have any children and we were both working, so we used to buy a couple of bags of groceries every week and take them up there and donate them for the hot-breakfast coordinated program. And there were these homes all over Haight-Ashbury and down in the other communities where there were a lot of African American people down in Divisadero and so forth. And so, that was it for the hot-breakfast program. Of course, eventually, that became a California state program and then a national program. But that's, you know, the origin of that program. So I was really — when I think back — really proud that we were able to contribute in some way.

But those kinds of activities were going on in communities and I think that they really never are showcased or brought to life. You know, when you think of Black Panthers, you think of them marching in Oakland and the Black Power sign and you really don't see or hear about the real contributions that they made in the communities and how the children benefited from the organizing.

FOLLET: You know, I sort of knew there was a California piece to your story, but I associated you with Oklahoma. Had you –

ASETOYER: Well, I –

FOLLET: Take me back further.

ASETOYER: OK. I'm Comanche and from Anadarko area of Oklahoma, but my folks [were] at Fort Sill during the war. And my mom worked there in the canteen and my father was a soldier. And they ended up getting married before he got shipped out. So, when he came back, they moved out west to California. And I was born in San José, California. My oldest sister was born in Oklahoma and then my other sister and I were born out in California. But that's the connection. My mother's family, my tribe, is in Oklahoma, southwestern Oklahoma. But I spent most of my time growing up in California, in the Bay Area.

FOLLET: Oh, I see. OK. So, did Oklahoma — did you keep up relationships with –

ASETOYER: Oh, yeah, yeah. I lived in Oklahoma for a few years. We lived there and we'd go back and forth all the time. I still go home. Yeah. I mean, a lot of my family is there. My relatives on my mom's side are there.

FOLLET: So those family connections were –

ASETOYER: Oh, they're strong. Oh, they're definitely strong. I mean, there's lots of families that — I mean, I live back here now on the Yankton Sioux Reservation because I married into the tribe, but I go to Oklahoma and I

go home to the Bay Area as often as I can. So there's family ties and, you know, we keep those long-distance relationships, and of course there's the telephone and so forth.

FOLLET: So you were born in forty—

ASETOYER: No, no. I was born in '51.

FOLLET: Fifty-one.

ASETOYER: Fifty-one, yeah.

FOLLET: OK. And you were one of how many children?

ASETOYER: There's four of us. I have an older brother from a previous marriage of my father's and then there's three girls, so there's four of us.

FOLLET: So, you're the –

ASETOYER: Youngest.

FOLLET: You're the youngest.

ASETOYER: I'm the youngest, yeah.

FOLLET: Out of four.

ASETOYER: Yeah. And the miracle child. My mother had had tuberculosis about the time that my older sister was born and really wasn't supposed to have any more children, and I came along. She had an option but decided — because of her health — one of her lungs is partially collapsed and they told her that it wouldn't be wise for her to have another child, she probably wouldn't make it. And she said, no, she wanted another one, and so, here I am. And she lived to be 83. So, I was just meant to be.

FOLLET: But your childhood was in San José?

ASETOYER: Uh-hm.

FOLLET: And you're one of four children. How do you remember childhood? What can you think of? What images come to mind?

ASETOYER: A very strong mother who instilled a lot of independence. You know, she'd always say, Don't ever depend on anybody to raise you or to support you — go to college. She was very, very much a supporter of higher education. She had gone to Haskell Indian School, which is a college for Native Americans. She didn't complete it, but she had gone, and was very proud of that fact, and always wanted us girls to be

independent and to be able to take care of ourselves and not have to be dependent on anyone. And so, I heard her loud and clear. Yeah.

My father, he was fine whether we went to college or not. He liked the idea. He was in business for himself, a business man, and he liked the fact that I had that drive, you know, to be in business for myself and would do anything that I could to take care of myself. So, I had two parents that were very, very instrumental in, I guess, helping me develop the fortitude that I have.

FOLLET: What was your father's business?

ASETOYER: He was a printer, and he printed everything from business forms to ice cream cartons and everything in between. He had a big print shop and us girls used to go down there. And before things were so automated, we'd go down and we'd do all the collating and the packing up of boxes and, you know, as far back as I can remember, we helped out in the family business. And I can remember my sisters and I playing marbles with the big ball bearings off the old Harley Davis printers, you know, the big print machines, and getting in trouble for doing that because they needed those ball bearings for the paper to move down the belts and stuff.

Yeah, I can remember those days. And so, we worked. We worked hard. We spent our Saturdays, you know, instead of out playing and stuff, we'd be working at the shop. He taught me how to post, so, the incoming and outgoing books, to take care of, keep, maintain books, so I learned at a very young age how to do that. Through high school, until I went into business for myself, I used to be the janitor. So after school, I'd drive over there and I'd clean toilets and sweep floors and dust and do all that, you know, to make extra money.

FOLLET: At the print shop.

ASETOYER: Yeah, at the print shop. My sister ended up working for him until he retired and then went to work for Ames Research and is one of their top editors. They do all the stuff for NASA. They're a contractor for NASA. So, you know, she's a graphics designer and does all the layout and the proofreading and so forth. She used to do it for him and now she does that kind of work for Ames.

FOLLET: Did your mom work outside the home?

ASETOYER: Sometimes, she did. She would help down at the business, or there were times when the business wasn't going so well and both her and one of my sisters worked at the canneries there in Sunnyvale, for Libby's and they used to pack broccoli, chop it and send it on its way down the conveyor belt. So she worked the canneries and that was really hard work, considering her health and everything — hot, steamy, you know, in those canneries. But she worked.

FOLLET: So, now and then, when the need arose, she did.

ASETOYER: Right.

FOLLET: If you had moved from Oklahoma, did you have other family around in California, or what was your family's social setting like?

ASETOYER: Well, my father's family lived out in the Bay Area and my sisters — because of my mother's health, there were large gaps in age difference between my sisters and I. And the war had something to do with that, too. My oldest sister is my mother's from a previous marriage, OK, and then my older sister and I are from my father and mother. So, there's five years between myself and my older sister and then [between] myself and the oldest is 15 years, and there's 20 years between me and my brother. So, my oldest sister had a family by the time I was in school, and so, her family and her kids live out in the Bay Area. And with my other sister. My brother lives in Utah. So, we weren't around him very much growing up, because he'd already had a family by then, too. But my grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, you know, live out in the Bay Area.

There's a huge — because of relocation that took place in the '60s of Native Americans, there's a huge Native American community in the Bay Area, and a lot of our relatives and extended family from Oklahoma live in the Bay Area. A lot of friends that my mother grew up with worked, in fact, at the Urban Indian Health Clinic that I worked at in San Francisco. So you know, the Indian community is really a small community nationwide. I mean, it's not unusual for something to happen, like for a close friend of my mother's that she grew up with, went to boarding school with, would end up in the Bay Area, and they would reunite after years of being apart. And so, we had a lot of extended family on my mom's side that were in the Bay Area as well.

FOLLET: Now, when you say boarding school, had she gone to a government-run boarding school back in Oklahoma? 27:10

ASETOYER: Well, they were — actually, most of them were run by the Catholic Church. St. Patrick's was there in Anadarko. And yes, she did go, and it was a very abusive situation, the boarding school experience. And yeah, a lot went on in the boarding schools until they were closed or no longer run by the Catholic Church. A lot of atrocities occurred down at St. Patrick's, as well as even here.

FOLLET: Now was that something your mother talked about, her experience with that?

ASETOYER: Not until we got older, you know. She only told us some of the — yes, she did actually when we were younger, come to think about it. Uh,

yeah. How, you know, she received corporal punishment for getting caught sliding down the fire escape slides or getting caught smoking cigarettes in the bathroom. Yeah, they were punished very severely for doing what children do — you know, being naughty — and yeah, there was a lot.

FOLLET: Now, was she a member of the Comanche community in Oklahoma?

ASETOYER: Yes. Yeah, she was raised there. That's where our tribe is, our peoples are there, and that's where she grew up.

FOLLET: A particular clan, or –

ASETOYER: Well, we're of the Eagle clan, of the Comanche tribe. We're actually Comanche captives. Asetoyer — my great-grandfather was a Comanche captive. Him and his brother Koweno(?) were down in Chihuahua, and that's actually our roots. And there was a Comanche party that was down there and they actually took Koweno(?), the younger brother, and Asetoyer, the older brother, which is my great-grandfather, insisted on going to take care of my brother, so they took him, too. And it was the Attocknie family, it was Yellow Fish and Ten Bears. And they captured them. [Koweno's Comanche name was To-yope. He was given the name Koweno(?) when he went to live with a different band. For full account, see "Gray Mountain Story" in Asetoyer papers.]

And at one point Asetoyer wanted to go back, so they let him go. And you know, it's desert down there, it's very hot, dry, arid country. And so he left. And he changed his mind at some point and he was on foot, and a few days later, they saw him walking back into camp, and he had the top part of a buffalo on him, the horns and the top part. He apparently had killed a buffalo to eat and to survive and used that as a sun bonnet to protect him from the hot sun. So, he came walking into camp that way and they realized, you know, that he was a very strong young man. And when they got back and caught up with the rest of the tribe's encampment, the boys were separated. One went with one band and Asetoyer stayed with the actual party that captured him, and so, [they] were raised that way.

And then, Asetoyer had five wives and, and his son, Kalara [Christian name: Theodore] Asetoyer, is my grandfather. And then my mother is Virginia Asetoyer, and I am Charon Asetoyer.

FOLLET: You have a wonderful knowledge of this history. Is it something that your mom told you or — how many of these people did you know?

ASETOYER: Oh, I knew all of them, I mean, except for my great-grandfather, except for Asetoyer. I mean, he was gone by the time I was born. But the Attocknie family, that's our family. And so I knew all the Attocknies and go down and visit and so on and so forth.

In fact, Joe Attocknie was writing a book and unfortunately didn't complete it before he passed on, but has the whole story of when Asetoyer and Koweno(?) were captured. And as they grew up, Asetoyer grew up with Quanah Parker and they hung out together and they actually fought not only the cavalry but also the Spanish government and rode with Pancho Villa. So that's all documented. And I'd made a trip with Joe Attocknie, Grandpa Joe, down to Chihuahua to do some of the historical research and so forth, and so that was real interesting. I did that the year I graduated from college, we went.

FOLLET: Now does that document still exist? Is that still in your family?

ASETOYER: Yeah, I have the story in the files. I suppose I should throw it in the hopper of the archives, if you're interested in that.

FOLLET: Absolutely.

ASETOYER: But, yeah, yeah.

FOLLET: Oh, that's fabulous.

ASETOYER: I have a real rich heritage.

FOLLET: And on your father's side, is there a similar story, long storyline?

ASETOYER: Well, my father is German and Irish and –

FOLLET: What's his name?

ASETOYER: Huber. Charles Huber. You know, I remember, we had an aunt, a great-aunt, Aunt Clara, who was a concert pianist, and she had gone over to the Conservatory of Music in Germany to study. And this was before World War I, and she met her husband-to-be, her future husband. And the woman that she went over there [with] to also go to school was Jewish. And they got caught in World War I and survived World War I, and she became a very well-known pianist and eventually World War II came, and her and her husband helped this other couple, because by then, her friend had met a man and he, too, was Jewish, and they helped them to escape into Switzerland during World War II. So, I have some very interesting relatives.

FOLLET: How wonderful.

ASETOYER: And then she came over after the war — it was in the '50s — she came back from Germany, and then spent the rest of her years here until she passed on. So, we have family over there as well.

FOLLET: And it was because of World War II and Fort Sill that your parents met, right?

ASETOYER: Exactly, exactly.

FOLLET: And then, some combination of the war ending and the relocation policy brought you to California?

36:00

ASETOYER: No, no, it was the war ending. I mean, there were lots of Native Americans that were going out into the Bay Area after the war during the relocation era. And so, that's how we were able to hook up with so many Native Americans. At the time, there were about 50,000 Native Americans living in the San Francisco area. It's a very large community. Chicago, Southern California, Denver, Minneapolis. Going east, there's Cincinnati, Ohio. I mean, there's huge clusters of Native Americans that were sent out on relocation programs during that whole era. So, lots of Native Americans from — a lot of Sioux are out there. A lot of the tribes from Oklahoma.

You know, they targeted various areas that they wanted to remove [people] from the land, [with] promises of jobs and education [to] get people out [of] there. San José also has a large Indian community as well. And Indian Center. And we used to go to all the pow wows there and all the potluck dinners. It was when I got a little older and moved into San Francisco that, you know, I got involved in the Indian Center there in San Francisco and worked at Urban Indian Health Center. In fact, I served on the board of directors for the Indian Center there when it was on Valencia Street in San Francisco, before I left to come back here.

FOLLET: So you had mentioned the rich cultural mix — German and Irish on your father's side and Comanche on your mother's side. How did that cultural mix play out in your family? Did you observe –

ASETOYER: Oh, very interesting dynamics. (laughs) Yeah. My mom's family were fine with it. OK. However, my father's family tolerated us, I think is probably a polite way of saying it. Yeah, they tolerated my mother. And if you tolerate my mother, then you're tolerating us as well. And my father was constantly having to deal with that. I mean, when you think about it, you know, a mixed marriage back in the '40s — they had their hands full. They had their hands very full.

So, it presented us with having to deal with and learn at a young age about indifference and racism and the different kinds of racism that exists. There's the institutionalized racism and there's the blatant racism. But you know, that very quiet, very, very quiet alluding to racism, now that's probably the most dangerous kind of racism, when people will be nice to you in front of you and then make comments of a racial nature behind your back. You know, that's very painful. That was very painful.

I mean, I remember my aunts making comments about my mother, you know, when she wasn't around, and they probably thought we weren't old enough to hear it or understand it or remember it. And you do. You remember things like that. It gets embedded into your memory and they stay there forever. So, yeah, the two faces of family members. And that's very hard to — nobody really wants to speak about it. People want to pretend it doesn't happen. But it does happen and it does exist and it does make an impression on a child and it impacts you and the way you think and the way you look at people and handle things through life.

FOLLET: Did your folks deal with it explicitly, or was it mostly something that you just observed and absorbed? Were there flare-ups, were there –

ASETOYER: Oh, sure. I mean, I can remember, you know, my folks arguing over my father's family, but they would do it behind closed doors. But we'd always go and listen and want to hear what was happening, what they were saying and stuff. Yeah, there was a lot of — my father didn't really want to deal with it. He just wanted to say, Oh, don't be ridiculous. Oh, just let it go. You know, it's not important.

It *was* important. It was very important to my mother. And so, consequently, she didn't like going places, like to my father's family, but had to and did, and she endured a lot. It's the way it was. And it kind of still is.

FOLLET: Did the relocation policy — obviously, it affected you, but was it something that they spoke about specifically? Did your parents have an awareness of or involvement in social or political issues of the day?

ASETOYER: No. My father was a Republican and was very opinionated and was very intrigued with the fact that I spoke my own mind. He encouraged it. But he was also kind of afraid, because of my politics. My mom used to say, You know, when it comes to financial matters, I will never worry about you, because I'll give you two dollars for an allowance and by the end of the week, you have five — but your politics, that's another thing. She said that scared her and she would worry, because I took a lot of risks as I got older, being very involved in the American Indian Movement. And of course, the activities of any movement can be very dangerous at times, and were. And so she worried about that. She knew that I spoke up for myself and I wasn't afraid of the consequences, and I did. I did speak up, and so, I was very outspoken and I spoke my mind. And so she worried about that. She worried about my politics.

FOLLET: So your father sort of encouraged it. Now, he was a Republican in the Eisenhower era, right?

ASETOYER: Yes.

FOLLET: This is in the ’50s and he had been in the military. Do you remember your mother having political views of any kind?

ASETOYER: She did, and they were often very different than my father’s, but she didn’t voice them in front of my father because it upset him. But we’d talk politics a lot and I knew that my mom would go in the voting booth and would vote her mind, contrary to what my father said, because she told me. My mom was Indian and to the day she died, and knew it, and was proud of it, and did her thing.

FOLLET: How did she express that? 45:00

ASETOYER: Well, you know, she’d say, Well, you can go in the voting booth and vote for whoever you want to. *I* do. You mean, you don’t vote the way Daddy does? No. Shhhh, she’d say, don’t tell him. She was always doing that. She was always saying, Don’t tell your father.

FOLLET: How did she express her pride in being Indian?

ASETOYER: Well, she made sure that we knew who our family was, that we spent time with our family. She’d take us down to the Indian Center and, you know, she just made sure. She knew who she was and she was who she was and, you know, she influenced our lives very, very, very much.

FOLLET: Did you participate in any, as a family, in any religious community? Did you belong to a certain church or community?

ASETOYER: My father’s family were Lutheran and because my mother had gone to St. Patrick’s, [she] was Catholic. And we grew up Lutheran until a certain age, and then we grew up Catholic. We were also baptized in Catholic Church, so both. And then our family in Oklahoma, its roots are in the Native American Church. And so, when we were around our family, we were around that influence, and that was very good.

When I moved down to Oklahoma and lived down there, I chose to participate in the Native American Church, as opposed to the Catholic Church. I’d had a run-in, you know, with the Catholic Church and also didn’t like their politics and also was very vocal about the boarding-school era and, and didn’t like what took place. To me, that presented a big contradiction in that faith, in the whole doctrine of the Catholic Church, because of all the sexual abuse and the corporal punishment and so forth that took place. And so I had no use for the Catholic Church. And when I was old enough to figure things out and understand the politics there and the history, and had seen the impact that it had on my mother, I didn’t want anything to do with Catholic Church, and still don’t to this day. I have no respect at all, no regard for them. And so.

FOLLET: So you were growing up in San José, going to school, living in what sounds like was a pretty diverse neighborhood — you mentioned Latina and African Americans –

ASETOYER: A lot of Italians and Portuguese.

FOLLET: But also you moved back to Oklahoma at some point, or is that later?

ASETOYER: Yeah, that was later.

FOLLET: OK. So, you're in San José through the point where you drop out of high school and become the seamstress and the entrepreneur.

ASETOYER: The entrepreneur/designer is how I like to look at it.

FOLLET: OK. And this [is the] mid-'60s. Your mother is worried from an early age about your having ideas of your own and speaking your mind. And your first recollection of taking action is in –

ASETOYER: High school boycott or sit-in.

FOLLET: High school boycott or sit-in. Where do you think that you got the idea to do that? What do you remember about [the] seeds of a political consciousness?

ASETOYER: Well, it was a nonviolent way of being able to let them know that we weren't going to put up with it any more. I mean, we were peaceful. We didn't tear up anything. We didn't throw our books through windows. We didn't throw bricks. We didn't fight. We just stayed there in the courtyard, or the playground, whatever they would all it, when the bell rang, and we just refused to go back to class.

So it was a very peaceful way of getting our point across. And of course, calling in the media, that really helped. The school was totally blown away when the media showed up and wanted to know who'd contacted the media and this and that. And of course I wasn't going to say I did, you know, until after it was all over. But they wanted to know how the media found out and so on and so forth. Hey, it's not important. It's the fact that they were here to witness what is going on and to get that story out into the greater community, so that people could see what was going on.

I mean, this high school was primarily children of color that were going there, and low-income people. And it was the East Side of San José, which is the roughest part of San José. I had gone to school over in Santa Clara for a while, and the school had all kinds of perks for, for their students — open campus, a hot-lunch program, I mean, you know, just all kinds of things, and treated their students with dignity and respect. And that's all we wanted, you know, not to be contained in this school the entire time, to be able to leave if we needed to or whatever.

FOLLET: You knew the difference from personal experience.

ASETOYER: Yes, I did.

FOLLET: Why had you switched neighborhoods, or switched schools?

ASETOYER: Well, I'd gotten busted. (laughter) Oh, dear, dear. Time for truths. I'd gotten busted for smoking weed. So they threw me out of school and — yes, yes, yes. That was the only school that would accept me, so I had to drive way across the county. Yeah, I had to drive, God, I think it was 16 miles or something like that on the freeway to get over to school every day. That's how I ended up with a car, because there were no busses or anything.

FOLLET: So you had gone to school and you were living in East San José.

ASETOYER: No, we were living in Santa Clara, near Sunnyvale. And I had gotten busted. You know, we lived in San José, but a different part of San José, and then we moved over to Santa Clara. And when I was in high school, I got busted. And so they threw me out of school. And I ended up having to go all the way over to East San José.

FOLLET: And then the family moved there?

ASETOYER: No, no. I had to commute to go to high school.

FOLLET: So you were still living back in –

ASETOYER: Yeah, I was still living in Santa Clara.

FOLLET: So these are very different types of communities?

ASETOYER: Yeah, very different.

FOLLET: So, Santa Clara, by comparison, how would you describe it?

ASETOYER: Well, Santa Clara was a very mixed community. I mean, a lot of Chicanos lived in the community, went to school there and so forth. But East San José was notorious. It was like Compton, comparable, like in Southern California. It would have been like going from I don't know what neighborhood in Southern California over to Compton to go to school, but basically, you know, I could not go to school in Santa Clara, and had to go all the way over to East San José to go to school. And my parents were not about to let me not attend school if I wanted to attend school, and keep me home. So, my dad said, "Well, OK, you can use this car and you can go to school and back." And that's how it was.

55:00

FOLLET: That had to have been a big change.

ASETOYER: Oh, it was. It was. Because, you know, I walked into a school where people were not treated the same as the school that I was coming from and didn't, you know, see why. I mean, what's up with this? I mean, we're all young people and doing the same thing that the folks over in the school that I had come from were doing, so why keep us caged in here all the time and not let us out in the community during the day? So it was a different experience. It was a very different experience. And it didn't take me long to catch on. So, when I said to this guy, I said, "Hey, let's just don't go back. Let's don't put up with this crap. Where I went to school before, we had all of this other stuff."

And they kind of thought I was cool, for whatever, because I'd been busted, you know, and it was known that I smoked weed and so forth, and you know, that was the times. That was what was going on. And so when I said, "Hey, let's just don't go back," and I told him why, he said that was right on.

And of course, you know, the Black Panthers were doing their thing, and the Brown Berets and so forth, the American Indian Movement, so it just seemed right for the time. And like I said, it didn't take a lot to organize it, because everybody was ready. They had just — nobody else had just thought about it before, what to do. And so, you know, the whole school refused to go back to class.

So I think it made an impact on all of us, including the school — that you just can't treat people like that and get by with it, or it not get out to the rest of the broader community, that you're treating these children different than you're treating those children.

And that experience always stayed with me, that you can organize and you can be successful at social change, at getting social justice to happen. And I've always believed in being able to change things. It's not all that easy but it can be done. And it's with coordinated effort, working together, collaborating. So that was a lesson for me in collaboration.

FOLLET: I'm impressed that you knew to call the media. That's a really savvy thing to have done.

ASETOYER: Well, why have a party without celebrating? I mean, it just seemed like the appropriate thing to do. I mean, how else would we get our demands heard? How else would we change the situation if we didn't have outside support and awareness? And the media — it just seemed like the logical thing to do would be to let the six o'clock news team know the conditions and what the students were doing about it to try to change them. And so, I don't know, it just seemed like the right thing to do.

I'd also been up in the — my girlfriends and I used to jump in the car on Friday night and head up to Haight-Ashbury, and we were there when the riots were taking place and tear gas and they're beating

pregnant women on the ground and, you know, the era was Vietnam and a lot of protesting was going on.

But the riots on Haight Street, they were some of the first times the tactical squad in San Francisco had come out in a riot situation with full riot gear, and it wasn't about Vietnam. It was about cleaning the streets and doing community and neighborhood improvement. It was very interesting what started those riots. But that was because the government had decided that they were going to stop all of this social change that was going on. And in fact, if I remember correctly, they would let guys off of their tour in Vietnam six months early if they would agree to serve in tactical squads in urban areas. So you've got all these young men who are coming home with post-traumatic stress disorder and so forth and you give them a billy club and a shield and a helmet and you tell them, Go out and bash heads — you know, crowd control. That's not crowd control. You don't enter a crowd dressed like that — bulletproof vest on and gas masks.

FOLLET: Now were you observing this from home on a television set or are you and your friends, you say you were –

ASETOYER: We were there.

FOLLET: You were there.

ASETOYER: We were there. We were delivering dresses, because remember, I had been designing and putting things on consignment at these boutiques. And before my father knew that that's what we were doing, we were sneaking off to Haight-Ashbury, and I had a two o'clock curfew, so I could do whatever I wanted to do.

FOLLET: OK. We've got another minute or so. So, you, as a young teenager, were folding into a whole scene, that whole culture.

ASETOYER: Right, right, right. I remember we were up there and we weren't supposed to be up there, and they had done this whole, um, the whole community got together –

FOLLET: OK. We'd better pay attention to this blink and this beep and change tapes.

END TAPE 1

101:43

TAPE 2

FOLLET: We're back. OK, you were recalling a time when the whole community did something.

ASETOYER: Well, the merchants' association on Haight Street got together and wanted to clean up the street because everybody had dogs, and there was dog doo all over Haight Street and people were slipping it on it and getting it on their sandals and their feet and it became quite a problem. So everybody agreed to wash the streets and clean the streets. They had arranged for the Grateful Dead to come out in a flatbed truck after everyone was done cleaning the streets and have a party. And they were performing, and it was really a nice day. It was a beautiful day. And I just happened to be up there at the time.

And then, all of a sudden, there's the riot squad down by Masonic and Haight Street, and the party was down by the Straight Theater, which is about two-thirds of the way down Haight Street. And so everybody had to clear the street, and it was this huge street party that was going on. There was no rioting. Nobody was disorderly. I mean, it was fun. It was a concert. But the police saw it differently. And all of a sudden, you know, on their megaphones, they were telling everybody to clear the street, that this was a riot area and to leave the streets and everything. It was, like, What's up with this?

And one thing led to another and before you knew it, they were shooting tear gas into the crowd to disperse the crowd. There was no riot, and people were literally trying to leave the area but they had it all blocked off and people were trapped and they were shooting tear gas canisters. By then, people had gotten up on roofs and so they were fighting back, you know, and throwing things off the roof and trying to save themselves. I remember running into the poster shop with a bunch of people and they closed the door, and then when it seemed like things were letting up, you know, we went out.

I remember this young pregnant woman, a hippie woman, getting beaten down to the ground by the tactical squad — for no reason, just because she wasn't out of the way. She wasn't doing anything. She was trying to get out of the way and didn't move fast enough for them. So they kicked her ass right there. And seeing all of this going on and just trying to figure out, What is this?

Well, it was the government's way of saying that they were tired of social change. They didn't want to deal with it. They didn't want the status quo to change. The young people of that era were rocking the boat and were opinionated and were involved in all of this social change. And that was their way of handling it, was to try to disperse the movements that were going on.

And you know, after that, there were riots down in the Fillmore district, and there were riots at San Francisco State, and whenever there was a gathering of people, a peaceful demonstration, an antiwar demonstration, a peaceful gathering, they moved that tactical squad in

there and they cracked heads. And, you know, there were people that were killed in demonstrations. Look at what happened at Kent State. And this was all about trying to keep us under control, and it was too late for that.

I think the young people of this country — the times were changing and we were a part of that. We were the change agents, and the status quo didn't want to see that change. They didn't want to see people enlightened and full of knowledge and saying that we were tired, sick and tired of being sick and tired, and wanting to see change. And so, that was one way that they felt they could control it.

FOLLET: At that point, you're, what, 16 years old, maybe, or something like that?

ASETOYER: Well, yeah, 16 or 17.

FOLLET: Sixteen or 17, and you're taking your dresses into the –

ASETOYER: Boutiques on Haight Street.

FOLLET: So, you're sort of happening upon this. But you're also becoming a part of it. To what extent were you just, you know, an incidental observer and to what extent were you becoming involved as one of those agents of change?

ASETOYER: Oh, I mean, I was very involved. I was hanging out at the coffee shops and listening to people, these intellectuals, talk — like, you know, Ken Kesey and tables full of really interesting people — Ram Dass and Ken Kesey at the same table down at the Drugstore Café. That was the place where all the intellectuals hung out. And you could hear table after table, you know, of people talking in these really intellectual conversations, and being asked, Hey, Charon, what's happening? Come sit down, and whatever. And being just mesmerized and just absorbing all of this, you know, this change, this intellectual dogma that was going on, these dialogues that were just like, Wow, I never thought of that. And seeing Wavy Gravy and all these folks and listening to them talk — it was just amazing. It was, like, Wow, now I understand the oppression of Indian people so much better, because you learn — I learned how the government reacted to other situations and their involvement in the colonization process that they were involved in in Vietnam, and their response to Biafra, and just everything that was going on in the world — to hear these older intellectuals talk about it and process it.

We used to — if we were waiting for a dress to sell or whatever and it hadn't sold yet, or an outfit I'd made — we'd panhandle. My girlfriends and I would panhandle, because we had to get — we had enough money to get up there, you know, [but] we had to get money to get home on. So we'd panhandle a little bit. Then we'd go buy some *Berkeley Barb*s [underground newspaper], and then we'd stand out in front on Haight Street, in front of Masonic, in front of the coffee shop

there, and the Drugstore Café, is what they called it, and we'd sell our *Berkeley Barb*s and we'd get enough and we'd go in and we'd buy a hamburger, you know, or a cup of minestrone soup. They made really good minestrone soup. And we'd go in there and we'd sit in there and then we'd listen to all this conversation. If we really had a good night, then we'd go to the Filmore, we'd go to the Avalon Ballroom, go to see some rock stars performing and so forth, and to a concert. We were just involved. We were in it.

And I just couldn't see staying in school, because I was getting so much more, you know, from what was going on in the coffee shops and out on the street and just a whole different philosophy. And I was ready, you know, to do it alone anyway. I was independent and creative, an entrepreneur. And so I got an apartment in San Francisco, with the blessings of my parents.

It was a strain. It was a strain for them, but they knew that, hey, I would just leave if they didn't help me. So my mom went out and bought me, you know, a broom and a teapot and dishes and sheets and I found a studio apartment, and I moved in. It was on Page Street, right off Haight Street. And that was my first apartment. And it was just a little studio apartment, but it was pretty nice, and I enjoyed it. And then I was able to go hang out at all my friends' houses that I knew there in Haight-Ashbury and got to know a lot of people and opened up my business, the retail aspect of my business, and be more a contributing part of the community.

I designed clothes for a lot of the rock stars. They came in. Janis Joplin used to come in and whoever was appearing at the Fillmore, they'd usually send them over, because we sponsored a basketball team and they would always go and play their basketball team, our store did — my store. So, yeah, so I knew a lot of the — you know, [Bill] Graham and all them folks at the Filmore. Grace Slick would come in to the store. Chuck Berry, he used to come in every time he was in town and buy something for his daughter. So it was an exciting time to be a part of all that, and to get invited to parties in homes of some of these individuals and, you know, check out their lifestyles.

FOLLET: So you left formal education behind for this rich –

ASETOYER: Yes, cultural change, to be a part of it and to absorb all of that. I couldn't have done that in high school. So it really opened my mind up to a whole lot of things that I never thought existed, or that maybe I was the only one that had those kind of thoughts and maybe, you know, like, I knew I wasn't weird, I knew there had to be somebody else out there that thought like I did, and I hooked up with those people, those individuals.

And I ended up finding a companion, and he was a jazz musician. So, that took me into a whole nother set, a whole nother environment, from rock stars and Haight-Ashbury down into Fillmore and the Divisadero area, and all of these jazz musicians. And that was a whole

interesting time as well, because a lot of hard drugs and, you know, a lot of challenges there, seeing people cross the line, and a lot of heroin. You'd see a lot of people that you met that were strung out and so on.

But you also saw the very creative aspect and the very intellectual aspect of music, which was very positive, and very creative, and a form of, definitely, personal expression, and it was a form of resistance. It was a form of social change that had existed for generations, and that I happened to be now a part of. And I was always very happy to have been there and to have met a lot of people and got to know them, and to this day, know a lot of them. I love jazz. To this day, I listen to — not too many jazz stations in South Dakota, but I have quite a good collection. I can pull a jazz station in in the evening times, so that's the time I enjoy my jazz. Yeah, it was a real influential time in my life.

My husband was Seminole and Cherokee and African American on his mother's side. And on his father's side, he was African descent from the Caribbean and Bahamian, and some British blood there. So, he was a very interesting character.

FOLLET: Now, was this the jazz musician?

ASETOYER: Yes, this was the jazz musician, uh-huh. And we were together — well, it took us ten years to finally break apart, yeah. And he was extremely abusive, and that was my experience in domestic violence, at a very young age, trying to break away from that and trying to understand the concept of, you know, Why would this person that I love treat me like this? It didn't make any sense. That was one experience. Later on down the line, I had another very, very, very profound experience. [My 'hunka' sister, Ethel Longsoldier, who is was very close to, had ten children. Her husband beat her to death.]

And so, it's understandable why this project [Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center] not only does the policy analysis and is involved in the political arena — policy work for reproductive health — but also violence against women. We run a shelter as well. We have two facilities, and a lot of people aren't aware of that.

But so, when I left him, at that time I was working at the Urban Indian Health Clinic. We had already separated but we'd go back and forth, back and forth, you know how that is, until it was final. And I was very much involved in the American Indian Movement and the activities that were going on then.

FOLLET: Tell me about how you became involved in that. You mentioned that your mother would take you to Indian events or Indian cultural sites.

ASETOYER: Well, I mean, it wasn't just her taking us. We were Indian. So that's a part of our life. That's sharing kinship with your family and your community. But my involvement in the movement didn't come until around Alcatraz. And actually, yeah, it was right around Alcatraz, and

16:20

my political awareness became really intensified. And then there was Chiloquin, the stand-in and the occupation of that land up there with the Klamath tribe, and I was there and very much involved in that, and working towards their — they had been terminated as a tribe — working for their reinstatement. And of course, that was very much seen as movement activity.

And D-Q University, getting that up and going back in those days. The Deganawidah-Quetzalcoatl, which is Native American, Chicana University there in Davis, California, and occupying that land and getting that going. You know, if federal lands are abandoned by the federal government, then Native Americans have, really, first dibs on them. And so, to occupy that land there, and that eventually went into court and that was how it changed hands and went from government into Native American occupation and ownership, and the school eventually opened and so forth.

But California had quite a number of Native struggles that were going on. A lot of them were related to PG&E, Pacific Gas and Electric Company, and their encroachment in Indian communities to establish their and further their company and so forth, and so, very much involved in that. Pit River, what was going on up in northern California, Hoopa Valley and so forth. And that was all movement activity, and –

FOLLET: What part did you play in these early years in these movements, in these activities?

ASETOYER: Well, you know, we were all the front lines. We were demonstrating. We were marching and demonstrating and involved in that. I was one of the rank and file, I was nobody important. I was young, very young. There was well-established leadership in the Bay Area. And also, the midwestern leadership, you know, their involvement — Dennis Banks and Russell Means and the Bellacourts and so on.

And then, I came back here in 1975. Actually, I was here in ’73 and ’74, but I moved here, just packed up and moved, because I kept going back and forth with my husband. And he’d find me and we’d get back together and I would try to stay away from him but he’d always find me. And so, I figured the best way to make a final break was to put some distance between us. So, I had applied to the University of South Dakota to go to school and was accepted. And so I packed up all of my belongings and put them in a U-Haul and towed that across the Rocky Mountains by myself from the Bay Area to Vermillion, South Dakota, to attend the University of South Dakota.

FOLLET: Now, where did you get the support that you needed over this long period of trying to get yourself out of that abusive relationship? What kind of resources or support system did you have?

ASETOYER: One of my sisters was very, very influential in encouraging me to make the final break, to just do whatever I had to do to get myself out of the

situation. And I knew that the only way I could finally break was if I put some miles between us. Because at that time, there was really only one shelter open, and that was, I think it was called La Casa, out in the San Francisco Bay Area. I had, uh, needed a shelter but never knew how to access it.

And I can remember one night, when he was beating the crap out of me, I ran out of our apartment — we lived up on Clayton Street — and I ran down the street and there was a Greek delicatessen that we used to patronize a lot and ran in there. We knew the family. And when I ran in there, I had like a housecoat on and my bare feet, and I had a bloody nose, and so, the daughter of the owners said, "Charon, did Tony do that to you?" I said, "Yeah." "Come with me." And so she took me in the back room and took me in the bathroom and she cleaned me all up and said, "You're going home with us. I'm going to take you home." And so she went out and told her father and her brother what was going on and said that if he came in, you know, don't acknowledge that I was here, don't let him know that I was there.

So, they took me home and they — they were great people and they made me call my dad the next morning. And he came up and he picked me up. And he took me back to my apartment and had me pack my clothes and said, "You're going home." And I remember I was packing and loading stuff in the car and I went up and he was — I stood in the doorway and I could hear him tell my husband, "If you ever lay a hand on my daughter again, you will find yourself at the bottom of the bay with a cement pair of shoes on. And don't think I don't know who I could get to make sure that happened."

And I'd never seen that in my father, and I realized the seriousness of the situation. And so then I walked in, I finished getting my stuff, and packed up and we left. And I never forgot that, you know, never forgot that. Never even saw my father that upset before or after. So I realized how it was affecting my family, because they'd been seeing this go on, you know, and not totally sure that it was happening but had an idea, and it was all out in the open then. So I realized that it was really a serious situation, and that this isn't how it is supposed to be, but that's how it was for me. And if this is love, then I can do without it. If this is the kind of love he has to offer me, I can still love him, but from afar. But we just can't live together, can't live under the same roof. And so, that started this separation and going back, and separation and going back — years of it.

Anyway, eventually, I ended up back at the University of South Dakota. And through the movement, I had developed this relationship with a male friend, very good relationship. And his sister-in-law [Ethel Longsoldier] happened to have been going to school in Vermillion at the same time I was. She was working on her master's degree in education, and she had nine children at the time. And we just hit it off. We just became sisters. It's just one of those kinds of — you know, the body chemistry, the charisma, it was just there between two people. And we

were just as tight as could be. And her husband was physically abusive to her, and so she would leave him and go back and so on and so forth.

But through this whole relationship, she managed to get her undergraduate degree and become a teacher, and then go back to school to work on her master's. And she had her tenth child and she named him Hawkala, which in Lakota means last-born son. And it was not too long after that that he killed her, and left her, left the children. He went to prison. And she was gone. And there were the ten children. Anyway, it was very painful, and still is very, very painful.

So when I met my second husband, we ended up — his father had passed away and we were going to move to Oklahoma, because I'd been offered a job and I wanted to go home to Oklahoma and be among my people, and work. But his father died and he had wanted to fulfill his commitment of — Indian people have a memorial, and we're a Native American Church family, and we do that for four years on the anniversary of the person's death, we have a Native American Church meeting and then we feed the people and we have a give-away. So we had four years of obligation. So, we were going to come here for four years and fulfill our obligation and then go to Oklahoma.

Well, when we got over here, you know, I was done with school and there was all this work that had to be done and tribal government wasn't addressing all the issues. They couldn't. Their plates were high enough with all the other issues that they were trying to address, and there was a lot of women's issues and children's issues that were just being left. So we started our first project. We incorporated and started Women and Children and the Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Awareness and Prevention Project.

FOLLET: Now, by this time, you had been to college? 28:30

ASETOYER: Yes.

FOLLET: And you went to which school when you were in South Dakota?

ASETOYER: I graduated from the University of South Dakota. Then I went back to the School for International Training back in Brattleboro, Vermont, and my son Chaske was born in Brattleboro, when I was working on my master's degree in international administration and intercultural management. So I got a double master's. And then we came back here when I was done, which was like six weeks after he was born. And we got back to Vermillion and then his father took ill, my father-in-law.

FOLLET: I see. Now, wasn't your undergraduate degree in criminal justice?

ASETOYER: Yes, my undergraduate degree was in criminal justice.

FOLLET: How did you select that?

ASETOYER: I wanted to go into law. I wanted to be a lawyer.

FOLLET: Really.

ASETOYER: Yeah, I mean, that's one of the ways you get things done. And so, I thought, Well, law school. Then when we came over here after my father-in-law died — well, actually, before that, I'd interned with Women of All Red Nations when I got back here from Vermont. I had to do an internship. So I did it with Women of All Red Nations [WARN], because they were the female entity of the American Indian Movement.

And they wanted me to design the health program. And I did, and we ran it through the American Friends Service Committee, through the Quakers. And we had a site on this reservation, the Yankton Sioux Reservation, and Porcupine, on the Pine Ridge, and then up on the Standing Rock Reservation — three offices. And we did health education. The first campaign was fetal alcohol syndrome [FAS], and we were working on that and also looking at some nutritional issues.

And then, I didn't particularly care for the way the decisions were being made and the lack of community involvement. It just didn't seem right. There were also some power struggles going on within the organization and some mismanagement of resources.

FOLLET: Now, what year would this have been? This is the year you came back from Brattleboro?

ASETOYER: Yes. This was in '84 and '85.

FOLLET: So, WARN was already several years old? So you hadn't been involved in the formative –

ASETOYER: Oh, yes, I had been involved in WARN activities before, in the American Indian Movement, but not in a formal sense. This was a formalizing for Women of All Red Nations, in terms of — I mean, they had the survival school going, but in terms of really getting a project going, this was a formal project where you were going from being a movement into the institutionalization process. And so I was selected to — fresh out of college, you know, knew how to write grants and so forth — to be the director.

FOLLET: Now, what was your connection to WARN before? Had it been in California? Or was it –

ASETOYER: No, it was in South Dakota, because I'd come back here in '73 and '74 for movement activity. And it was in '75 when I actually, physically, moved permanently. But I mean, I was back here, back and forth to the Bay Area, like I said, involved in movement activity.

FOLLET: So, WARN was founded here in South Dakota in the late ’70s. Were you in on the founding?

ASETOYER: No, I wasn’t involved in the founding meetings, no.

FOLLET: How soon after that did you hook up?

ASETOYER: Oh, in the mid-’70s, yeah. No, no, excuse me, in the –

FOLLET: I want to say ’78, it was started.

ASETOYER: Yeah, it was in the late ’70s that I got involved. There was a survival gathering and so on and, yeah, yeah, I was involved. There was an organization called NAILS, Native American Inmates Legal Service. They were out of Vermillion, and I was involved in that organization. And we used to go into the prison and we were writing reports and trying to bring out the injustices that were happening to the Indian inmates. And I was getting involved with WARN. It was shortly after that, yeah, because I remember the Longest Walk took place and I was already involved. They had the survival gathering, the survival schools going by then.

So when I graduated from school, I came back, that was when they came and — Madonna Thunderhawk came and said, “Hey, we need to get this health education project going and we don’t exactly know what we want to do, but we know that we have to start addressing some of these issues that are, you know, bothering our communities. They had already been doing some extensive work on water and the water issues, and the uranium and the contamination. So they knew that it needed to go another step, in terms of looking at health issues and how they impacted women and children. So, I said, OK, I’ll put something together.

And then I ran it by them and we fine-tuned it and the American Friends Service Committee was already involved over in Porcupine, they had a project over there, with Lorilei Means. So we ran it by them and they said, yes, they would fund it. And that’s when we started looking at FAS and we also looked at water quality and so forth.

But that relationship, in terms of the project, I did not — probably about a year I was the director, and then I didn’t particularly care for the way that the decisions were being made and the handling of the resources.

FOLLET: Yeah, what was it that — who were the key leaders at that point and what was WARN like at that time?

ASETOYER: Well, it was Madonna Thunderhawk and Lorilei Means and Madonna’s sisters, and I just felt that the way the decisions were being made were not in the best interests of the community or were also not in the best interests of the program, in terms of it having longevity.

FOLLET: For example, can you think of decisions that you especially disliked?

ASETOYER: In the way the resources were handled. There was mismanagement of resources. And I saw myself as being responsible, because I was soliciting for them, and it was my name that the funders were getting to know, and of course I felt responsible for those resources. And I did not like the way that some of them were being handled. And it was time for a parting. And I ended up leaving and incorporating the Native American Community Board [NACB] here in this community, and we got started that way. And we continued to work on fetal alcohol syndrome.

FOLLET: Ah-hah. So, the NACB was an alternative to WARN, for you.

ASETOYER: For me, because I wanted to get serious about this work. I felt that it was an issue that was plaguing our communities and that we really needed to get a handle on it.

FOLLET: When you say "the issue," do you mean specifically fetal alcohol syndrome?

ASETOYER: Fetal alcohol syndrome and all of the residual issues related to it, because you get into children's issues, you get into education, you get into women's issues and needs. And you get into how women were treated who were chemically dependent and how their rights were being violated and there was no respect, and just all of those issues, you know, that women who are chemically dependent have to deal with — and being written off as chemically dependent and no real services for them in order to be able to go into treatment.

Still, there's issues with women who are pregnant going into treatment, women who have children and taking their children into treatment with them. I mean, who wants to sign their children over to somebody when they're gone for three months or two months in a treatment center? And how are the children going to be taken care of and who's going to take care of them? And don't children really need treatment, too, because they have felt the brunt of the chemical dependency within their homes and so forth?

So, those issues were being denied and the needs of the children and a child that is adversely affected by fetal alcohol syndrome — how does a mother get her child to hold a fork or a spoon and feed himself? How is a child who's mildly affected but *is* affected, what kinds of education are they receiving in school? What are their needs, and are they being fulfilled? So there were a whole lot of issues that are related to fetal alcohol syndrome and they needed to be addressed. So, we incorporated here and we continue to work on them. And "Women and Children and Alcohol" was the first proposal that I wrote representing the Native American Community Board.

FOLLET: (pause to fix microphone) OK, you were starting to talk about setting up the NACB here.

ASETOYER: Right. And the first project of the Native American Community Board was Women and Children and Alcohol. And basically, through that whole project, it became real evident to us that there were a whole lot of areas of women's programming that we needed and services that we needed, too. (pause to discuss camera and battery) 40:10

Anyway, it was real apparent to us that there was a whole lot of other areas of unmet need, in terms of women's services and programs. Now, the first office of the Native American Community Board was across the street. I used to live in the house across the street and we dedicated a bedroom to be the office in the basement.

FOLLET: Who's "we" at this point?

ASETOYER: Well, myself as the director and the board. My husband, Clarence Rockboy, was on the board, and Everdale Song Hawk, Jackie Rouss, and Lorenzo Dion. And we knew that — I'd basically said, Look, let me raise the money, and when it's time for us to move out of the one-room operation, we'll do it. But we don't have the money right now. So, they said, All right, go for it. And I did.

And about two years later, the house across the street, which is now the Resource Center, became available. And we purchased it. We had the money to — well, to put a down payment on it. We were financing it. We were going to make payments. And the Community Board members and so forth came in here and scrubbed down the house and painted and made repairs and we got the Resource Center up and opened.

And a house seemed like a logical kind of a facility, because we would have women and children coming in and out of here and we needed a fence because, you know, children would be playing out in the yard and it would be fenced in and then we needed to have a kitchen, because some of our programming, you know, we were looking at nutritional courses and addressing diabetes, and so we needed a kitchen to be able to cook and show people how to prepare meals that were nutritionally sound and diabetic-acceptable and so forth. So a home just seemed like a real good building. And then, because we'd have children running in and out, we wouldn't be disturbing neighbors in other offices. So, if they would cry or play, do what children do, they had the space to do it in.

And so we bought this place. They wanted eleven thousand dollars for it and when I told the owner what we were going to do with it, he let it go for six thousand. And that was totally amazing because it's made out of brick and it had the hardwood floors and it was quite a nice little structure.

So, about that time, the National Women's Health Network was having a conference, and it was sponsored by Proctor & Gamble. And they had brought, I don't know, about 40, 50 women's activists together to talk about the direction of women's health and where it is and where it's going and so on. About that time, Byllye Avery had gotten the National Black Women's Health Project up and going a little bit before that, and I had met her somewhere out and about, at a conference, a gathering of some kind.

And I was invited to this meeting, and the night before the meeting started, there was a reception, and Luz Alvarez Martinez, the director of the National Latina Health Organization — that was just getting started — was there, and she came up and introduced herself to me and we started talking and she asked me about the kind of work I did and I told her. And I also let her know about the house that we were buying. And I had gotten the idea for having the house — it just seemed like a logical kind of a setting for women and children, after visiting the National Black Women's Health Project and their house in Atlanta.

We had been contacted by UNICEF and Madame Mayou(?), who was the second in command at the time of the All-China Women's Federation was touring the U.S. with her entourage and they wanted to visit an indigenous women's program. So, they called us up, contacted us and asked if they could bring them to South Dakota and we said sure. So they came for a visit and they wanted to see the kind of work we were doing and if they could kind of replicate this model in communities in China. And so they came and visited the project. They were with us for about a week, actually.

And so, we toured them through different projects in South Dakota. We went to the White Buffalo Calf Woman's Society and their shelter on the Rosebud and they saw how that was all set up and operating and so forth. And then back here. And prior to that, we had been in Nairobi — but I'll tell you about the Nairobi work later. I want to get back to this evening at the reception, at this conference. And Luz Alvarez Martinez had said, "You bought a house?" And I said, Yeah. I'd been down to Byllye Avery's project and I wanted to — you know, it worked out so nice and I thought it'd be good for us to be able to move our operations into a house, because we have children and women that we work with. And, you know, I just explained everything to her and how it'd be a good setting for operations.

So, she said, "Well, how much is the house costing you?" and I said, "Well, six thousand dollars." She said, "You need that for a down payment?" I said, "No, I need that for the whole house." And she said, "For a house? It must be quite a fixer-upper." "Well, not really. Just a little paint and it'll be ready." "For a whole house?" "Yeah." "Well, women here are women of means. They are working. And tomorrow at lunch when we introduce ourselves, I want you to stand up and tell everybody what you're doing and ask them for donations." "No, I can't do that. I can't ask people for money."

I was very stressed out every time I had to do fundraising. I could do it, but, you know, it was different standing up in front of a crowd and asking people to dip into their pocketbooks as opposed to writing a proposal and sending it to a foundation. And I still had a hard time with *that*. So, she said, "No, no, no, no, no. Don't worry about a thing. It'll work out all right. I'll be there and I'll back you up." I said, "All right."

Well, lunch came and I tried to ditch her, I tried to avoid her, because I didn't want to do this. And she found me and sat right next to me at lunch time. And apparently, she'd talked to Byllye Avery about this and when it came time for me to introduce myself, I did, and I started to sit down. She said, "No, tell them. Tell them." And I said, "Quiet, quiet." And she said, "No, tell them." "Just be quiet." And then I sat down. By then, everybody wanted to know, Tell us what? So, I proceeded to tell them about the house and how we needed to pay it off and so forth.

And I noticed on the other side of the room, Byllye Avery was sitting with her back against the wall and I noticed her reach into her purse and pull out her checkbook, and she scratched out a check and I think it was for 125 or 150 dollars. And she held it up and she said, "I donate and I challenge every woman in this room to do the same thing." Well, everybody pulled out their checkbooks and I walked out of there with enough to — plus the National Women's Health Network made a substantial contribution of a thousand dollars — and I walked out of there with enough money to pay for half of the house. And then, Jael Smith came, Jael Silliman, excuse me, who's now with the Ford Foundation, but at that time was with Tides — no**,** Jessie Smith Noyes, came through and they paid off the house — a real small little grant, and they paid off the house. So anyway, the house was ours. And we did what we wanted to do and of course, got it — because we were tax exempt, you know — deferred from paying taxes and so forth. And we've been in operation ever since. Of course, we've expanded to the home and so on and so forth — to the building.

FOLLET: So, this was '88.

ASETOYER: Yes, this in '88.

FOLLET: So, by this time, you're already attending meetings with Byllye Avery and with Luz and you're engaged with the National Women's Health Network. Tell me about how those connections came about.

ASETOYER: I can remember, in 1985, attending the UN Decade of Women Conference in Nairobi, but I already knew Luz and Byllye. But anyway, we were out there and we had difficulty raising money to get to Nairobi, because we're so rural. You know, we hear about things kind of after the fact. We don't get the lead on it. And we'd heard that Ford was funding trips to — women to go to Nairobi, but we were too late for that and so on. And – 52:30

FOLLET: How were you hearing these things? How did you get from your work with WARN to setting up the Community Board here in '85? How did you become connected to this wider women's health network?

ASETOYER: Well, I was going out for conferences and meetings and people were hearing about the work that we were doing, so they were inviting us to different forums to participate and to serve on panels and so on.

FOLLET: I see.

ASETOYER: And so I think that's pretty much how I got to know everybody, is at these different meetings and –

FOLLET: And you were on the board of the Women's Health Network for a few years.

ASETOYER: For eight years.

FOLLET: Eight years. What years would that have been?

ASETOYER: Oh, I'd have to look that up, but it wasn't until after — it was at that meeting, that Proctor & Gamble meeting, that women's conference, that Judy Norsigian from the Boston Women's Health Book Collective had come up and introduced herself, and said that she'd heard about the work that we were doing and wanted to know if I would be interested in running for the board of directors for the National Women's Health Network. And so I said, "Well, tell me more about the organization." And she did and I thought, Well, yeah, I think so. That might be an interesting experience and I think I could contribute. So, we started that process. But that was from that meeting. That was right about '88, yeah.

FOLLET: So you joined the National Women's Health Network, became part of that, and served on the board. Tell me about that experience of being part of that organization.

ASETOYER: Well, you know, it was very interesting. The dynamics were real interesting. Some really wonderful women, I mean, women that had put together *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, had a very, very active role on that board. And that was about the time that — oh, there were some old timers on there. There were some interesting dynamics going on at that time.

FOLLET: Tell me about that. Tell me about the dynamics.

ASETOYER: Well, I had come in after there was a lawsuit. There had been a lawsuit between the board members, and boy, it was around one of the IUDs. But anyway, they were doing a lot of work around reproductive health

and rights, a lot of work around Norplant and looking at trying to stop the approval process with the Food and Drug Administration because of all the contraindications that Depo-Provera had. And we were really objecting to Upjohn's legalization of it for contraceptive use. And there had been a lot of accounts of women who had used Depo-Provera before it was legal as a contraceptive, and hence Byllye Avery and the work that she had done around women's education and awareness of Depo-Provera and the misuses that they were doing at the — I'm trying to remember the name of the hospital down in Atlanta, the county hospital — and how they were giving African American women Depo-Provera and the adverse reactions that it was [causing].

And of course, there was also some activity with Depo going on in the Native American community, and so I wanted very much to learn more about it and to also see what all was going on, and how we could bring awareness of that into the community as well. But they had made that movie, the video, about Depo-Provera, and I'm trying to remember the name of that. We have copies of it here.

FOLLET: Is it something that the Network produced?

ASETOYER: Yes. No, actually, I'm not sure if they did or an outside entity put it together. Boy, I could go get a copy. We should cut right now.

FOLLET: That's OK. We'll think of it and we can add it in later. We'll take it out.

ASETOYER: But anyway, and the video had Byllye — I can't go on. It's stuck in my mind here.

FOLLET: Want to stop and find it?

ASETOYER: Yeah. I know right where it's at.

FOLLET: OK, sure. Let's do it.

ASETOYER: I should remember this.

FOLLET: It'll give us a chance to stretch anyway.

ASETOYER: Yeah. 59:27

END TAPE 2

TAPE 3

FOLLET: OK. We're back. So now, the mystery is solved. It was called –

ASETOYER: There had been a video produced on Depo-Provera and all of the atrocities that were starting to occur, in terms of its misuse on women, specifically women of color. Byllye Avery was in the video. It was called *The Ultimate Test Animal*, and she was talking about all the atrocities that were going on down in Atlanta, at the county hospital there, and how they were using Depo-Provera on African American women. And there was a segment in there about how it was being used on Native American women. And I saw things going on in the community with the Indian Health Service [IHS], and then, looking at it for the prevention of fetal alcohol syndrome, and that's a misuse, you know, when it comes down to trying to coerce a woman to use it, [a] court ordering women to use it, and so forth. And so, there was this huge potential there for the violation of our rights. And they were occurring and we were seeing it escalating.

So, it just seemed at that time that it would be a good idea if I did agree to serve on the National Women's Health Network, where I'd be able to network with these women and collaborate and so forth. And watching what was happening in our community, in terms of fetal alcohol syndrome escalating, and just how bad it was, and our women not even aware that consuming alcohol during pregnancy and the birth defects that could occur — I've always said that, you know, a nation is only as strong as its people, and its leadership is derived from its people. So, if you have people who are weak-minded because of something like fetal alcohol syndrome, then your pool of potential leadership is going to be impacted in a very negative way, and that's going to make us even more vulnerable to the oppressive federal Indian policies and the whole expansionist colonialistic process that the government uses to get our land and to get control of our natural resources.

So I saw it as something being very, very profoundly political. And going back into the history of alcohol use and abuse, it was legalized and then illegalized, and then legalized at the whims of presidents. And in terms of its legalization with Native American people, most reservations are dry reservations. It's illegal to consume or sell alcohol on a reservation, so people have to leave and go into a state jurisdiction in order to buy alcohol and then bring it back onto the reservation. So, it's always been very political.

And now, this new thing, fetal alcohol syndrome — but it really wasn't new, you know. There [are] actually historical references back to Aristotle, you know, and the Bible, about foolish hare-brained women bring forth children unto themselves, you know, if they consume alcohol on their wedding night. So, man was aware of it. But contemporary man really became aware of it in the '70s. And again, I saw it as something very political.

And so I also saw Indian Health Service — looking at continued sterilization abuses, even though there had been all of the sterilization abuses that occurred in the ’60s and all of that coming to a head, and the process being changed for the better, in terms of waiting periods and informed consent and so on, but when it came to other forms of sterilization, other than surgical sterilization or tubal ligation, there were other ways of continuing to coerce Indian women into sterilization as well as intermittent sterilization, meaning the use of Depo-Provera. And doctors were feeling very comfortable with using Depo on chemically dependent women, coercing them. We were very uncomfortable with that, because they were not dealing with the root causes of alcohol. They were not dealing with the chemical dependency. They were just saying, We will prevent these women from having children and this is how we’ll do it, because they’ll have fetal alcohol syndrome children and we don’t want that to happen. No talk of helping a woman overcome her chemical dependency. No talk of education and prevention out in the communities. And that was not acceptable, as far as I was concerned. To me, that’s a reproductive health issue. That’s a reproductive justice issue.

And I had actually interviewed the contracted OB/GYN for our Indian Health Service unit, and was totally blown away by his attitude. He was a good OB/GYN but he would have done anything to prevent an FAS birth, including, you know, sterilization of a woman. And he felt no pain at talking a woman into using Depo, even though she might have had a lot of contraindications that made her a poor candidate — high blood pressure, suffering from depression — that was not the issue. The issue was how to stop a pregnancy from occurring. And again, no talk in this interview of trying to help a woman with her chemical dependency. So we could see where this whole thing was going, and so we really needed to get out into the community and talk to women about it, and to educate our tribal leadership as well. And so, we had our work cut out for us.

And then, there were all the children that were here that were not getting the educational services that they were entitled to and that they needed. And so, these children were being pushed out of school because a lot of them are hyperactive and [have] short attention spans, and so, they were seen as problem children and pushed out of school. And that also is not acceptable. So, we had all of those cutting-edge issues that needed to be addressed.

And before we’d actually gotten over there to open up the Resource Center in its current facility, when we were still a one-room basement office in my home, women in the community were running to the door of my home because they knew our office was there, and banging on the door to let us in because their perpetrator was on their heels, running after them. And so, they were running to us for safety. So then that made us realize, Oh, we need to expand the program and deal with violence-against-women issues and have some kind of sheltering program, and so that’s what led in that direction as well. And

eventually, you know, we opened up a shelter. But that was a struggle in itself, trying to do that.

But anyway, the fetal alcohol syndrome program grew and flourished and in ’85, when we were in Nairobi at the UN Decade of Women Conference, I had a friend over here that I had worked with, an older woman, who had a sister who was over in Nairobi, and they were semi-retired, and they were working for the Peace Corps, doing cross-breeding of corn at the University of Nairobi, and she had been working with a group of indigenous women out in the area of See-eye-ah (?phonetic) and the women of the Luo tribe, of the Luo nation. And so, when we went over there — there were nine of us that went over, in our delegation — we met with those women and they took us out to their village, and wanted us to do some health education out in their community.

Well, when we got out there, we noticed a lot of alcohol consumption. And coming into the village, I hadn’t seen any liquor stores. I mean, we were very rural. And I noticed some of the children that seemed to have the characteristics and the facial features of fetal alcohol syndrome. And I said, “Wait a minute, what’s going on here?” So, after dialogue with the women and the elders, it became apparent that there was a huge alcohol problem in the rural villages of Kenya.

There had been a program called Trickle Up, which is still in existence today, that had looked at what are the possible means for economic development projects in rural areas. And one of the things that they had done was, they had several projects where they had encouraged the women to produce their local home brew, as a means of economic development. And among the Luo people, after harvest — there are three harvests a year — and after a successful harvest, a brew is made called *chanong*, which is approximately 150 proof. And it’s used to celebrate — consumed by mostly the men — to celebrate a bountiful harvest. And then, the celebration is over and there’s no more *chanong* that’s produced and everybody gets back to work. And that was a tradition. Well, different groups were now making it and selling it on a daily basis as a means of economic development.

So, when we were talking to the midwives, they were saying, Oh, that’s why so-and-so’s baby and so-and-so’s baby and so-and-so’s baby smelled like *chanong* when we delivered. And we said, that’s what we call “born drunk.” And then that started this whole dialogue about fetal alcohol syndrome. So we realized that somehow we needed to get this message of FAS into these communities, and we started an exchange program with the women from the Luo village in See-eye-ah(?) and their women’s organization and ours, and that started this pilgrimage going back and forth and doing training. And then we raised the money to bring some of them over here, and to train them and to be able to do workshops and awareness programs in their communities.

So we had to convert all of our slides and electricity-using props into no electricity. So we would take the slides that were the most effective and we had them blown up and we sent them back, you know, with all

these aids, these visual aids, so that they could do this work in the village area. And then we took them to the University of South Dakota and had developed a number of public service announcements that were done in English, Ki-Swahili, and in the Luo language. And they aired throughout Kenya. And so, we started this whole fetal alcohol syndrome awareness program over there.

And eventually, I went to Moscow. And I want to say that was in '89. The Communist women's organization over there hosted this big conference with Edith Ballentine's group — they're the oldest peace organization in existence, women's organization.

16:00

FOLLET: The Women's International League –

ASETOYER: The Women's International — yes, The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, yes. Thank you. Anyway, so there was this big conference over there and I was part of a delegation that went over. And there was a tribunal, and so I testified at the tribunal about the nutritional issues that we were facing with the U.S. commodities, and how unhealthy they were and all of the ill health effects from eating commodities that were occurring. And I also talked about the politics of alcohol and fetal alcohol syndrome.

Well, in that audience, Fatima Said Ali, who was the minister of finance, sports and women from Tanzania, was in the audience, and she heard me speaking. Well, the next day, we were all put on buses and going out on field trips to visit different factories and so forth in Moscow. And I had picked the chocolate factory. (laughter) I love chocolate, and I said, Let me in there, I gotta check this out. And some women had decided to go to the bra factory, they toured that. Well, she, too, had wanted to go to the chocolate factory.

Well, at the end of the tour, they took us into this very elegant ballroom. I mean, it had to have been as long as football field. It was just horrendous [sic], with chandeliers and beautiful hardwood floors and this lonnnnng table with white tablecloths and sterling silver and china. It was very, very elegant. And there were all these boxes of candy on the table. And you know, when we were going through the factory, they told us we could help ourselves to as much chocolate as we wanted off the conveyor belt, so we were all sticking chocolate bars everywhere we could, you know. (laughter) But when we got out there, they weren't chocolate bars, they were these boxes of candies that had liquor in them, and then really nice truffles and bonbons and just wonderful, wonderful chocolate.

Well, we sat there and we had tea and they had all these Russian women from these different organizations in the Communist Party there to sit and have tea with us and talk to us and so forth and it was quite a powerful tea, learning about their history and every woman in there, you know, from Russian descent, had family that had been devastated in all the wars that they had had. I mean, the history of Russia is really interesting and very complex and they're constantly at war. And you

know, you could just see why the peace movement, it was so powerful in the Soviet Union.

So, after the tea, you know, they had told us to not take the boxes of chocolate because they didn't sell them in the Soviet Union. They exported all that chocolate. Well, you can't tell a chocolate lover not to take an open box of chocolate, just to leave it there. So, of course, I grabbed one and stashed one under my shirt and go walking out there and they're getting ready to get on the bus and all of a sudden, there's this kind of a tap on my back and a shove and somebody reaching for that candy and I thought, Oh, no, I'm busted. And here it was Fatima Said Ali. She had taken her wrap off of her hair, off of her head, and she grabbed that box, because she's seen me do it, and she wrapped her scarf around it and her hair piece around it, you know, and tucked it under her arm and then got on the bus, and then we sat together and we were eating this chocolate. (laughter)

FOLLET: She'd helped herself, too?

ASETOYER: Yeah. So she helped me hide this chocolate and get it out of there. But we were talking on the bus and she said, "I heard you speak yesterday at the tribunal." And I said, "You did?" And she said, "Yeah. Tell me more about this fetal alcohol syndrome." So, I was telling her about it and she said, "You know, all these Christian missionaries are out in our villages doing the very same thing. They're having the local women produce our traditional brew, which was done for special ceremonies and special times of the year, like the Luo women after harvest. And they have the women selling alcohol on a daily basis. And I didn't know what to call it, but after listening to you speak, I now know what it is, and I'm inviting you to come to Tanzania the next time you're in Africa, and visit with my minister of health. And I want you to train my staff on fetal alcohol syndrome so we can address this situation. We've been trying to figure out how to throw these churches out because of the missionary activity that's going on, and now we have a damned good reason."

22:08

So, several months later, I'd planned a trip to go back and I did go to Nairobi and out into the Luo area of See-eye-ah(?) and so forth, but also over to Dar es Saalam to meet with her and I trained her staff. And then she flew me over to Zanzibar to meet with the minister of health. And he had been educated here in the States and was familiar with the Alkali Lake Project up in Canada, where they had gone in and dealt with the chemical dependency community by community and brought sobriety, total sobriety, to communities. And so, he knew what fetal alcohol syndrome was and he was aware of it. And listening to me talk about FAS, they kind of put things together. And so they were launching awareness about FAS in Tanzania.

So, it was a real exciting time for us, you know, to be working nation to nation and grassroots organizing among indigenous peoples in different tribes. So, our FAS work was not just contained in our

community. It was among other nations, not only in this hemisphere but you know, across Turtle Island and into Africa. And it was very interesting, the politics of alcohol and who was promoting it and how it was being promoted. And so, we had our work cut out for us.

FOLLET: You sure did. Talk about the concentric circles. You start here and then you're working on the national level and then you're working on an international level, and in such a short period of time. Between '85 and Nairobi in '95, you've gone from establishing this center here in Lake Andes to working in international circles.

ASETOYER: Right. That was all back in the mid-'80s, right.

FOLLET: All the health activism that was going on among women in this country, the formation of the Women's Health Network, the split off and the creation of the Black Women's Health Project — you mentioned Luz, by the time they started, Luz had already started the [National] Latina Health Organization. And for a while, at least, you were all under — were you all working together at the National Women's Health Network?

ASETOYER: No. Byllye had already broken off, because Byllye had realized the need for an organization specifically for African American women, and Luz was just in the process of getting her organization going, and we also had our organization going. And so, you know, there was a common ground and that was, you know, the white women there were the National Women's Health Network and the Boston Women's Health Book Collective and the work that they were doing around Depo.

And so, it was a real good networking of organizations that were really doing very similar kinds of work in their communities and also addressing the very specific issues related to those issues where we have the common ground that were culturally specific. And that was the obvious void, you know, and some of the motivation for starting our own groups is because there were these mainstream issues, but the agenda was just very narrow and was not broad enough to include our issues. And so, we became very aware during that time period that we needed our own organizations, so that we *could* broaden the agenda, we *could* work on our issues, as well as work on the mainstream issues that affected us.

FOLLET: So, the issues that the predominantly white Women's Health Network was working on, you said they were very involved in –

ASETOYER: Depo-Provera.

FOLLET: – in Depo-

ASETOYER: And reproductive rights. But we also saw, as indigenous women, that fetal alcohol syndrome is a reproductive rights issue, and that's where some of them didn't. And so, it just really supported my concern about the need for our own organizations to really expand and to address our issues and to look at what our issues are: domestic violence, you know, the right to parent your children in a nonviolent home; the right to live as a woman in a nonviolent environment; the right to food, to be able to feed your family, to be able to feed yourself; the right to health care; the right to be able to have as many children as you wanted — *or not*. It isn't always about the right to terminate a pregnancy. In our communities, it's about the right to be able to *have* children, because of all the targeting in government policy in the years of oppression, sterilization abuses, and trying to implement all of these — I call it "population reduction" campaigns of the government. That is a reproductive rights issue.

And a lot of folks were, Well, sterilization, yes, but is fetal alcohol syndrome really one? Yes, to us, it is. So, if you are not willing to expand the agenda, then we need to go out and do this for ourselves. And our common ground will be where some of these issues come together. But not all of those issues are going to be seen by mainstream white women as a reproductive health issue, or reproductive rights issue.

And then, along comes Mary Chung and the National Asian Health Project, you know, with a whole another set of issues, you know, for her community. And again, the same thing, you know, mainstream, OK, common ground, but there are all these other issues. And they just didn't want to see them as reproductive rights issues. So, the need, again, for our own organizations.

FOLLET: Now, you were with the network for eight years, or at least –

ASETOYER: For eight years.

FOLLET: – just on the board –

ASETOYER: Yes, I was on the board.

FOLLET: – for eight years, which is a long time in an organization that isn't proving to be hospitable, or I should say, you've obviously identified some common ground, but there are differences. What incidents, what meetings, what issues were the most revealing, or enlightening about the different perspectives?

ASETOYER: Well, I'm going to be really careful here, because there is a common ground, which is really, really important, that we work together on these issues. But we're talking about organizations that do not want to — and I'm not just talking about the National Women's Health Network, I'm talking about NARAL and NOW and you name it, not wanting to

expand their agendas in a way in which would diversify its leadership, diversify its issues, and make room for women of color and lock arms and work together, you know, move forward. There was resistance there, and a *lot* of resistance, in bringing forth an idea. And getting the respect that that idea really warranted — a lot of times [the respect] wasn't there. And it was extremely challenging — hence the development of women of color committees within a lot of the organizations forming. And committees of white women working against racism, you know, committees addressing that, and just trying to get progressive women to realize that they need to address their racism because they don't think that they're racist, or even capable of it.

So you know, there was a lot of struggling that was going on within the women's movement around the whole issue of race, and diversifying leadership and the issues. And it was extremely frustrating. I think the National Women's Health Network did a very good job at really trying. It was a struggle. It was a big struggle, and they were open. There were players, members on the board, that didn't want to diversify, and there were women that did, white women that did.

FOLLET: Who did you feel your allies were?

ASETOYER: Most of the women of color, yeah, they were. And I think a lot of it came from control and not wanting to give up that control. I mean, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective was a wonderful group of women, but until Byllye Avery appeared on the scene, they were really, you know, reaching out and trying to organize, or trying to address some of the women of color doing programming, and it's really not appropriate. It really needs to be done for and by us, you know, for and by women of color. And they had some hard times letting go of some of that, but it had to occur. And there were struggles.

FOLLET: What struggles did you participate in most fully around those issues with either the Network or any other collectives that were predominantly white women's organizations?

ASETOYER: On the National Women's Health Network board, women of color would put forward program ideas and a lot of time, they were not appreciated — big time. I mean, there were some real big issues here. And they did not want to expand their agenda, and they really wanted to keep pretty well focused.

FOLLET: Focused on –

ASETOYER: On Depo-Provera, and certain reproductive health issues that were specifically related to class, you know. There were a lot of class issues. In the greater women's movement, the Hyde Amendment — the Hyde Amendment was big time. I feel we were sold out as women of color, you know, because the larger reproductive health organizations,

NARAL specifically, didn't want to really work on it in the way in which we wanted it to, because it meant women of color, low-income women.

It challenged a lot of their relationships that they had established with representatives and legislators in Washington, you know? It was kind of like, Well, we'll let this one go by if you don't mess with that. I mean, there was some stuff going on, some very sophisticated back-room kind of policy work that was going on. And to this day, it is very painful when you bring it up in a room, because I brought it up in a room at the Ford Foundation and it brought some tears in there, you know, so –

FOLLET: Tell me about that meeting at the Ford Foundation. What was the occasion and who was there?

ASETOYER: Oh, everybody was there. Eleanor Smeal, Loretta [Ross] was there — the list is just numerous. I guess you would say the leadership of the women's movement was there. NOW was there, Planned Parenthood was there, I mean, everybody was there, OK. I said, "You know, if we're going to be talking about the new women's movement, we probably need to get over some old issues that could cause some barriers and challenges to us. So, you know, let's look at what happened around the Hyde Amendment and how we felt that we were sold out, how we *were* sold out as women of color." Phew.

Eleanor Smeal, who I have a lot of respect for, you know, got really upset and broke out into tears. They do not want to be seen as having anything to do with selling out women at all. And, you know, it was a real heated discussion. But if we don't deal with some of our heated issues, or things that keep us from working together, how are we going to go forward, if we don't air them out, and even for the purpose of airing them out, and realizing that OK, maybe we did make some mistakes along the way. Some mistakes were made. And let's learn from them and move forward, and don't do that to each other again.

But there are still women who are not willing to do that, to acknowledge that they may have made a mistake, you know, so that we can move forward. It's painful. It's very painful. So.

FOLLET: Were there specific issues that you pushed within the Network where you felt let down?

ASETOYER: Well, there were issues that I didn't feel that I could bring to the table, because I knew that they were not willing to broaden the agenda. So, I tried to really focus on our common ground and that was the most constructive approach to take, because it did last, you know, [we had] an eight-year relationship, [while I was] serving on the board. And I know we certainly benefited from it and I'd like to think that they also benefited from it. I would have liked to have seen the issues more diversified, because if we're looking at National Women's Health

Network, then it needs to be a very large venue of women's issues and not just so mainstream.

But the work we did do, together, was pretty incredible, meaning the [National Women's Health] Network, National Black Women's Health Project, National Latina Health Project, National Asian's Women's Health Project, and the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center, they were all very, very productive collaboratively. Formally, the organizations worked very well together, especially around the area of Depo and also Norplant, and really taking a hard look at Norplant and trying to make changes in the package inserts, get the FDA to really reexamine whether or not they should be out on the market or not, getting the news out about the potential for misuse and abuse, especially Norplant. And I think women were very successful in that, you know, because that benefited our women as well, the whole education piece around that, because there were abuses of Depo going on — they're still going on — and Norplant. And so, I think that we really did a good job and we were very effective. So, it's all right if we didn't get them to broaden the agenda. We worked where we had the common ground.

And then, in other areas, we worked with women of color groups that did not always include white women's organizations, because they weren't willing to work on our issues. So that's fine: work on what you feel are your issues and we'll work on ours, and then we'll come together and have a meeting of the minds where we do have a common ground and merge forces. And that's always been a real effective way. But there have been — National Organization for Women, you know, lots of issues there in lack of diversification and inclusion of women of color in the planning of certain activities and events that have taken place.

FOLLET: Marches?

ASETOYER: Marches, yeah, marches in Washington around women's rights, abortion rights, and women's issues, health issues in general, you know, when it comes to reproductive health. Yeah, and those are sore spots that will always be there, because of the way they were handled. And we can only hope that lessons were learned, and that it might make some inroads, in terms of positive change around how they deal with things in the future.

FOLLET: Were you involved at all in the '86 March for Women's Lives that NOW held?

ASETOYER: Yes, yes. And, I'm trying to remember if that's the one we boycotted, with the green armbands.

FOLLET: I think that was in '92.

ASETOYER: Yeah, that was in ’92.

FOLLET: I think that was ’92.

ASETOYER: Yeah, yeah, because of the lack of women of color speakers and lack of participation in planning and kind of asking us to be there as arm candy, to make them look diversified when they really weren’t. And so, a boycott ensued and for those that were going, I can remember our staff was here cutting up green armbands and sending boxes and boxes, you know, because we were not going to be there. We were not going to go there.

FOLLET: But you sent your message via the armbands?

ASETOYER: Yes, yes, most definitely, and made some statements to the press and so on and so forth. I definitely expressed my opinion formally and openly, in public, about the situation. You know, if you want to be inclusive, you have to be inclusive from the beginning. You cannot make all the decisions exclusively and then figure that we’re going to say, OK, and then jump on the bandwagon. And I think that’s been going on for generations and generations in the women’s movement: where do women of color fit in? We know our issues. We know there’s a place for us. So don’t try to keep us out from participating or in the decision making, and don’t tell us what our issues are. We will tell you what our issues are, whether you like them or you don’t. Those are our issues. And that’s the stand that we will take.

So, yeah. The women’s movement has a lot of diversity to it and a lot of challenges within the movement. And there’s more than abortion, a whole lot more, and if we don’t acknowledge that, if we don’t get equal time, if we don’t be inclusive, then it becomes oppressive. We have to be very careful about that, and very aware that our movement can be oppressive, because it’s exclusive. And we’ve got to watch out for that and constantly be working on it.

A lot of resources go into the mainstream, and that’s important, but there needs to be equal attention paid to women of color issues, which hasn’t happened yet. Yes, we get funding, but if you compare how much funding we get to some of these other organizations and what they do with it and what we do with it, you know, there’s a whole lot of difference. We get a very, very, very, very small percent, and a lot of times, nothing. And then, all these other resources are going into the mainstream organizations.

And it perpetuates invisibility for indigenous women. Our lack of visibility throughout the history of the movement is a real good example. Not that we weren’t doing things and organizing, and not that we weren’t there, it’s just that we weren’t documented or we were not included in the decision making. And so, a lot of times, we’re there, but it’s not because of the help that we got from the greater women’s community. It is because we got ourselves there, or because somebody

knew somebody that could help us get there. So, it was a lot of back-door politics, favors, and relationships that had been formed, as opposed to the formal, like, OK, here's a pot of funding and that comes from foundations, and we're going to make sure that indigenous women get their fair share so they can get here. That doesn't happen.

FOLLET: Still.

ASETOYER: Yes, still, to this day.

FOLLET: OK, shall we heed the call? 50:25

[50:30-54:58 — outdoor footage of Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center building and town of Los Andes]

END TAPE 3

TAPE 4 September 2, 2005 (begins with recording room tone)

FOLLET: OK. We're back. So, any thoughts from yesterday, any afterthoughts or loose ends, or things you thought of afterwards?

1:30

ASETOYER: Oh, one of the things that I did want to go back and clarify was when I got my first involvement with the National Women's Health Network. The lawsuits that were occurring were around the Dalkon Shield and all the legal activity that occurred from those lawsuits. There was an attorney, Cybil Shangwell(?), who was a member of the board, who was accepting cases and assisting women with that and so forth. I'm not really sure of all the details of the lawsuit that occurred between the board members, but at the time, the board kind of factioned, and it was a time of healing and recovery for them and a good time for them to bring on some new energy into the mix.

FOLLET: Were there similarly decisive issues while you were there?

ASETOYER: There were decisive issues, I wouldn't say similar to, and as serious as a lawsuit, but there were issues where the board was factioned. And a lot of times, women of color were trying to move through and expand the agenda, and that was not really welcomed with the kind of warmth and appreciation that it really should have been. You know, those are challenges that women of color really experience on boards that have traditionally been held by white women. Even your very progressive white women have a hard time letting go and seeing that as being racist. They don't feel that they are capable of being racist or that they even think in those terms. But then, when it comes to being able to let go of the power and the control or the leadership and wanting to share with the leadership, it becomes extremely difficult. And they really, you know, have a difficult time with it.

And we're not willing to be arm candy. We're not willing to be there because it looks good. We're there because we have issues that we bring to the table and we feel that they are very, very important. We know they're important. We know that they are issues that we carry with us from the realities of our community, and we want them addressed. And these organizations are relief agencies, in terms of social change, and being able to address and work on these very pertinent issues in order to be able to move forward policy recommendations and so on, and to be able to get things changed. And if we're not going to be appreciated, then we're really not effective, and so why be there? So, it was a constant challenge for me and for other women of color at the time.

FOLLET: In working either with the Network or with or in other mainstream organizations, when were the moments when you felt that most acutely?

ASETOYER: When we brought forth issues that were not being addressed, new issues that needed to be worked on. That, I think, is probably when, well, they

don't see it as important as we do, or they don't see it as being important at all. And then that's, I think, when a lot of the challenge, a lot of the clash, occurs, is that we wouldn't bring it up if they weren't important to us. And so, because you don't see them as important, it does not mean that we are not important. Those kind of dynamics always makes for a lot people to become defensive.

And you know, what you really want to see happen is that a give-and-take situation where they say, OK, well, let's try it. Let's see. Let's look into it. But that was not happening. A lot of times, what would happen, too, is that they would say, Well, OK, but then when it got to the office actually doing the work on it, it never got done. And you see that a lot in women's organizations, you know, is that they will say, Sure, OK, we'll do it — but then they never get to working on those issues.

That's when you really have to ask yourself, you know, Is this the best place for me to be — because there's only so many hours in a day, so many days in a week, and so forth. And could I spend my time more effectively and being a change agent for my community if I put my energy somewhere else? Those are the questions that we have to ask ourselves.

FOLLET: Is there an issue that you feel you've been successful in putting onto the mainstream agenda as a Native woman? Is there something that you've –

ASETOYER: Oh, by all means. There are several issues: going back to looking at fetal alcohol syndrome and the related issues; looking at how women were treated that were chemically dependent, and bringing that to light. I think one of the most impressive organizations and women working on those kinds of issues is Lynn Paltrow, and the work that she does around pregnant women's rights. We've crossed paths many times throughout the years and have worked together, and she really understands, you know, the issues and the fact that pregnant women have rights and the fact that merely because a woman is chemically dependent does not mean that her rights should be violated. You know, her issues need to be addressed. Her needs need to be addressed and those of her family. And Lynn gets it, and has really committed her life to working with that population of women. So I really applaud her. And oftentimes, there are groups out there that don't quite get it, but there's one woman that does get it and really has made a commitment. So I have a lot of respect and admiration for Lynn Paltrow and the work that she does.

And I really think that a lot of women in the mainstream really didn't know what fetal alcohol syndrome was, didn't know what the related issues were, until we came knocking on the door. And I know, Loretta Ross has always said, "Heck, I didn't know what it was until Charon came along."

And that's an important statement, because it was affecting so many women of color, and it's handled different when it gets into middle-

class and upper-middle-class women. What we found happening was that in labor and delivery rooms, if a women was a woman of color, if she was low income, if she was an indigenous woman, she would be reported, you know, as child abuse, if she was chemically dependent and she delivered, and she was high at the time or intoxicated at the time. What happens with middle-class and upper-class women, usually white women, is that it does not go reported, you know. It's seen as possibly just a one-time incident, and doctors don't report it. But if a woman is on welfare, she's a woman of color, if she's low income, or she's an Indian woman, charges are brought against her.

And I don't care what economic background you come from, chemical dependency is in every class, it doesn't matter, every color, every race, every class of woman, every economic income level. And so it should not be treated any different. It does need to be addressed — criminalized, no, but it does need to be addressed.

FOLLET: So, that's a positive outcome, a place where you've made headway. Is there an issue that's been extremely difficult to make headway with? 11:37

ASETOYER: We've been challenged on many levels and we have very much expanded the agenda when it comes to reproductive rights abuses and sterilization abuse. When a person thinks — or the mainstream — about sterilization abuses, they think of forced tubal ligations, as opposed to looking at how it continues today. And we really opened a lot of women's eyes in order for them to see that it is important to work on the issue — that, for instance, Depo-Provera is used as an intermittent sterilization for women. When a woman is coerced into using it, when a woman is ordered to use it, because it's temporary, because it's for three months, and it's usually administered more than just one time, that it can be used as a form of sterilization, not necessarily permanent, but intermittent. And that's just as serious. And so, we really planted that seed, we've really worked on that issue, and we've really brought that to the forefront.

A lot of women in the movement say, Well gee, it's another form of contraceptive, another form of birth control. We should celebrate that there's another product out on the market. And we say, Not one that has as many contraindications as that, not one that has such a potential for abuse, especially when you look at some of the populations that have a lot of the health problems that make these contraindications very, very serious: obesity, high blood pressure, depression. Can you imagine a judge ordering a woman who has a history of depression to use Depo-Provera, or a doctor coercing her into using it, such as Indian Health Service? — which happens a lot.

We saw this with Norplant, and we worked very hard on Norplant — women who had Norplant inserted and wanted it removed for reverse of intent, and not being able to find a doctor that would do it because they had it put in on Medicaid dollars and there was no money allocated for removal. And so, South Dakota, in fact, had a law that said they

would not reverse it, or they would not remove it for reverse of intent. And so, we found doctors that, you know, would take out a cylinder or two and then when a women had more money, could come and pay to have a couple more of the cylinders taken out, and that's very, very dangerous. And so, we had ACLU in here and the Center for Reproductive Rights in here at the time helping out with legal cases and so on and so forth and referrals. You know, there were a couple of other states that were like that. So we have really moved that into the agenda so that it was recognized and that work could be done on it.

We've done a lot around the Hyde Amendment and looking at the impact it's had on Indian Health Service, because Indian Health Service is a federal agency and they are entrusted with our health care. However, you've got to look at the history of our relationship with the federal government and the fact that the Bureau of Indian Affairs at one time was the Department of War, and so our services come out of that history. The Indian Health Service was brought in to actually take care of epidemics around the forts, to do disease control when they introduced such things as small pox and tuberculosis, via blankets and other methods that they gave to us. They were brought into do disease control so that the people in the forts, meaning the white people, the settlers, were safe and did not contract these diseases.

So, that's where our health care system comes out of, is that history. And so those very same policies, that mindset, it's there. That's the history. And we have got the Indian Health Service doing experimentation in many, many, many ways. There's a long history of human rights violations. So when it came to looking at, Gee, the traditional form of sterilization cannot be done because of all these new policies and regulations that were put into effect which Indian Health Service has to also comply with, what's their next plan of action?

And so, we've tried very hard to stay on top of that and to find these things out. They're still getting by with tubal ligations, by suggesting to women that they have it done, by the dialogue that goes on between a woman and her physician. Women have told us that they've been told if they have any more children, it could be fatal for them — later to find out that this wasn't true when they got an opinion from another physician. There's still a lot of coercion going on in trying to get our young women to become sterilized and to accept their recommendations. When Norplant and Depo were introduced, there were a lot of women, Indian women, that received Norplant.

There's a lot of women who continue to get Depo, some because it works for them. I mean, we have to realize that even though there is a lot of contraindications, that there are some women that can use it successfully, but there are a lot of women in our populations that do not — it does not work real well for them. They don't understand why they're depressed, why they're gaining all this weight, why they're losing their hair, until they seek out that information, because the informed consent is not as thorough as it should be in every Indian Health Service hospital. We're constantly trying to get that information

out to women and to say, OK, if you still want to use it, here are the contraindications. Here are the potential side effects and risks, so if you do experience any of them, you know what it is, and you'll go to your physician, and you'll discontinue use, et cetera.

And we've had a lot of difficulty and resistance from the Indian Health Service over informed consent versus consent. And they are two very, very different things, and women really need to think about that, giving consent versus informed consent. One is just consenting to a treatment or medication and the other is being informed and knowing what the risks associated are or not. And so, we really have done a lot of work on informed consent.

And that really came out of the National Women's Health Network, I have to say. They have done an enormous amount of work throughout their history around informed consent. And I happen to have been on the board during that time and learned a lot from the women about informed consent and the importance of it. And so, we've really carried that into our work and incorporated it and it's been an area where I have to give credit where credit is due. The National Women's Health Network really did a lot of work and our organization has benefited from it. Indian women in general have benefited from it. So, that was one of the reasons for staying around, when there was, you know, some challenges. I wouldn't have been in there if there wasn't, for so long, if there wasn't some really good interaction going on and some really good things that the board did accomplish. And so, I have to attribute the work that we've done in informed consent to the Network.

There's other areas, such as the Copper 7 IUD and a lot of the work that we did around IUDs, and that information coming out of the Network. A lot of Indian women were using IUDs and the Copper 7 and experiencing a lot of side effects, a lot of infections, life-threatening infections, and that had to do with the design of it and the fact that we had information on it and we got that out to the women, and a lot of them had it removed because of that.

But getting back to the Indian Health Service and its history, you know, it does have a very long history with us, and [what they do is] not always in the best interest of our communities. But it is our health, it is our health service, and we have to do everything we can in our power to make it the best health service that we possibly can, so we stay on their case and make sure that we're getting acceptable services. And a lot of times, we're not.

So, we work really hard to bring awareness, to change policy, to even get policy implemented. And the Hyde Amendment issues are what we have been working on lately, very, very adamantly, looking at that whole picture of the Hyde Amendment. Because we receive our services from Indian Health Service, which is a federal agency, they're restricted under the Hyde Amendment, and we're the only race of people in this country that are restricted purely — from abortion access and under the constrictions and restrictions of the Hyde Amendment —

based on race. We're the only race of people that are denied access to abortion based on race, because of the Hyde Amendment.

FOLLET: And because you're dependent on federal agency for the care. 23:30

ASETOYER: It's not because we're *dependent* on it. It's because of treaty rights for lands seized. We're not dependent on IHS. IHS is there in exchange for lands seized — that they took from our peoples. And that is a treaty obligation, that they have to provide us with health care. And in their mission, it is to improve the status of Native people. So it is not that we are dependent on it, and we need to get that very clear. We are not dependent on Indian Health Service. They are obligated to provide health care to indigenous peoples of North America, because of land seized.

For Indian people, health care is not a privilege, it is a right, and that is an extremely big difference in the mainstream. For other people, it is a privilege to have good health care. But for indigenous peoples of this country, it is *our right*. And you really have to think about that — what we gave up, what was taken from us, and their obligation, because of these treaty agreements, and how they are reneging on those agreements.

There isn't a millionaire in this country that hasn't reaped the benefits of colonization of our people, and the resources that it took to make that millionaire. It was not only just off our backs, but off our lands, off of our homes, our children, our children's children, for generations to come. And also, from my mother, my mother's mother, and my mother's mother's mother and so on and so forth back, we have been victims of massive genocide campaigns, ethnocide campaigns, and it continues, since contact. And we continue to stand up for our rights. And we're still here.

So, one has to really think of the whole history of Native people from contact, and what was taken from us and how it was done. There are tribes that don't even exist any more because they have been totally exterminated. And there were intentional campaigns to do that. The tribes along California coastal areas, a lot of tribes in the areas where the Gold Rush and so forth, you know, where they went in and took the Gatling gun and just annihilated entire tribes — all in the name of gold. So, I mean, the history is there and it is not that long ago. And so, the remainder of us, you know, being put on reservations and relocated and having to deal with the treaties and the oppressive federal Indian policies that exist today, have a horrendous impact on our health and well being.

And a lot of people really don't have any kind of understanding of that. They've never been to a reservation, they don't understand the Indian politics, the politics with the U.S. government and how they continue. We have an enormous amount of cases that are up before the Supreme Court every year, looking at jurisdiction, looking at health care, looking at land/water rights, Indian gaming — you name it. As we

move into a contemporary era, with new issues coming up, jurisdiction is a really big issue. So, it's not over. It's not over and it will continue for generations to come.

And so, when you go back to looking at health care and looking at reproductive rights, it makes sense. Look at the fight for oil up in Northern Alaska, how the government is constantly trying to go into sacred territory and sacred grounds [with] no regard to the people that live there, that have lived there for generations and generations. They want that oil, and they will do everything they can for that oil. You know, right now, most of the oil is either too expensive, because it's under some deep shelf in the ocean, or it's in a war zone. I mean, it's very difficult now to access oil. So, when they can go into an indigenous community and there's resistance, what is the game plan?

Well, we have to look at how do they reduce our numbers. They do it through population reduction, population control, sterilization, poor health. Why should my health be any different than someone down the road who's not Native American who lives in the same community? Why should we have such different health conditions, diseases, and so much poorer health than that neighbor who's not Indian? We need to answer those questions, and we need to look at the different campaigns that the government has launched on our people: the introduction of yellow fever, for experimentation purposes, you know, which took place in Alaska.

If we look at the level of human papilloma virus in certain areas within the communities that receive Indian Health Service — Indian Health Services is broken into twelve regional areas, and they keep statistics on all diseases and health conditions, and when you look at the human papilloma virus in the Aberdeen area, which is this area, we're off the Richter scale. There is no reason why our numbers should be so high, other than the fact that when it was introduced in our community, when the numbers started going up, the epidemiology — that department did not launch and work with the public health nurses to launch a public health campaign of awareness. What they did was, they watched the numbers grow and they watched it manifest in the community. And for the past 15 years, we have been very aware of it and we have been in dialogue with them, so consequently, we now have the most number of cases, we have the most number of deaths from cervical cancer. The cervical cancer rate in the Aberdeen area is higher than in any other area. It's off the Richter scale. It's not acceptable.

And this is because we are very, very sure that the Indian Health Service chose this particular area to watch it manifest so that they could collect their data and to see how this disease runs itself out — and eventually, of course, results in cervical cancer for most women that have it. Their own statistics prove that. So –

FOLLET: Prove the fact that they've –

ASETOYER: That they have done nothing to try to control it and to bring awareness to people to control it. Yeah, and the importance of having early diagnosis and follow up. We had a roundtable, a focus group for young women several years ago, and there were women, 19, that were in that focus group, that had abnormal pap smears with no recommendation from Indian Health Service to follow it up. And if they wouldn't have been in that focus group with us and disclosed that, they wouldn't have known the importance and significance of following up on abnormal pap smears in relation to human papilloma virus, HPV. So, Indian Health Services is very guilty of not informing women in doing the kinds of health care that are necessary to save a woman's life.

FOLLET: I just read that example about the young women and the pap smears in some of your literature, and it's so — your literature is just amazing, the amount of research and surveys and documentation that you've done on this. So the fact that the data is there is extraordinary. I see why you call yourselves the Health Education Resource Center. Tell me how the Center works. It's called the Native –

ASETOYER: The Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center.

FOLLET: Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center. And you came about in the '80s, and we traced that a little bit. And by 1990, you were ready to pull together women from different tribes in these Northern Plains to address women's reproductive health issues at that Pierre meeting. Is the Pierre meeting something that's vivid in your mind? 34:45

ASETOYER: Very much so.

FOLLET: OK, good, good. I mean, I've heard it compared to the Spelman meeting for African American women –

ASETOYER: Wow, wow.

FOLLET: – that it was really a momentous gathering. Can you describe the process of pulling that together and what it was like to be there, and why it was so significant?

ASETOYER: Well, what we did was to form a committee and to identify women from throughout the Plains, to invite them to participate in the meeting, to come together to start the process of prioritizing reproductive health issues for us, for Native women in this country. And by doing so, we ended up really starting kind of a domino effect, you know: women taking this information home with them, women talking about it, women saying, Well, gee, this has been going on in my community. I didn't realize it was going on in your community, or another community — and starting that real important process of networking.

FOLLET: Charon, could I ask you to move? I need to point you just that way. Thank you, sorry, good. That helps a lot. Good. Thanks.

36:41

ASETOYER: Sure. But starting this very important process of networking, so that women are not working in such isolation. I mean, you've got to remember that most Native women are isolated, are living on reservations, are land-based, are out on rural areas, and, you know, we are isolated. So we've got to establish those relationships in other communities, with other women in other communities so that we can network, and the importance of networking. Never underestimate networking, because if you have a contact down in Navajo nation, or you have a contact in Comanche country, or if you have a contact down Seminole country or Cherokee nation, or Onondaga, you know, you can pick up that telephone or get on that e-mail and say, "Katsi [Cook], we're having this problem. Can you help us?" Or, Wilma [Mankiller], "Hey, is this going on in your area?" And so, you know, establishing those relationships and sharing information and finding out that we're not, I'm not the only one who's seeing this happen in our community. It's happening elsewhere. So that right there is really important.

Also, identifying what are some of the reoccurring issues, and prioritizing those issues. That was really important. It was very, very important. Also, getting women involved in looking at Self-Help models, and starting the dialogue on abortion. That's really very, very interesting, that topic of abortion in Indian country, because you have to remember that pre-contact — meaning, you know, pre-European contact — we had very sophisticated systems in place: our traditional forms of healing, our herbology, our medicines, our midwives, our women who are midwives. And we had our women societies in place.

For instance, a lot of tribes, they have a women's society and a coming-of-age ceremony for women. And what that does is when a woman enters womanhood, when she starts going through puberty, there's ceremonies that are held, and celebrations. But also it brings her into a society of women that will mentor her through the different stages of her life, the midwives that will deliver her children, and advise her, you know, throughout whatever challenge she may be going through.

And in turn, when those mentors become elders and pass on, all of those young women that they mentored through puberty — they may have even delivered some of them, and through their different phases of growing up, and becoming a woman — they will handle that elder when she passes on. They will wash her body, they will dress her body, they will prepare her for her journey into the Happy Hunting Ground. And so, womanhood is a very, very special, very, very sacred thing to us. It's very special. And we have a lot of respect for each other and ourselves.

And so, during that time [pre-contact], of course, our medicines and our systems were all in place. I mean, we have science. We have forms of mathematics and measurement. All of these things have just been totally overlooked, because they tried to annihilate us as the

colonization process kept reoccurring and occurring over and over again. But, very sophisticated systems. And abortion — the word abortion does not exist in our languages. You know, say abortion. It's a harsh word. I don't like English. It's kind of a language of commerce and utilitarian, you know. It's a very harsh language and the word abortion is very harsh, and offensive to a lot of women. But in our culture, women knew how to take care of themselves. And we had a different concept, OK. It wasn't termination, OK. It was to make our periods come, to take care of ourselves in a time of need.

It was up to a woman to decide whether or not she was going to have a large family, or no family, or a smaller family. It was not up to the political arena. And the business of women was just that, the business and matters of women. It was not for our male counterparts to be involved in at all. So, if a woman decided that she wasn't going to have a child, she knew how to make her period come. And there were different methods, techniques, and herbs and medicines that were used, different procedures. And so, it was not seen in this greater political format that it is today, all these men involved in making this decision over our bodies and over something that we have a right to make a decision over.

So, it's very hard for Indian women to enter into this dialogue with men, because we never talked to men about this. It wasn't their business. So, it's very difficult to all of a sudden change your thought patterns, that we should even include him, you know, a male into this dialogue. It's none of their business. They don't have a right to engage in this dialogue with us. It's our business. It's our responsibility.

FOLLET: In your own experience, how much of that women's culture was still alive for you and transmitted to you?

ASETOYER: Well, quite a bit. I mean, we've got to look at this. First of all, the impact that Christianity has had in our culture and how that has impacted families. You know, it was pushed on us as a form of ethnocide. If they couldn't take care of us through genocide campaigns, then they were going to commit ethnocide and to assimilate us into the mainstream. And Christianization was a good process for that to occur. It was effective. So we have a lot of Catholics. I mean, our parents and our grandparents were sent to boarding schools run by Catholic nuns.

FOLLET: And your own experience in your own family.

ASETOYER: Right. And my mother was sent to a Catholic boarding school in Oklahoma. And so, there's a big influence there. However, a lot of our women that are older women, our older women, our elders, that are Catholic will say, Oh, yes, I know what the medicine is. I know that they used to do that. I know they still know how to do that. But I'm Catholic, so I choose not to do that. But they're not condemning a woman who does choose to do that.

And now, our younger generation, because they never bothered to engage in those kinds of conversations with their elders, some of our young women, are really struggling with that, and you can see the impact, or the influence, of the Christianity. And so, when you start engaging in conversation with them and letting them know that Indian women knew how to have control over our bodies, we knew how to make our periods come, we knew how to decide the size of our family, then they stop and they listen and they want to know more.

And so, that's what was so incredible about the Pierre meeting, because we had a panel of elders that knew their traditions, that knew that abortion, or pregnancy termination, occurred — that women knew how to make their periods come, that we had that power, that we had that medicine, that we had that control, and stood up and said yes. And the younger women heard that and were, like, Wow, I heard that from somebody. And they started remembering conversations when they were younger, that their mother and their aunties were having and, you know, [and they] were shooed out of the room, like little girls are, you know, and I think in every culture — this is grownup stuff — but hearing enough so that it started bringing back that memory. And women started engaging in it. And women knew it was OK to talk about this. It was OK to think that, if I decide not to have a child, it's OK. And so, that really sent some incredible energy through that conference and that went home with everybody, went out to the communities. And younger women realized that, Yeah, it's OK to talk about this. It's OK to talk about abortion. Yeah, it's OK if a woman wants to have an abortion.

And so, women were talking about it. And interesting enough, I've done some of the radio shows on — there's a national radio show called "Native America Calling" — and we've talked about abortion there. And women would call in from all different places, you know, Indian women from all over, talking about, it's good that we're talking about this. It's good because we know this now and we, you know, since all this dialogue has been going on, we've been asking questions. And that's good that we know that information.

And, even men will call in and say, I'm really supportive of this program and the conversation that's going on because, you know, I'd heard this from my aunties or my mother or my grandmother and our women need to know this, and our men need to know it, too, because a lot of them don't. You know, a lot of our men have been Christianized and the impact of Christianity has had, not only on the women but it's also occurred to our men as well. And so, they know this.

And it's OK to be able to say, Well, I would never terminate a pregnancy, but I will respect a woman's right to do that. And so, we've heard that echoing over and over in the community. And not so much, No, you can't do that; that isn't right; we never did that. You're not hearing that. You're not hearing that any more, because we found the elders that had that very important history and they shared it with us in Pierre.

And so, that's what makes the Pierre conference so historically important, so important to Indian women. It's bringing back information that was almost gone. But we brought it back. We saved it. We preserved it. And we've engaged in dialogue with other elders who have that knowledge. And that dialogue just continues and women continue to seek it out within their own tribes and communities. And so there is a much greater dialogue about abortion going on in our communities.

And all of the different kinds of ceremonies and rites that we had as women and young women, they're coming back. They weren't gone, but there was a time of silence, and so it's been an awakening and making sure that before that generation that holds that information shares it and passes it on.

51:25

I mean, our midwives — years ago, some of these elders told us that they were still delivering babies and the soldiers came by in the rural areas and told them if they didn't stop delivering babies at home, that they would be arrested. And we're talking about, you know, at a time when white women, farmers, because they're so rural, were still delivering babies at home. And our women were being told that they would be arrested because they were passing on that knowledge. And Indian Health, they wanted them to go to the Indian hospital. They wanted to give them a C-section or they wanted to sterilize them or whatever. And you can't do that when a woman has a baby at home. So, it became very frightening for a lot of these women. They didn't want to be arrested. They didn't want to be taken by the soldiers, and the police, and so forth.

And so, a lot of women stopped delivering babies at home. And the infant mortality rate just grew and grew and grew and grew. It just went up, higher and higher that it'd ever been, because women had to be transported long distances to deliver their children and sometimes they didn't make it and they had complications and so on and so forth. You know, when women were having babies at home by our midwives, the infant mortality rate was not nearly as high as it went when women were being forced to deliver in the Indian hospitals years ago.

And so, there's just a whole lot of important information there that needs to be preserved and continued. Pierre [played] a very, very powerful, very powerful role in that process.

FOLLET: The other thing that you mentioned about the really significant [issue] at Pierre, besides retrieving this lost history, and especially around the issue of abortion, was self-help.

ASETOYER: Oh, yes.

FOLLET: Tell me about self-help at Pierre or self-help in general.

ASETOYER: Well, it was very interesting, because we had brought women in from the Feminist Women's Health Centers to show and share with our women OB/GYN self-help and self-examination. And so we had

brought in speculums for everyone, and mirrors and flashlights. Young women were shown how to do this and then they were teamed up. They selected their own team, and all night long, we only had so many mirrors and flashlight sets, and so there was a knock on the door, you know, because when a group was done, then they'd bring back the mirror and the flashlight. There'd be a knock on the door and a young woman would want to [know] — is there a flashlight and mirror available? Yes. Hand it out to them and they'd go and they'd do their self-help. Well, the next morning — that went on all night long.

FOLLET: Do you mean self-help or self-exam?

ASETOYER: Self-exam. Well, we call that self-help.

FOLLET: Oh, OK.

ASETOYER: Yeah, but anyway, self-exam. And so, it went on all night long. And so the next morning in the workshops, these young women got up and said, Hey, nobody's going there — that's mine. They made the connection that their cervix belongs to them and that they're not letting anybody go there, just randomly. They're not going to just be giving it up to any guy. You know, he's got to be special. He's got to be clean. He's got to be — it was just a total, incredible, ownership and connection.

A lot of times, women don't make the connection, you know, but it's like, That's a part of me and I'm going to keep *me* healthy. I'm going to keep *my* cervix healthy and it's not up for grabs. So, young women were making these incredible comments. I mean, we're talking about high school students. We're talking about young college women. We're talking about rural community women, and educated women, dropouts from high school, welfare mothers, employed women. Just from every cross section that Indian woman represents in her community, you know, was there, and were making these comments of ownership.

And it was just this very, very powerful epiphany. It was very, very powerful. And it was, like, Wow, we did it. And young women get it, the importance of it and that we can be in control and we can make decisions over our bodies and we know when we're sick and we know when we're healthy and we know how to tell. And so, it was a really powerful conference, or gathering. It really wasn't a conference. It was a gathering of women, Indian women. It was very, very –

FOLLET: How many were there, would you say?

ASETOYER: Oh, boy, I'd have to look up on the roster, but I would think — I don't know. It was probably around 50 Native women, yeah — actually, probably more than that.

FOLLET: So, you have a roster?

ASETOYER: Yeah. I think we do in our records somewhere. In fact, I was going through them the other day and I saw a lot of names and addresses, lists of participants, so I think we do.

FOLLET: Fabulous, fabulous.

ASETOYER: And that started the process also of putting together a committee. [We] formed and put together the Indigenous Women's Reproductive Rights Agenda. And the committee continued to meet after and come together and it was finalized, and then again in 2001, at a roundtable that we convened, there were additional points added on to it. You know, we didn't just decide to go in and [say], Let's develop another one. We took the original one, we honored it, and then we've expanded on it. And we probably will go in again and expand, meaning, adding some new points to it every so many years, because the first one was so solid and so good, and you know, so much thought went into it. So we will no doubt convene meetings every so many years to look at it, to examine it, to see what additional points we need to add.

FOLLET: One of the issues that was added in 2000, or 2001 — oh, is it flashing?

ASETOYER: Yeah.

FOLLET: OK. Well, why don't we — let's stop then and add a new tape and go on to the other issues. Thank you. 59:38

END TAPE 4

TAPE 5

FOLLET: OK. We're back and you were talking about the reproductive health agenda and that ten years or so later, you went back and visited it and added new issues. And I know that one of those was around lesbianism and sexuality, [another was] breast feeding, and I'm trying to remember the third one. I can't remember the third one right now. But was adding the rights of lesbian women and sexual rights a controversial process?

ASETOYER: Actually, it wasn't. In traditional societies, two-spirited people have always existed, and so that wasn't really controversial. I just think that in the original document, there was nobody that was two-spirited sitting at the table. And you know, was it an oversight? Did somebody not volunteer to sit on the committee? We didn't go around and say, We've got to make sure one of these and one of those and one of them are, you know, that everybody's at the table — because we don't ask each other those things. It's up to a woman to disclose that or everybody in the community knows who's two-spirited and so forth, and so it was not really controversial. It needed to be put in there because it was not there, and so we had some two-spirited women involved and they made sure that the dialogue was appropriate.

There's been a long history of two-spirited people within our traditional societies. In fact, they have a very special and sacred place. For instance, a lot of the two-spirited people are the ones that will assist in name-givings and so forth, and certain ceremonies. It's a respected position that a person holds within the community.

FOLLET: So the effort to save and retrieve and restore the history and the traditional status of women seems to be an important part of your work. Is that a fair statement?

ASETOYER: It's very important, because how would our contemporary Indian women engage in the dialogue around abortion if they didn't have access to that traditional information, to our history, that we knew how to take care of ourselves. The impact of the churches would have the upper hand, so it's very important that we know our history. And it's been very beneficial in the dialogue around abortion, especially with other groups, other organizations that are not Indian, to know that we have these issues, and it is a big issue.

I mean, women call this organization every week wanting information on where and when and the cost of an abortion and whether or not we can help. We do keep a small fund, which we always need replenished because we do run out of money, but we do have a few dollars set aside, through donations, to assist women who are looking for the financial support for abortion. We also provide the emotional and moral support that they're looking for.

We bring out our reproductive rights agenda and they see how many women were involved, and from all the different tribes, in putting this

together. And then they realize, Wow, I'm not the only one who's thought of this, who's dealt with this, and here [are] all these women from all these different tribes who've put this document together. And so, women don't feel so alone.

Women can also get transportation. There's only one abortion provider in the state of South Dakota, we're a huge rural state geographically, and so we will provide escort service and transportation for a woman. Whether we pay for the service or not — the abortion — we still provide that, because a lot of our women don't have cars and they don't have the resources to travel that far. For us, it's almost 150 miles one way, so. But yes, we do provide those services.

FOLLET: You mention history so often and I'm really impressed with what a strong grounding in a sense of history seems to be part of this work. And I'm reminded of a statement that you made, and I think it's in the "Moving Forward" document, and I wrote it down. You say, "We're becoming our own mental health support system, because the Indian Health Service just doesn't do it: traditional thinking, community-based, run by and for the community people. The IHS needs to quit forcing us into that biomedical model of mental health and give us the resources so that we can create the spaces we need to unload five hundred years of stuff." Tell me about what's it like to carry around five hundred years of "stuff."

ASETOYER: Well, that's very heavy on your shoulders. It's always there. We have to look at what our families went through in that colonization process. We have to look at what our mothers and our fathers went through, what our grandparents went through, what our great-grandparents went through — and prior to that, before a reservation, all the wars, all the violence, and the famine and the relocation. You know, we have to look at all of those things and how that impacts our community and our lives today. 7:15

In boarding schools, there was a horrendous amount of corporal punishment that took place, as well as sexual abuse. Our mothers, our fathers, were raped, were sodomized, were violated by the priests within the Catholic Church. And prior to contact with boarding school experience, sexual abuse was unheard of on children. It was unheard of in our culture — not to say that it did not exist, but from all the questions and research that we have done and all the interviews, that on the very rare occasion when something like that would surface, it was dealt with harshly. Abandonment, you know — you were abandoned by the tribe. You were set outside the camp to survive on your own and that's it. You were disappeared. It was dealt with very harshly.

The impact and the volume of sexual assault that occurred and sexual abuse that occurred in the boarding schools, you know, the rapes and the molestations, have had a horrendous impact on our culture. And the appropriate resources have not been provided for us to deal with it appropriately by the Indian Health Service or Health and Human Services. So, what we're doing is, we're, in our communities, starting

the healing process, the dialogue, because of the impact, generation after generation, that this has had on our people. And it's very important to start that process of dialogue, to start the process of ceremony, to start the process of healing and to engage in that, because Indian Health Service, for the magnitude of the problem, is virtually doing nothing.

And that, to me, is a continuation by omission, by omitting their responsibility, of the colonization process and the genocide and the ethnocide. And so, they're very guilty of that.

FOLLET: These issues — Donna Haukaas [of Native American Women's Health and Education Resource Center staff] was telling me earlier about the Boarding School Healing Project, and how in Canada, when the process of addressing this went the legal route and people had to testify about their experiences, that the retraumatization was horrendous. And I'm wondering, how do you go about dealing with the trauma of revisiting these things? Is self-help a process that you use?

ASETOYER: No. Well, it depends on your definition of self-help. You know, there are forms that we use. We use talking circles. We use healing ceremonies, and that is a traditional forum that people can disclose, that people can start that process of healing. So, I wouldn't call it self-help. It's very different than the kinds of situations I've been in where people have called [it] self-help. In fact, you know, we think of self-help like self-exam, you know, more along those ways. And I know there are some groups that do what they call Self-Help, and that is even very different for us and very uncomfortable in a lot of settings.

But we have certain ways of coming together and everything is started out with a prayer and a sharing of medicine through the process of smudging. Then talking circle, and that's a very different process. There are ceremonies that occur, that people can have, so that that process also takes place, of healing. And it's not something that's done one time. I mean, it's ongoing. It takes a lifetime, you know, of somebody working when they have been traumatized by that, by sexual assault. It takes a long time to heal, to start that process, to move forward with it, because it is so traumatizing.

And we have to be careful that when we go into a community and talk about it, that we don't just pack up and leave, because for somebody who has been suppressing those feelings and those memories for long, to open them up, and then not provide any of the support that is necessary for that person, it's very unfair. It's just like, you know, opening up a flood gate and no control. And so, it has to be very well planned. There has to be certain support systems in place, so that the aftercare is there.

FOLLET: What are the ceremonies that are part of this process? 14:42

ASETOYER: Uh, there's a inipi ceremony. There's a lowampi ceremony. There are different kinds of ceremonies that take place to help a person move

through and process a trauma, a sickness, to start a healing. And the Native American Church, their peyote ceremonies for healing that can occur. So there are many different kinds of ceremonies that can take place for healing and for trauma. And it usually isn't one. You usually start out with a series of four and then you go on from there. So it's a very time-consuming process, and it often involves bringing family together, bringing your support system — if you're a woman, your female relatives — together, some people that are close to you, and developing that support system in the process.

But it's all about healing and it's all about traumatization, you know, that our communities have been forced to live with for generations and generations. And it's not only the sexual assaults, but it's also the famine and the poverty and the oppressive policies and having your land taken away from you. So it's one trauma after another built on top of each other, and looking at what has happened to that person or that person's family, and trying to start that process of healing and get them on the right road.

You know, the alcoholism is a horrendous problem in our communities, and people don't form chemical dependency, usually, just because it's fun to go out and get drunk. It's a form of self-anesthetizing that occurs, and people do it because they're in pain and it's usually because of trauma, reoccurring trauma that's happened. We have many levels of trauma, and so it gets very, very complicated. And it's not an easy task to start somebody on the road to sobriety, or the road to healing.

FOLLET: I know you mentioned yesterday that the self-help process as practiced by the Black Women's Health Project and other groups was not something that you're entirely comfortable with. How does your practice differ from that?

ASETOYER: Well, in that process, you might bring up a situation that's going on or, you know, it starts out with checking in and talking about, disclosing, your very personal feelings and situations and sharing it. And you've got to remember that we're there in a professional setting, and for us, it's to ask us to start that process of healing without all of the support systems that I talked about — without the ceremony, without the support, without the continued help and the continuation of the ceremony. It's like opening up that Pandora's box and just letting the floodgate open and not being able to continue with the process. It makes it artificial, it makes it kind of like a band-aid and that's very, very dangerous.

And I'm very protective of myself, to make sure that I don't allow myself to participate in a situation like that, because then I'll have to come home and, you know, start a whole process in order to be able to heal from that trauma of just sharing, and then, OK, time's up. Let's move on. Let's get back to work. We don't process like that.

For us, a ceremony — well, I'm a member of the Native American Church and we have medicine, *hooseah*. We take medicine, and that's peyote, and a ceremony will start at sundown and last all throughout the night, until sunup. So if it's wintertime, sundown comes very early and sunup comes very late, so you can be in a ceremony for 12 to 14 hours before it's over with, and there might be a meeting for four nights in a row, and that's only the beginning.

So, to go in and start a process or get involved in a process that, OK, we've allowed 60 minutes here for a check-in and for self-help — boom. Over. Let's get to work. That is not the environment or atmosphere that I want to participate in at that level that they're expecting you to participate in. So I just say, Whoop, no, no — too touchy-feely for me. Stand back. I'm outta here.

And I don't know if they really realize what it is they're doing themselves, because it is not a 60-minute or 20-minute process, if you're going to take it very seriously, and I do. So, I'm not going to go there. I would rather just not participate and just stand back. And then, you know, a lot of times you can see things continue out into the business table after a session has closed up, so you know it's not over for a person. You know they just can't do it in a short amount of time.

And when they did — I had participated in some training, it was like training but it was like hands-on, where it went on for two or three days, which was a much more comfortable setting because you knew that when you had a break and you reconvened, that there was going to be more time, and you were allowed the amount of time that it took you to process something before you moved on. So, in a meeting where you're only afforded — you know, there's 30 women in the room and they're going to do it in 60 minutes, then you get a couple of minutes and that's it and on to the next. So, you really can't get beyond superficial, and the expectation is for you to really disclose, and I can't do that.

22:05

So, I just choose not to participate, because it also violates some of the things within — there's a contradiction there within my belief system, you know, and so I choose not to participate. And that's to hurry it through, that's to not do it with all of the ceremony and formality that we do it with. You know, you can't do it without saying thank you to the creator. I mean, we sit down at mealtime and we say thank you to the creator for the day and for the food and for the water, and you pray to watch out after those who are not as fortunate as you are at the time. And it's a process, and it takes a while. And so, when you leave that out of the factor, you know, out of the element there, it's very foreign and undone.

FOLLET: So this is a daily practice for you, for example, around meals?

ASETOYER: Yes, yes, yes.

FOLLET: What are the practices and ceremonies that are most important to you?

ASETOYER: Uh, on a daily basis, to get up early and to say thank you to the creator, and for the first thing that goes into your system, be it water, you know, because that's so life-giving, and that's when you say your thank you's to Tun Kasina, to the great spirit, and you start your day that way. And that takes a lot of discipline to do that every day, to remember to do that — not to put a cup of coffee in your mouth first, or some hot chocolate or tea, you know, but water, and to take the time to say thank you for this day, because I made it through the night and I'm here for another day, and to appreciate that. That's a ceremony that we do every day.

I really enjoy our family's participation in our peyote ceremonies, because the family gets together and it starts weeks in advance before you have a meeting, because it is a very big production. There's a lot of work that goes into it. First you have to set your date. Then you have to know who you're going to invite and there's always a purpose for a meeting, and where you're going to have it. And then you have to get your helpers together. And then your menu is planned. And a teepee is set up and they have to have wood, so wood has to be found and wood has to be chopped and it has to be chopped in a certain way, because the fire is kept going all night. So there has to be enough wood. So wood has to be gathered and that's a very big time-consuming [activity], that and making sure that you have the peyote. And sometimes it has to come all the way up from south of the border, or someone will bring it in from Wisconsin or someone will bring it in from Oklahoma. A roadman has to be selected, the person that's going to run the ceremony. And if they're not local, then you have to raise the resources to bring that person in, and their family, and to lodge them, feed them, take care of them while they're there.

You know, the morning food, which is the traditional food, has to be prepared, and so if you're going to have chokecherry wasna, you have to have gathered those chokecherries during season and dried them out and stored them — or go to someone who does and ask them to make the chokecherry wasna. And then the corn wasna, and there has to be dried corn and the corn has to be prepared and ground and made into the wasna. And then meat wasna: if you're going to use dried meat, you have to make sure that your family hunted that season previously and that there was dried meat and there's a big process in drying meat and making baba, jerky. And then that's all pounded out and that's all prepared. So then, those things come into the ceremony.

A teepee is put up, and teepees are huge. So the poles have to get to the right place that the ceremony's going to be and then your helpers have to put up the teepee. And then people come. And so, all this preparation. And then, if it's a large meeting, there might be a hundred people. Maybe 50 people in the meeting, but then their family members are out there waiting until morning, and so there might be 150, 250 people that you feed the second breakfast to, because the morning food is the first breakfast and the second breakfast is when people come out of the teepee and everybody comes together for breakfast. So you've got to have your coffee and your juice. You've got to make sure there's

water. You've got to make sure that if you're going to have eggs and biscuits and sausage and fruit, that all that's prepared. You have to have all your cooks in place and so all that food has to come together at a certain time.

And then there's the noonday meal, which is a very important — before anybody is excused, there is the noonday meal. And so you've got to make sure that you've got your wild rice and you've got your soup and you've got your whatever else you're going to have, roasted buffalo meat or roasted deer, and that your fry bread is made and that whatever vegetable dishes you're going to have and your salads and so on and that's all prepared and all brought together.

And before the meeting even starts, the night before, there's a supper. So, you have to have all of that food. Usually, it's soup and fry bread and coffee and juice or cake or some kind of a sweet, and that's for all the families and the people that are going to participate in the ceremony. They're all fed.

So there's a lot of preparation, a lot of preparation. You have to make sure that the person who is going to keep that fire going all night, your fire-keeper, is in place, because it's that person's responsibility to come in and out of that teepee all night long and keep that fire stoked up. So there's got to be enough wood for that fire, and there's got to be enough peyote for that meeting, you know, and there's got to enough cedar that will be burned during the meeting for prayers.

And then, a female companion usually to the roadman comes in and prays over the morning food and then your prayers ascend on to the creator there, when she prays. That's a big responsibility.

FOLLET: You mentioned that there was always a reason for a meeting. Does an individual call a meeting?

ASETOYER: Well, a family will put up a meeting — that's the term, to put up a meeting. It might be a memorial meeting for someone who has passed on. It might be a graduation meeting: their child is going to graduate. It might be a wedding. It could be a doctoring ceremony for someone who is sick. And that determines the activity, the ceremonies that go on, the songs that are sung throughout the evening, and the way the medicine is administered. And that determines how that takes place, the reason for the meeting. Our son was named in a meeting, so we had a naming ceremony and a meeting for him — and then one meeting every year on his birthday. He has his own teepee, and that goes up every year.

It might be a funeral meeting, and that lasts for days and days. Things are done, not in a hurried way, they're done with a lot of preparation, and that way things will turn out in a good way because you took the time and the appreciation to do it, and that's very important.

FOLLET: You mentioned water as an important part of your ritual, and fire. I wonder, what other imagery is part of your belief system? I see circles here.

33:30

ASETOYER: Well, yeah, that's very true. Life is a reoccurring circle. The circle is very, very important in understanding that we come from Mother Earth and we journey in this circle of life, and we eventually return to Mother Earth. And when you have that understanding, then you realize the significance of a circle, you know, and that we live within that circle of life. And so things are done in a circle. If you ever go to a wachipi or a pow wow, you'll see that, you know, you dance in a circle. Our drums are circular. Our ceremonies are usually done in circular motions. And so, it's very, very significant to us.

But it represents that cycle of life, or that circle of life, that is where we start, that is where we end, so that it's just is a continuation. We start out as nothing, and then creation occurs and birth occurs and we take our first breath, life begins. And we make that journey. And then eventually we end up back as nothing, you know, we're put in the earth, we replenish the earth, and we become the dust that we began as. It's a recurring cycle. I guess you might say we're recycled, in a contemporary way, you know. We recycle ourselves. (laughter)

FOLLET: You mentioned talking circles as part of your process in working on women's health issues. It that the same as a roundtable? How does a roundtable work? Roundtables seem to be an important part of the Center's work, part of your method of working.

ASETOYER: Well, convening a roundtable isn't really our concept, I mean, other groups have had roundtables and everything. But that is the idea, you know, is that you have a talking circle. You convene a group of women and you talk around a table and you hash out ideas and a certain topic is what you talk about. But yeah, that's pretty much — we keep in step with that, very much so.

FOLLET: I get the feeling from reading some of your materials, that the roundtable is one of the ways in which you gather the kind of testimony and evidence that you use to then develop positions and policies.

ASETOYER: Very much so. For instance, we're in the process of one right now. We put out this report on the sexual assault policies and protocols within Indian Health Service emergency rooms. And we did a survey of emergency rooms to look at the kinds of policies and procedures that take place. And we found out a whole lot, you know, and it wasn't good.

So the next thing, after we put out that initial report on the results of our survey, is to convene a roundtable, because what happens in a roundtable is that we bring in the voices of the women from the communities and they share their realities. So that that initial report isn't

just statistics. It is the voices of the women coming into the room and expressing what's actually — what does it mean? What is this group of numbers: what does it mean? What does it mean when we say Indian Health Services does not have appropriate policies and procedures in their emergency rooms when a woman is sexually assaulted? What is the reality? So they share their stories and their realities. And we get a cross section of Native women to come in from many different tribes. And before you know it, they have confirmed that report — their voice has. So then, we look at, What is the next step?

So a group of recommendations will come out of that roundtable. And that gives us a work plan for the next few years. How are we going to resolve this problem? What are we going to do to address it? Are there policies, procedures, campaigns on education that need to be done? So this roundtable, actually, is the women coming together to say, We need to do this. This is our solution. These are our recommendations. This is how we can handle this. This is how we can work on solving some of these issues that we came here to talk about. And then, we go out and start that process.

So it's really the community coming together, and when I say community, I don't mean just our community alone, but many communities, and starting that process of healing, starting that process of resolving the issues or the problems that were identified within that report. (siren) Well, real life.

FOLLET: Is that [siren] a noontime thing or something?

ASETOYER: Well, yes it is. However, if you really want to get down to the nitty-gritty of it –

FOLLET: Tornado?

ASETOYER: Well, that is the civil defense bell, but it's constantly being tested to make sure it's in order. It rings at lunch. It rings in the morning, it rings at lunch, it rings at dinner, it rings at curfew. It rings for fires. It rings for tornados. It rings when the ambulance is called. However, they keep it in good shape and use it every day, because we live at ground zero. We're one of the 26 tribes along the Missouri River basin, and there's a series of dams, hydroelectric dams, along the Missouri. On all of the reservations that are along the Missouri, most of them, there is a dam. and these dams provide the electric power for — you know that little bunker when the vice president or the president has to go into in a state of emergency? And NATO also functions out of that bunker in Omaha: this is the power source for that bunker. So, if you were an enemy of the United States, realistically thinking, take out a dam that supplies power to that system, because NATO operates out of there. That's one of their locations. And so, you would attack a dam.

So there's constantly air surveillance and there has to be evacuation warning and so forth, in case one of the dams along the river was

attacked and the water cut loose, because it would cause a domino effect, dam after dam after dam. So the communities along the dams have to have a warning of evacuation. So we live constantly under ground-zero threat. And so those were strategically put on reservations along the Missouri River.

FOLLET: Interesting. Interesting. So near and yet so far from the center of power, right? (laughter)

43:10

ASETOYER: That's right. That's right.

FOLLET: Really kind of eerie.

ASETOYER: Well, we're always under the threat of war. I'm Comanche and I am from Anadarko, Oklahoma, and our community is constantly under siege. They call us Fort Sill Indians, the Kiowa Comanches and Apaches, because we surround Fort Sill. Well, years ago, Fort Sill was a cavalry post, but now it's the second largest artillery range in the United States for the Army. And so, my parents met at Fort Sill. A lot of Indians work on the Fort. During World War II my mother worked in the canteen, and that's how she met my father. He was a soldier.

But there's constant war games and these big guns, these artillery guns, that are constantly going off. And so all of the homes that are adjacent to the fort have big structural cracks in them and there's always the military flying over and the helicopters landing and the military vehicles all around our communities. So we live under a constant state of siege.

Back in the '80s, there was an occupation of our tribal complex. There was a split in the politics at home and one group occupied in order to keep the other group out. And I was down there during the occupation and there were those big helicopters that would fly over from Fort Sill with their surveillance cameras out and they were taking pictures of all of us, you know, and during the whole occupation. They were right there. I mean, you go out of our tribal complex and it's about maybe a half a mile. and then you go in the back gate, Geronimo Gate, of Fort Sill.

And they're constantly expanding the artillery range and they have actually taken over some of our cemeteries. And some of our cemeteries are now in the Fort, because they've expanded. And so, they have to halt those artillery, those war games, in order for our funeral processions to go through. And years ago — it wasn't all that long ago, maybe 20 years ago — they moved some of the chiefs and the graves there, and then told us after the fact, which they weren't supposed to do. So, it constantly goes on in tribal communities, the occupation and the reminder.

I mean, a certain day of the week, Indian Health Service — the workers are required to wear their uniforms, and that is the day that there are less patients going into the Indian Health Service facilities,

because they don't like the uniforms. We don't like to be reminded that we're still under that government control. And that's a reminder. It's mandatory that they wear their uniforms, and a lot of times they don't wear their uniforms. They just wear street clothes. And so, we're constantly reminded that we're under siege, that the occupation is not over.

FOLLET: Here you are, in Lake Andes, dealing with that reality of ongoing siege and occupation, taking on these huge issues that go back a long time and are very deep rooted. You're a small operation. How big an operation are you? How large is your staff?

47:24

ASETOYER: When we're fully staffed, meaning with interns as well, there's 14 of us.

FOLLET: Fourteen. And how do you function? Do you have a board that helps set policy? What's your internal working structure?

ASETOYER: OK. We have the Native American Community Board, which is a board of directors that sets policy and [has the] responsibility of monitoring our finances. They also look at program and make program recommendations for the kinds of programs that we have. Then there are department directors and coordinators. We provide direct services to the community as well as do policy work at the local, national and international levels. And actually, we say we're small but we have a larger staff than the National Women's Health Network, a larger staff than a lot of organizations. So, 14: we're probably small to medium size. And so, the Native American Community Board is the board of directors. And then we have the Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center, which is the operation headquarters for our projects, the majority of our projects. And then we have a shelter, which we call the Women's Lodge, and it is in another facility here in Lake Andes, and it is a shelter for battered women and children. The Resource Center, direct services. We have a food pantry. We have a youth program. We've always worked with youth from various ages, early childhood development on. And that started out years ago as a tutoring and skill-building program for school-aged children K through sixth grade.

And then we started doing cultural preservation and language work, and that grew and flourished into a language-immersion school, and so we have the language-immersion program that takes place when we have the funding to do that. Usually we have anywhere from 15 to 20 children that attend three days a week, and they're usually preschool up through kindergarten. The kindergarteners — in South Dakota, kindergarten is optional, so we do home-schooling through kindergarten here and language immersion. And we have a summer school language program.

Then we develop a lot of language materials. If you go onto our website, you can see there's an interactive language page there.

Throughout the years we have developed an immense amount of literature, brochures, pamphlets, videos, for the different initiatives that we've worked on, and we've developed culturally specific material. So there's been quite an accumulation over the years.

We've established a clearinghouse, and it's actually a national — really an international, because a lot of our customers are tribes here in the United States and in Canada, and they will order — say they want a brochure on HIV or STDs or fetal alcohol syndrome, they'll order them from us. So we have a clearinghouse, and the proceeds from that go back into the program.

I don't know if I mentioned the food pantry. We have a food pantry. We have referral services that take place here. We have the probation department. We have a probation officer as part of our violence against women program, which is a specialized probation officer for offenders of domestic abuse. And so, they're accountable to Vonnie Zephier, who's the probation officer that's hired to deal with the men that have domestic abuse offenses on them.

FOLLET: Did I meet Vonnie here yesterday?

ASETOYER: Yes, I think you did. She's the probation officer. So, we provide that service for the Yankton Sioux Tribal Court. And Vonnie also runs a male abuser program that is mandatory for them to attend if they go through the tribal court system. Also, state court will refer offenders to the group as well.

And then we have a Reproductive Health and Rights Project, where we do all of our policy work and our community health education work under that, whether it be something on fetal alcohol syndrome, on Depo-Provera, on HIV — we do that. And then we also are involved in environmental work. And we look at the environment issues and how they impact our reproductive health — cancers, birth defects — and so, where those crossroads occur, you know, we work on environmental issues as well. And we've produced a lot of reports and paperwork on reproductive issues here in our community. And then there's our shelters. So we do a lot of things.

We also have an archive here of a lot of material that no other place in the community or on the reservation or in the state of South Dakota has — quite an extensive collection of materials that are culturally specific, that are indigenous specific, because we also work at the international level at the UN, and have for 20 years, on indigenous peoples' issues — primarily health issues and reproductive rights issues and human rights issues. And so we have a good collection of materials from other indigenous organizations throughout the world that we have networked and collaborated with. We put out a newsletter as well, and try to keep everybody kind of up to date on what the current activities are and the issues and so forth.

We have the IWRW, which is our newest endeavor, which is the Indigenous Women's Reproductive Watch, and it's an electronic e-mail

newsletter that goes out once a week to bring action alerts to people — articles on reproductive health and rights, announcements and so forth — and so that goes out. We have over six hundred women that it goes out to right now, and that number is growing, because we keep an intern working on bringing in more e-mails and more members to the listserv.

FOLLET: Now, is that something connected with the Indigenous Women's Network, or is it separate?

56:38

ASETOYER: No, no. That's totally separate. I serve on the board for the Indigenous Women's Network and have for many, many years, and I also serve on the board of Honor the Earth, which is Winona LaDuke's Project, and it's raising money and resources for re-granting around environmental issues, cultural preservation issues, land protection, natural resource protection, and so we raise the resources to be able to re-grant in other indigenous communities.

We've done quite a bit lately around alternative energy and wind energy. We just had a meeting earlier this week, actually, before you came. I had to fly to Minneapolis to attend that meeting, looking at bringing alternative energy right into the community. I had spoken to Winona and the board about, let's look at helping the shelters, the women's shelters, in our communities and our reservations communities, to defer some of their costs, their overhead costs, because things are so expensive to run a shelter. And why don't we look at alternative energy, helping them develop alternative energy in the shelters, for instance, solar panels. And some of the shelters are rural enough where they could have a wind generator. But let's focus on trying to help women's shelters.

And so, that idea went over real good and was very supported, and I think that might be some of the direction that Honor the Earth will take, in terms of selecting some projects for alternative energy.

FOLLET: Speaking of costs, how does funding shape what you can and cannot do?

ASETOYER: Well, there's no such thing as we can't. We just do it. We are not funded for all of the things we do, but we do them. But we do receive funds. The majority of our funding comes from private foundations and individual donors and we do receive a little bit of state and federal support for the shelter and for the probation position. But the majority of our funding comes from private donations, individuals, and foundations. And of course, the money that we generate through our clearinghouse revenue — very important.

FOLLET: Is that a big piece of it?

ASETOYER: It's not a big piece of it, but it is a good size. We bring in about fifty thousand dollars a year.

FOLLET: Fifty, did you say?

ASETOYER: Yeah, about fifty thousand dollars, to recycle that money back into the organization.

FOLLET: That's huge — not to mention the fact that that's material that's going far and wide.

ASETOYER: Oh, yeah. It's our ideology that we're spreading. You know, it's our work that we've developed that goes out through that clearinghouse. And so, it's very, very important. That it's a message that is culturally appropriate.

FOLLET: I see that this is flashing. Is it? OK. We've reached the end of another hour, so we'd better turn this off before we start with anything else. 1:00:00

END TAPE 5

TAPE 6

FOLLET: Who are your closest allies as you do this work?

ASETOYER: Other Indian women, other indigenous women, yeah.

FOLLET: You mentioned Winona LaDuke and you mentioned yesterday about her new book coming out and her other work. Who else comes to mind? Who do you look to for inspiration?

ASETOYER: Oh, gee, there are so many indigenous women out there who are doing so much work in their communities that rarely get credit for it. They're trendsetters. They're real fighters for their community. There's Mililani Trask, a native Hawaiian and her sister, Haunani-Kaj— incredible activists in the native Hawaiian community, do a lot of work at the local level and a lot of international work at the UN. Winona LaDuke — I really admire the work that she's done in her community around economic development.

Eloise Cobell, who has taken on this incredible case with the government, trying to bring about accountability, and how the government has misused and misspent our money, to the tune of 176 billion dollars, you know. They thought at first it might be a couple of billion, but it looks like after this audit and everything, it's 176 billion dollars of Native people's money. Now, can you imagine what we could have done with that, in terms of the impact on our health and our education and the advancement of economic development within our communities and the control we could've had over our natural resources if the government would've been honest with taxpayers' dollars — you know, that are actually our dollars, revenue generated from our natural resources, off of our lands — if we would've received that? So, pretty incredible work that she has done.

Wilma Mankiller — incredible woman who never forgets other women, who always remembers to give credit where credit is due, who will help another woman, bring her into the forum, bring her into the circle — she's an incredible person, incredible leader.

There's Katsi Cook and her work with the Breast [Mother's] Milk Project. She's an incredible person, you know, just somebody who has done a lot of work around traditional midwifery and the importance of beginning life and taking that first breath in a traditional manner and environment, and how important that is.

There's Shelly Vendiola, up in the Northwest Territory areas, up in Washington, who works with her youth, who does conflict resolution, who has a gift for being able to bring people together and resolve issues so that people can move forward, because we have so much baggage that we carry around. She's just a really incredible peacemaker, and so I really have a lot of respect for her as well.

There's a lot of sisters who have fallen and we've lost to the struggle, like Ingrid Washinawatak, who was assassinated, or murdered,

in Columbia by FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia], and the work that she did around cultural preservation and saving indigenous languages, you know, to the point of where it cost her her life. Because you've got to look at what happens, in the case of the U'wa people in Columbia, when the oil companies come in and they bring their crews, and how that compromises a culture and all of that English or Spanish that is spoken and the impact that that has on U'wa language and how that compromises a culture. How there's a lot of money to be made when that happens. How drugs are brought into a community and prostitution occurs. It's the compromising of a culture, you know, of a tribe. So, what does it mean when you say, OK, let's help this community retain its language. Let's help them fight this invasion that's occurring, to the point of where it cost her her life. She was seen as a threat to the oil companies, and that was it. And FARC being the soldiers, or the henchmen for the industry trying to move into that area, not really a revolutionary movement as everybody thought. We have to be very clear about that.

Marcia Gomez, who was an incredible artist, and ran the Alma de Mujer Retreat Center for the Indigenous Women's Network. Her artwork — what a gift. An activist's expression of herself. And all the work that she did at the international level and the work that she did with women — and she was murdered as well. She was an incredible loss to the indigenous women's network.

There's Laurie Pourier, an Oglala woman who works with artists in the communities around the United States, to assist them in being able to move their medium into a more formalized structure so that they can make a decent living, and assist them in economic development endeavors.

I'm married to an artist. My husband's medium is beadwork, and he has some of his work in the Smithsonian and in collections in Europe and collections all over the United States, but we have very little of it, because like most indigenous artists, you make a piece and then you sell it so that you can feed your family, you know, because you need the money. You become well known and pretty soon, you can't even afford a piece of your own artwork.

And so, she [Pourier] does incredible work around being able to assist the artists with developing the business skills that they need so that they're not in that kind of situation, that struggling situation anymore. And it's really incredible work that she does. And also, bringing the indigenous peoples' art into the marketplace in the Northern Plains, so that they get fair price for what the work is really worth. And that's taken a lot of work throughout the years. She's done an incredible amount of work in the communities with her artists.

The list just goes on and on and on, and it just doesn't stop, you know.

FOLLET: Have you done any work at all with Rebecca Adamson and the First Nations Development?

ASETOYER: Yes, yes. Her work has been very important, in terms of economic development and supporting various organizations throughout the country that are trying to become sovereign and self-sufficient. In fact, First Nations gave us a grant to actually formalize our clearinghouse, and it's been very successful throughout the years. And they gave us a startup grant to really formalize it and get the systems in place that were necessary to make it a profit-making venture. So, First Nations has done a lot of really incredible work out there, in terms of economic development.

FOLLET: In terms of leadership style, how would you describe your way of functioning? You're a founding member of this –

ASETOYER: I'm the founding mother, yeah,

FOLLET: The founder, and only director, continuing director of this organization. What informs your leadership style? It that something that you think about or consciously dwell on?

ASETOYER: Well, it's a challenge, because, you know, where do you learn how to develop personnel policies when you become very institutionalized, dealing with all of the administrative component of the work? So, you go off and you get little mini-trainings here and you have a mentor there, you know, because things don't always run smoothly. I mean, we've got to be honest. I'm a very demanding person. I expect a high level of performance, and of course I'm a believer [that] you are paid for a day's work and so you perform. You do a day's work. And I'm of that old-fashioned mindset, because I came from a family of business. My father was in business for himself and we did everything. I did everything from cleaning toilets and sweeping with a broom to packing cartons to posting in the ledger. And so, there is no job that is not important.

Every job is important, because if somebody doesn't, for instance, restock the shelves with supplies, when you go to get them, they're not there. When you need them, they're not there. So then somebody has to take time out and run to the store to get something that is needed in order for you to continue working. So every position is important. If I don't follow through with a report, then we don't get refunded, and then we can't make payroll. So, there's all those administrative things that we don't like to really have to think about that we have to do in order to keep the doors open that are all so very, very important, and allow us to be able to do the incredible program work that we do, that allow us to get out in the community and provide the services that we do.

You learn along the way how to do these things and if you don't know, go find out how to do them. But, you know, it's not something that you really learn in school how to do. You just learn along the way.

So, we process things in a weekly staff meeting, where everybody brings to the table an update of what they're doing and everybody can pitch in and make suggestions and recommendations and we have program committees in our larger programs, like the shelter has a program committee and the reproductive health project has a coalition program committee. That's where ideas are formulated, enhanced, stocked, whatever — they're processed in that forum. And then we go back to our desks and we do the work.

FOLLET: Do you have an executive committee where decisions are finalized and made, or do you make the final decisions? 14:25

ASETOYER: Well, what we do is, the board really doesn't micromanage, you know. They let us do it, and a lot of times in staff meeting, we process things. But, I mean, the bottom line is that yes, I am the executive director and I do make the final decision. I mean, I've got that job. And so, yes, I do. (laughs) Let's be real about it. But it's usually through an informal process of trying things and going back to the drawing board and improving them until they get fine-tuned. And that's a very collective process. I like to think I'm usually open to a lot of recommendations. There are some things that, no, because I know that we want them a certain way and so let's try to get it that way. Let's try to fine-tune it like that.

But the majority of the time, you know, the staff know what they're doing. They're activists with lots of experience and they'll bring those ideas forward. And because I certainly don't have all the ideas necessary to do what we do, so I really rely on my coworkers, you know, to do the research and bring forth all these new ideas. I like to stay well informed on what's going out there, and the new issues and so forth, but I keep myself pretty in-tuned in the reproductive health area and so I'm out there in the national arena and so I know what's going on, and then, I know what's going on here at home. And so, we bring those things together and look at how they impact our community and what's going on, or what our community is being challenged with and how that interacts with the national arena. And it's time to bring those issues forward. And so I'm the one that does that.

But in terms of style, you know, I think we're pretty conducive to working with each other. This is not the place to work if you expect a total nine-to-five, uninvolved life. We are women that work together and sometimes work most of the time outside of the nine-to-five box. We do a lot of traveling. We are very creative and we're activists as well as paid program people. And so we may be at a demonstration or be at a gathering, you know, after hours because we're going to be there anyway. We're very much involved in activities outside of the office. In fact, we create some of the activities, demonstrations and the challenges that other people attend out in the community.

We do a lot of civil rights work and social change work and are very much involved in voter rights work — in fact, are involved in an ACLU

lawsuit on voter rights issues here in the community. So, we do quite a bit.

FOLLET: And over the years, I know you've worked at various times in coalitions with other women of color organizations — in the first, I think, formal effort to bring women of color together in '92. I think it had a long name: Women of Color Reproductive Health Coalition, or something like that. And then, for Cairo –

ASETOYER: Reproductive [Health] and Rights Coalition.

FOLLET: Reproductive [Health] and Rights Coalition — for Cairo and for Beijing. And we were talking yesterday, after we finished taping, about one of the most recent formations, SisterSong, where different women of color groups are getting together around reproductive health issues. And in that conversation that we had off-tape, you were giving me some examples in, maybe it was Cairo, I think it was pre-Cairo or in Cairo, and once again, at the recent SisterSong meeting, where it proves a challenge to present indigenous women's perspective in a way that feels fully respected.

ASETOYER: Most definitely.

FOLLET: To the point where you have decided to pull out of SisterSong.

ASETOYER: Yes, most definitely.

FOLLET: Can you explain that meeting and that decision?

ASETOYER: Well, there's a long history there, and one of the big issues for us is the use of "indigenous peoples." And a lot of women of color don't understand that whole concept of sovereignty and self-determination. We are sovereign nations. There's over five hundred sovereign nations within the United States that are referred to as Indian nations or Indian tribes, and we are all different: different languages, a lot of different cultures, values — not necessarily values, but practices — and different land base, different environmental issues and challenges that we're facing, and so forth. And we have treaties that are formal documents and agreements with the United States government. So it becomes a government-to-government relationship that we have.

And so we have a whole nother layer of issues because of that situation that we have to address. And that's the protection of our natural resources, our land, our land base. We have a land base here within the United States. And some of them are very large. Pine Ridge, it's much larger than the country of El Salvador, bigger than the state of Rhode Island. I mean, we are talking about large masses of land that is our land, that we come from and that we have to protect. So there's a lot of responsibility there.

And through the years, when we refer to ourselves — first of all, I'm a Comanche woman. OK. Then, Native American. OK. In a large setting, in order to identify ourselves, I mean, we're not going to list, you know, 40, 50, 60, five hundred tribes in a document. And when we're looking at our sisters and brothers that are to the south and to the north, you know, we have tribes that are split right down the middle because of those international borders. And so, when we start talking about the tribes that are to the north in Canada and the tribes that are in the south, you know, of the southern border, Mexico on down, we use the term indigenous, because that really reflects international — and also tribes in Australia and Asia and so forth — the indigenous people, the people that still live off the land, that still maintain their sovereign nation state, their nationhood, OK, and refer to themselves by their tribal names.

So, when we're speaking collectively, we use the term indigenous. And there has been a big issue with that among other women of color groups — their reluctancy to want to understand what that means, their reluctancy to allow us to use it. They challenge us using it. You know, you're not allowing us: this is what we are. This is who we are. This is how we self-identify. So who are you to challenge it? And it's constantly challenged.

And in preparation for Cairo, some of the African American women's organization were challenging our use of it, to the point of where, when we last got together to finalize the document, the word indigenous was in the document but when we got to Cairo, it had been inadvertently left out of the document. And so, that created a very heated, volatile situation that occurred in Cairo, behind-the-closed-door-meeting kind of environment, where tempers were very high. And we actually made the organization that was responsible for the final printing of that document send back to their office in Atlanta for the disk, which was FedEx'd to Cairo. And then the document, the original document, the way it was, was then printed there in Cairo and disseminated.

FOLLET: With the word indigenous back in?

26:08

ASETOYER: With the word indigenous back into it. I mean, you do not have a right to do that, to change how we wanted to be listed in the document. And we had agreed on that. So, you don't just arbitrarily change that and delete that because you don't think that's appropriate. Who are you to say that's not appropriate, how we self-identify and choose to call ourselves? I have never challenged any other women of color groups or organizations, how they choose to be self-identified. You know, I respect it and if I don't understand it, I try to understand it, but I've never challenged it. So why would someone do that to us? So the document did get disseminated appropriately.

FOLLET: And you were the person who faced that down, who had the face-off, right?

ASETOYER: Well, it was myself and Mililani Trask and there were other indigenous women in that room, yes. And also Trazilla Zea from South America. There were other women in there. It was quite a challenging moment in our history of working with other women of color organizations. But that same kind of sentiment keeps coming up, the issue of the use of indigenous. And we're constantly challenged as to why we want to use that word.

And at the last SisterSong meeting, the issue came up. After eight years of working with a group of women, you just get really tired of having to revisit the issue. And Donna Hawkins, one of my coworkers, was there, and she said, "You know, whether you understand it or you don't, just trust us, just trust us." And they couldn't. They still had to challenge the use of it. And most of SisterSong is relatively new and there were some older SisterSong members in there when it was challenged and the question came up about it, you know, why are we using this and why do we have to put it in our mission statement? And they were redoing their mission statement — again. No one from the original SisterSong, the older members of the group, stood up and said, Hey, we've been using it since day one, and if you look in the documents, it's there — [no one stood up] to defend it.

So, you know, we have only so much time in a day, in a week, in a month, in a year, to do the work that we do. So instead of arguing with women, I could be spending that time working at home on the issues that we have, because they are so important, not trying to create new issues over self-identity, OK, and challenging someone and always having to defend it. I don't have time for that. After eight years, and women still don't get it, don't want to get it, I'm out of there. I have to do what is most beneficial with my time, for my community. And so, we chose to formally withdraw from SisterSong, because I don't have time to keep discussing, having long discussions, having painful discussions.

One of the sisters, you know, brought up and asked the question whether we would defend women of color issues. And I thought for a minute, Well, gee, I've never been asked that question before. And so I said, "Well, there's a flip side to that. Would you, as a woman of color, defend an indigenous women's issue?" And it was, No-no-no-no-no, you didn't hear me right. You didn't hear it. And another African American woman said, "Oh, yes, Charon heard you very clearly."

And it's not that we don't see ourselves as women of color, we *are* women of color, but we are indigenous women of color. And that's what the difference is, is that we have a whole other set of issues, and they are related to land base, that we have a land base, and all the things I had identified before. And so, it gives us an additional set of issues. Of course I support women of color issues. But I also want to know, Are other women of color going to support indigenous women's issues?

And so, if you're challenging it, hey, you know, I don't have time for this. I've got to go where we're going to be most effective, because

we've got a lot of work to do. And those are the issues that I want to address, and those are the issues that I want to spend my time on, and those are the issues I'm going to spend my time on. And so, we withdrew our participation in SisterSong.

FOLLET: You mentioned that you thought Latina women might be sympathetic. Were you speaking of Luz [Alvarez Martinez] in particular?

ASETOYER: Well, a lot of Latina women who understand their tribal origin understand the whole issue of indigenous, because they may be displaced, they may have been relocated generations and generations ago, but they know that their origins are tribal, OK, and that somewhere, that there are land-based issues. Not all Latina women are of that mindset, but there's a large amount of them who do. And there are also a lot of indigenous women in Latin countries that we work with at the international level and so, there's a lot of U.S. Latina women, Chicana women, that understand that. They respect that concept of indigenous. And there are some that don't. And unfortunately, Luz Alvarez Martinez was not there at that meeting, because she fully understands, you know, she understands it. She spent a lot of time reclaiming her indigenous roots and that's been very important for her. So, she understands. And what she doesn't, she supports and finds out later, you know. She's very good about respecting other women.

FOLLET: She's one of the other women we've interviewed and I just happened to have read the transcript of her interview just before I came here, and she mentions you frequently as someone who she feels is a real sister along the way and someone who's been a real example to her.

ASETOYER: Oh, that's good, that's good to know. Thank you, thank you.

FOLLET: Yeah, she specifically talked about — I'm thinking it was a meeting of the National Women's Health Network that she came to, and I think she may have come to this work a little later than you, or to some of these gatherings — anyway, and she says, there you were, saying with just grace and fortitude what the important issues were for women of color, and without bad feelings, there was just coming to be a time when you needed to go your own way. And she was just very admiring of the way you did that. She was giving you a lot of credit and admiring the way you did that.

ASETOYER: Well, thank you. Yeah, we've had a very long relationship and a very supportive relationship of each other's work and a lot of respect. Like I said, she is a Chicana woman that understands her tribal roots and has made a personal quest to understand even more and to participate and to seek out the information from the elders and so forth. And so it was just a shame that she wasn't there to help resolve the situation. But it probably wasn't meant for her to be there, or she would've been there.

So, we have to look at the greater scheme, what Tun Kasina has in mind, what plan that is there for us, and I think it was really for us to pull out. It's not that we don't support SisterSong and the work they do. Very much — I very much support the work that's done there within that collective, or coalition, you know — very much so. And the individual organizations — certainly, Loretta Ross and the work that she does as the executive director and the work that she has done in the past and will do in the future. But it just is not a forum that we can participate in the level in which we feel we'll be effective enough. And I have to be working at a level of maximum effectiveness. I owe it to the women of the community.

And so, we left on a good word. It was time to go and let's do that before this gets to a point of where we can't work together and people say things and do things that aren't healthy, that aren't productive, because we are all working from the same side of the fence, you know, on similar issues for the advancement of women of color, for the protection of our basic human rights. And that's so important.

FOLLET: The balance between the common ground and the differences is just such a fragile one. Let me pose it to you this way. I think I mentioned yesterday that we're hoping to develop all these new materials about women of color organizing around reproductive rights and toward reproductive justice into a documentary. So, how to balance the common ground and the differences — and we're at the early stages of trying to even imagine what this would look like. I mean, no decisions have been made.

So, one way of posing the question is, do we imagine four different, or four or five, or however many different segments, where there is a segment on Latina women's organizing around reproductive rights and, say, immigration issues and issues that are especially significant to them, and a separate segment on Native women's organizing and all the issues that are so central to your work, and another segment on African American women. That's a way to do it, with the emphasis on the differences, which are so important to appreciate and understand.

Or, do we approach it as a story in which the commonalities are emphasized — and I know it's not an either/or question. But for example, a documentary that opens with footage of the 2004 March for Women's Lives, and there's a significant presence of women of color there, notably different from '86 or '92 or earlier. When you flash back and say, Where were they then and why and why not? And then, tell the story of the emergence of, and empowerment of, and organizing of women of color, to the point where there is a significant presence in '04 and women of color effectively changed the name of the march from the March of Choice to the March for Women's Lives in a way that reflects the broadening of the agenda. Those aren't the only alternatives, of course. But what's your reaction to that kind of a — how should this be represented?

ASETOYER: Well, you know, bringing together the common ground is, I think, a very positive place to start. But I think it's important to show the diversity. It's very important, because we aren't all of one. We are different, you know. Asian American women have their issues, Latinas have theirs, Native American women-indigenous women, African American, African-descent women have their issues. And they're different, but there is a common ground, and not on every issue. And I think it's important also to reflect those differences.

If you really want to respect the integrity, you know, of each race, we're not just this homogenized, put us all in a pot and mix us all up and we'll come out one color. I mean, we have different backgrounds and different historical experiences. And those need to be documented as well, because that's what makes our issues so diverse, is our historical experience and our history. So those things have to be reflected, if we're going to truly understand what some of our differences are all about.

Because a lot of times, they're not about the issue where we have a common ground, they're about some of the other areas of difference. And they're very important. You know, why we pulled away from, or out of, SisterSong: that's really important to us. But also, where we had the common ground: that, too, is important. So, you know, you have a challenge, and your work is cut out for you. But I would not be afraid to show the difference. I would not be afraid to show the diversity, because that's what makes us who we are and our issues. It's a better way to understand our issues.

FOLLET: Who would you be most comfortable having around a table where these kinds of decisions were being made, about the representation of women of color? I was going to say, you can think about this, because I'd love to be in touch about this, as this project evolves.

ASETOYER: You know, we have to remember indigenous women and women from the South Pacific, and oh, it has to be a diverse group of women, definitely. Who the individuals are? We'll talk about that. I've got women that come to mind right away and I know, later on down the road, there'll be more names that will surface that I think would be very, very important. And women that you haven't even interviewed or even probably thought of interviewing, you know, they'd bring their really good thoughts and ideas into a project like this.

FOLLET: And I'd love to be able to ask you, too, about the key moments, the key episodes without which this whole project would be invalidated — that kind of thing. You've been at the center of so many of those turning points. OK. Turning points.

Oh, I wanted to ask you — did you participate in the march, the April March for Women's Lives?

ASETOYER: No, I didn't. I didn't. Again, I withheld my participation and there were reasons for that. Resources were not really made available until the very

last minute for indigenous women to participate. So, again, I saw no point in trying to organize last-minute efforts to get women there that were not involved in the planning or that we didn't know if we'd even have any money to get there or not. I was very, very — you know, people made promises and never came through with money and resources. And so, you know, just to have a presence and visibility — no, I'm not going to do that.

Because there's a whole process that goes into organizing and getting women there, and it has to be the understanding that we should be a priority, indigenous women. This is our land. This is our country that you all live on and make your livings off of and there's got to be a certain respect for the First People from the beginning. And when that isn't there, then, you know — my heart would be there but my presence will not be there. And so, there was a lot of that feeling there, and it was really sad. I thought it was really, really sad. There were very few indigenous women that were there, and I think it's not acceptable. It's not acceptable.

And when we did inquire about money, [they told us], Well, we gave money here and we gave money there. And come to find out, that there really wasn't all that money given to get women of color there, let alone indigenous women.

FOLLET: This sounds much like the green armbands in '92.

ASETOYER: Right.

FOLLET: Would you say there has been progress, not enough, or regression? I mean, this is a very conservative time period we're living in. The obstacles are greater. The resistance to the kind of change we're trying to make is greater. Would you say in this political climate, there has been, what, treading water, progress, falling back, in terms of indigenous women's movements?

ASETOYER: Well, in terms of indigenous women movements, or movement, a lot of progress has been made. We have come a long way. We are getting more organized and more sophisticated in documentation of our realities and moving them into national arenas and we certainly have been doing it in international arenas much longer than we have been doing it in national arenas, and that's been taking place, and so that's a very good thing.

But, there's still a lot of resistance out there to — not necessarily to have us there and be visible, but to have us there and to participate and to have our voice heard. It looks good when we're there, but we also have to have input into the development of that whole process, which did not occur at this last march. And so, do I want to be arm candy? No, I don't. Do I want to make others look politically correct? No. If you're inviting us to participate and to be an equal partner in that process, we

will be there, but not just to make everybody look complete and politically correct. That's not why we're going to be there.

And that's what happened in both instances. In the first march, the one where you were asking about the green armbands — that was a show of protest, a show of resistance, that we were not invited to the round table. We were not invited to the beginning of where the process started, where the decision making was made. Who was going to participate? Who [were] going to be speakers? Which women of color? Which indigenous women?

I mean, that was not anything that we were asked, solicited for our input, or even, did they care to do that, because they know how to reach us. We live in a day with e-mail and telephone and they have our numbers and can get a hold of us for other things when they want to. But that didn't happen, and so again, I wasn't about to be there to make them look good. I was there to participate. And if you're going to respect our participation, whether you understand it or you don't, respect it. Trust us. But that wasn't there. And so, that's what that was all about.

FOLLET: You just mentioned that indigenous women have been organized internationally longer than organized nationally — how did you put that? On the international scene. So there's the international framework. There's the national level of organizing. There's the direct service that you are providing here in Lake Andes, in a shelter, in a particular reservation. Does it make sense to even ask how you divvy up your time, or where your priorities are, where your goals are? Does dividing it up –

ASETOYER: Well, if you examine the work that we've done, and look at, for instance, the documents that we've produced, those are the realities of the day-to-day experiences of our women, the realities of this community, of other indigenous communities. And they're documented. And so, we move those realities forward into the next level, into the policy development level, you know, into the national arena, into the international arena. That's the process.

We don't live in Washington, D.C., and decide that women in Lake Andes need this, you know, and develop it and have it trickle down. We're in the community, and we're documenting our realities and saying, Gees, when you look at this, we could use this and we could use that. That means policy change and implementation, you know, the development of policies. And so, we move that up.

When we're at an international forum, we have the documentation to back up what we're saying. That's already been developed. That reality's been documented and we take it there and say, Here it is. We're not saying, We need this and we need that, and they say, Show us — go back and do your surveys and your research and prove to us. We've already done that when we're there.

And we've been working at the international level much longer than we have at the national level, in terms of our interactiveness with the mainstream. We've been doing national work among other indigenous women's organizations for years. But actually moving that out into the national mainstream women's national forums and stuff, probably not as long.

You know, there were indigenous people that were at the formation of the UN, and the original charter for the UN, and so, there's always been an indigenous presence there. I spoke at the UN back in the '80s, the early '80s, pre-Nairobi, and a lot of indigenous women before [then also spoke]. We've been lugging our bags to Geneva and to New York for many, many years, with the formation of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations and through that forum, and through the World Health Organization and that forum as well, doing international work, and with tribes to the south and tribes to the north.

So, working on the national level is probably the newest arena for us in the mainstream. But we've been working nationally and internationally amongst ourselves, meaning other indigenous organizations and tribes and so forth with other women's groups and stuff, for a long, long time.

55:30

FOLLET: It's interesting, to think of it that way.

ASETOYER: I mean, I was at the original environmental summit, you know, where the Principles of Environmental Justice were developed and I was in those drafting rooms and contributed to the Principles of Environmental Justice. And that was, you know, we're looking at quite a while ago. We're looking at well over ten years ago. We're looking at having a presence there, and there was a large indigenous presence there. So, indigenous people have been there at the very important summits and gatherings.

FOLLET: When you think of the international meetings, the one you just went — Durban? Were you in –

ASETOYER: No. No, I wasn't.

FOLLET: Oh, OK. Cairo, Nairobi, Beijing — others that are important to you. Do any of them stand out as especially memorable for good or bad reasons?

ASETOYER: Austria Human Rights meeting [UN World Conference on Human Rights, Vienna, 1993]. That was a very, very important meeting — very, very important, huge indigenous participation. Rigoberta Menchu had received her Nobel Prize. The first indigenous woman, person actually, so there was a big participation. And that was very important. And it was a real catalyst for indigenous people globally.

Some of the international AIDS forums and conferences that were held, the one that was in Amsterdam — there was a large indigenous

population there, which was really good, from all over, and tribal participation, especially from Africa and South America. It was very good — and from the U.S. and from Canada. But tribal — we have to remember that — indigenous nations participating, and that's very important, very monumental.

Down in Rio de Janeiro, huge indigenous participation at the Environmental Summit — very, very historic for indigenous people. And the leadership that was shown.

Cairo was very interesting. I think there were a lot of indigenous women there, especially from India, that self-identified as indigenous women. The different indigenous nations of India were very well represented and networked with us and worked with us. It was very powerful to see them in action.

FOLLET: I remember you said yesterday that you teamed up with women from India and threatened to protest the –

ASETOYER: We did protest, we did, the U.S. and its official position there at Cairo. And the bottlenecking that the mainstream women's organizations from the U.S. and the Holy See and how they were duking it out and preventing a lot of other issues from being heard. That was totally, totally unnecessary and should not have happened. It was not acceptable.

FOLLET: Do you mean that the U.S. government and the Holy See were duking it out with each other or they were in collaboration?

ASETOYER: They were in collaboration, very much so, in collaboration. And the mainstream women's organizations from the U.S. were keeping the dialogue on abortion when there were so many other issues that were so important that should have been addressed. And that whole dialogue kept all these issues from being addressed. It was not a good situation at all, especially for indigenous peoples globally.

FOLLET: And your take is that mainstream feminist organizations were in league with –

ASETOYER: No, they weren't in league with them. They were challenging the Holy See, but keeping that conference bottlenecked with that one issue. There's a lot more issues than abortion. When you're looking at population issues globally, abortion is not the only issue. That's what I meant: broaden the agenda, look beyond that one mainstream issue.

FOLLET: So the mainstream organizations were challenging the Catholic Church and challenging the U.S. administration?

ASETOYER: Oh, definitely, definitely, in their position. But that was bottlenecking the dialogue.

FOLLET: By letting abortion –

ASETOYER: Be the only issue. And that was just unacceptable.

FOLLET: Any exceptions to that from the mainstream that stand out, in Cairo, in your mind?

ASETOYER: From the mainstream? No. No. Not really.

FOLLET: And you define the mainstream as — can you identify who would –

ASETOYER: You know, white women's organizations, right.

FOLLET: OK. We've done it again. We've wrapped up another tape. 1:02:40

END TAPE 6

TAPE 7

FOLLET: OK. We attempt to wrap up. There was one thing left from yesterday that I wanted to be sure I got, and that's just clarifications of your name along the line, because if someone goes to do research on you — as a child, you were Charon Huber.

ASETOYER: Correct.

FOLLET: H-U-B-E-R. OK.

ASETOYER: That's my father's name, Huber.

FOLLET: And then, when you married, did you take another name?

ASETOYER: Charon Duncan.

FOLLET: D-U-N-C-A-N?

ASETOYER: Yes.

FOLLET: OK. And that would've been your name from what year to what year?

ASETOYER: Gee. We lived together for about three years before we got married. I don't remember what year we got married in. But we were divorced around '76.

FOLLET: OK. And at that point, did you take the name Asetoyer?

ASETOYER: Yes. At that point, I decided to use my mother's name, because we're the direct descendants of the male descendant of Asetoyer, my grandfather being Kalara, or Theodore Asetoyer, and my mother being Virginia Asetoyer, and I'm Charon Virginia. So, I said, "Hey, mom, I'm going to use our family name." And she said, "Fine." So I'm Charon Virginia Asetoyer.

FOLLET: OK. And then you remarried again. You didn't remarry again, you remarried. (laughs)

ASETOYER: I remarried, correct.

FOLLET: And you married –

ASETOYER: Clarence Rockboy. Clarence Homer Rockboy. And it's not unlikely for indigenous women to keep their names and so, I'm legally Charon Virginia Asetoyer Rockboy, but I rarely use Rockboy. And most people know me as Charon Asetoyer.

FOLLET: OK, good. OK. And you have two sons?

ASETOYER: Yes.

FOLLET: Tell me about each of them, briefly.

ASETOYER: Well, there's Reynold James, we call him Reno. He came to our family when he was about 15 years old, one of my husband's extended family, one of his nephews. Actually, it wasn't his extended family, it was one of his nephews. He was orphaned and he had no place to go, so we took him in and we raised him. Then Clarence and I have a biological son, and that's Chaske Joseph Rockboy. And he's 23 now.

FOLLET: I just had the pleasure of meeting him.

ASETOYER: Yeah, yeah. And if you'd been here a few days earlier, you would have met Reno and his family. He's 38 now, and so, he was in town and brought his little girl and his wife. He has a six-year-old. So, I'm a grandma.

FOLLET: Now, is he in Connecticut? I have a Connecticut connection in my head.

ASETOYER: No, no, no.

FOLLET: Chicago.

ASETOYER: Yeah, Chicago. He lives in Chicago, right.

FOLLET: And he is the drummer? Is that true?

ASETOYER: No, no. He is actually an artist. He does bead work. Growing up around my husband, who is also an artist and his medium was beadwork, so he does that. The singer is Chaske, the younger boy, the one that you met yesterday, and that's where he was off to, getting ready for a pow wow. He sings on the big drum. So, he has a big pow wow this weekend so he was off and running for that.

FOLLET: Good. I'm glad he's feeling better.

ASETOYER: And he is also the son that traveled with me most throughout the years, attending conferences and gatherings and meetings. And so, a lot of the women out there know him and have met him. Haven't seen him for a while, but did when he was little, and used to accompany me. He's actually the one who's preparing the archives here from the organization, packing them up and identifying them and sending them out to Smith College. He can identify a lot of the meetings because he was at the international meetings with me, and in fact, considers Loretta Ross as one of his sheros, you know, because she used to chase the Klan

and keep tabs on the Klan and all that, in her earlier days. And so, my son just thinks, Whoa, she's just it, and has always had a lot of admiration and respect for her. And Ms. Foundation women know him. The Center for Constitutional Rights know him.

Luz Alvarez Martinez and I, with Chaske, traveled from Vienna, Austria, after the human rights conference. We rented a car and drove through Europe and flew out of Paris, and so we all shared a room together. So he knows her as Auntie Luz.

In fact, at the AIDS Conference in Amsterdam, it was very interesting, Dr. Jonathan Mann was still alive at the time and he was the head of the World Health Organization's international program on AIDS, and the conference was very expensive — registration fee, like, five hundred U.S. dollars, and I never bothered to buy my son a ticket, I mean, register him and pay a fee because he was my little child with me. And the women from Africa came and — that's a lot of money for a registration fee, five hundred U.S. dollars, and they had their children with them.

And so, we'd get in and security would run after us and [say], Let us see your child's badge, and this and that. He doesn't have one. So, we learned how to sneak him in. But then, a few hours later, security would always catch up with us and so forth and so, they caught up to us one morning and my son says, "Who's the boss of this conference?" And so, security said, "Dr. Jonathan Mann." Well, I had done some work for Jonathan years ago at the World Health Organization in Geneva, and so I knew him and so forth. But my son says, "Well, I want to talk to the boss." So, I told security, "Yeah, you'd better let him do that."

And by then, there was a crowd that was starting to form around us and watching all of this and so, he says, "You're not going to throw me out. I want to talk to the boss." So, security got on their walkie-talkie and Dr. Mann happened to be in the office at the conference center at the time and so, he said, "Well, send them over." So, we go into the office and here comes Dr. Mann and he recognized me. "Well, hello, Charon. How are you?" I said, "I'm fine. How are you, Dr. Mann?" He said, "Pretty good. What can I do for you?" I said, "Dr. Mann, this is my son, Chaske Rockboy. Chaske, this is Dr. Mann." And he extended his hand and shook it and he said, "Are you the boss of this place?" And Dr. Mann said, "Well, yes I am."

So, Chaske says, "Are you aware that the conference police are chasing us around, all the mothers with children, and they want five hundred dollars registration fee for us? And do you know all the women from Africa, all the mothers have their children, and they can't afford five hundred dollars? My mom can't afford five hundred dollars. So they're not supposed to come in to the conference or what?" And Dr. Mann said, "Well, I'm not aware of that." And he said, "Thank you very much, Chaske, for bringing this to my attention."

And so then, he got on the walkie-talkie and he informed security to stop harassing the mothers with their children and to let them in free. So, Chaske became an activist and an advocate for children when he

was a child. So we came out — and so then he shook his hand and he thanked him very much and I thanked Dr. Mann. And so we left the office and when we got out there, there was this big crowd by then and the media was there and there was this group from Italy that apparently does a lot of — they're clowns and they take children with HIV and so on and try to make their lives very happy and so forth, and bring some cheer into their lives. And they were there, and they wanted to interview Chaske and he was the hero of the hour there and so forth. But you know, I was very, very proud of him, very proud.

FOLLET: How old was he at the time?

ASETOYER: Oh, gee, I want to say 11, ten, maybe?

FOLLET: It reminds me of the school cafeteria.

ASETOYER: Yeah, it sure did. (laughter)

FOLLET: It's in his blood.

ASETOYER: But by then, he understood enough about economics and knowing how unfair this was and how far — he even mentioned how far — "Do you know how far women from Africa have traveled?" It just made me realize how much he takes in, because I would never have thought that he would've been thinking, you know, how expensive it is for African women, how far they traveled to get there. It was just amazing. It was amazing. And that he was thinking of the children. You know, let us in for nothing.

FOLLET: That's so wonderful. And it was a positive result, he had that good experience.

ASETOYER: Yes, yes, yes. I'm very proud of him.

FOLLET: I'm sure that stayed with him.

ASETOYER: Oh, definitely, definitely. And, if you ever interview Suki Ports or Marie Saint Cyr, you'll have to ask them about the train ride in Amsterdam, because somehow we got stranded and we were the last train out and we had to talk our — Marie was negotiating with the train driver to please take us into the barn, because that'll take us into the city where we could catch a taxi, because we were out where we couldn't catch a taxi.

And so, the train driver — and they have these high-speed trains there in Europe — we were sitting up, right up in the car where he was at, you know, and the door was open, and so Chaske went back there, into the actual little cabin where the train driver sits. And pretty soon, Suki comes out here and says — because I was out visiting with the other women — and says, "You really must come and see your son."

"What's he doing? Is he bothering the conductor?" So I went back there and my son was sitting in the driver's seat and had the throttle in his hand and the driver was saying, "Faster, Chaske, faster." And he said, "Faster?" My son really likes to drive fast in a car, you know, he was always saying, Mom, dad, faster, faster. So, the guy was saying, "Faster." And he was putting his foot down on the throttle and then this hand throttle and [the conductor's saying], "Faster. You can take it faster than this." I mean, the train was probably going 60 miles an hour at that point.

I was just in a state of shock. I turned around and I went out into the car and I said, "You ladies must come and check this out. Your lives are in the hands of a ten-year-old." And so they got up and, Ahh, he's driving. So, faster and faster, and Chaske was just really having a good time. He brought it on in.

When it was all over — because we were the only ones on the whole train, you know, so when it was all over, all I could do was [say], "Thank you for making my child's experience over in your country a memorable one. I can't even begin to thank you." I said, "Do you have a wife? Do you have a family?" He said, "Yes." So, I took my earrings off, you know, I had these sterling silver earrings, and I said, "Here. This is a gift for your family, for your wife."

Oh, I was so excited for him. Can you imagine being able to drive a train at that age? And being told to go faster, go faster? Oh, that's a little boy's dream. So, he's had some wonderful experiences along the line. The women that I trucked around with have, too.

FOLLET: That's great. I could tell yesterday when he was showing me some of the boxes and the files that he's putting together and the care that he's taking, it was clearly a trip down memory lane for him, too, to go through this stuff. It's great.

ASETOYER: Yeah, yeah. We will get to the box that has all the pictures of the Amsterdam conference and I'm sure he will remember the train ride and his wonderful experience.

15:30

FOLLET: It's great that you've saved all this stuff and I hear in so much of this, these last few hours that we've been talking together, how important the history is to you — how important, how essential, recouping the history of your people is to the health of your people today. That's what you're doing here, building that history into the work that you're doing.

ASETOYER: You know, it's really hard to cut loose of all these documents, these original documents, but the more — through this whole process, you know, the bottom line is that they really don't belong to me. They belong to the people, and so, they should be someplace where the people can access them.

FOLLET: Well, it's a thrill to know that they will be, and I hope you will come sometime to the actual place [Sophia Smith Collection].

ASETOYER: Oh, try and keep us away. We're all looking forward to when they're finished and we're going to get ourselves there somehow and we're going to check them out. Oh, we're just so excited. It's such an honor, yeah, because other indigenous women will be able to access our history. It'll be preserved, and that's so, so important. Because you know, if you look back in the history of even your own archives, I'm sure there's a void there and that's the representation of indigenous women. So, this is really very, very, very important. It's very important and I do appreciate this great honor that Smith College has bestowed on us. So, thank you.

FOLLET: Well, thank you. I mean, there is a void. There is no doubt about it, and we've been fortunate enough now to try to do something about filling that void. And you are the go-to person.

ASETOYER: Well, thank you.

FOLLET: So, it's really very gratifying to be able to do this.

What's next? As you look ahead for the next year or two, what are the priorities? What are the issues that you will be targeting that really highlight indigenous women's health and reproductive needs?

ASETOYER: Getting Indian Health Service to adopt a standardized set of policies and protocols for sexual assault victims for their emergency rooms. Native women are raped and sexually assaulted 3.5 times higher than any other race in the United States. That, to me, says priority issue. Yet the agency that is responsible for providing our health service has not even made that a priority by having a standardized set of policies and procedures for when a woman is brought into the emergency room. And that's not acceptable.

What it means is that sometimes a woman will come into an emergency room and there's nobody trained to collect the forensic evidence, to do a rape kit. That service is contracted out and she may have to be transported or drive herself 50, 75, a hundred miles to a facility that has those services. And so, it means that there is a lack of evidence collected, because a lot of times a woman will not do that. They will go home, they'll take a shower, they'll start the process of healing, of dealing with what just happened.

And so, it means that no forensic evidence is collected, so that there is no possible conviction that can occur. There is a predator that is out in the community to strike again. It means that no emergency contraceptive was offered. It means that later on down the line, if a pregnancy occurred, that under the constraints of the Hyde Amendment, because it was not reported to law enforcement, because there was no forensic exam done, that she wouldn't be eligible for an abortion. It

means that she [would] not get the medication administered to her or even offered to her that would reduce her risk of contracting HIV, you know, or another sexually transmitted disease that could've occurred, so no treatment.

So there are so many issues that are connected, and that are so important for a woman's health and reproductive health, that occur when she has been sexually assaulted, and these services need to be accessible. They need to be up to par. They need to be standardized, so that every woman that is brought in, or child that is brought into an emergency room within the Indian Health Service structure or system, receives the standard of care that will protect her and serve her needs — a standard of care that a white woman would get in Beverly Hills or San Francisco or any other community. And not be victimized, or not treated as though it's a minimal occurrence, because that challenges who we are, and certainly is not, right now, a priority among Indian Health Service.

So we're moving that whole issue forward through a coalition of women, not only mainstream organizations. On our program committee is the ACLU, the National Abortion Federation, Center for Reproductive Rights, but also a large number of indigenous organizations that are involved, like the American Indian Law Alliance. And we're moving forward through the National Congress of American Indians, which virtually every tribe in the United States, just about, is represented in and active in the National Congress of American Indians. So we're mobilizing, you know, all the tribes to move forward and to get this implemented within the Indian Health Service as a priority, because it's not acceptable any other way. So that's what we're currently working on right now, yeah, in terms of our reproductive health and rights.

24:20

FOLLET: What's the greatest obstacle?

ASETOYER: Well, Indian Health Service, for one, and their prioritizing this issue, but the resources, of course, to be able to do this. But we're doing it and we're getting help. But this is where the intersection around reproductive health, reproductive justice, OK, and violence against women come together, and they're not two issues. They unionize here and they become one issue, just like reproductive health and environmental issues. There are those crossroads, and this is that crossroad.

You know, with this rightwing power structure that exists right now, there are so many bills and laws that are coming down the tube that are so anti-woman, and they really started out as being antiabortion, anti-choice, but they're really, if you really look at and analyze all of these bills, they're anti-woman. They're taking all kinds of different degrees and levels of our rights away — not just looking at abortion. And so, we really need to look at this and look at where our work intersects to be able to strengthen and mobilize more power into trying to get things

done. And so, that's a very, very important aspect of our work, is trying to mobilize the forces to be able to get the necessary services and to look at the reproductive justice issues and violence against women and the reproductive health and rights and bring them together. It's a good example. And hopefully other groups will follow suit, and see that it can be done, because we definitely have to look at the impact that these rightwing forces are challenging us with.

You know, we're going backwards in terms of women's rights, with all the rightwing forces that are out there. It's a very dangerous, very serious time for women. We really need to support each other and work together on these issues, and engage our male counterparts as well, when we can.

FOLLET: What about what's next for you? You're — 1951, let me do the math. I'm trying to –

ASETOYER: Fifty-four.

FOLLET: You're young, you've been leading the Center now since its inception. What do you expect or hope to be doing five or ten years from now?

ASETOYER: Well, five years from now, I'd like to continue working. Ten years from now, I'd like to be still working. But the process of mentoring a new leadership for the Center is definitely weighing heavy on my mind, and so that's something that I'm looking for and am wanting to do, to find a few young women that understand the importance of this work, and that are young enough to understand the importance of the work, and to mentor to take my place, because an organization is as strong as its leader, or leadership, and that leader motivates them into the direction, or leads them into the direction that the agency work goes, or organization where it goes. And I want to make sure that there is someone here who will continue with this work and not go a different direction, so far different that it no longer does the work that we do. But I want to work for a long time. I'm not ready to retire. I'm not ready to give it up yet.

FOLLET: Good. Good.

ASETOYER: You know, it's real interesting — not too long ago, I received this award, the Women's E-News Award, and I brought my oldest sister, who is 69, and still working full time. And Gloria Steinem was there, and afterwards we finally made it through the crowd and saw each other and were able to talk for a little while. So, I introduced the two of them. And you know, they're the same age and they're both working and I was looking at this exchange here and I was thinking, Wow, we're really out in the workforce a lot longer than we used to be. And they do two very different kinds of work.

But, you know, seeing this, it really excited me and was invigorating. And I really enjoyed this dialogue that they were having. It was short, but, you know, asking each other, what do you do and whatever, and they're both still professional people. So, I think that really women need to focus on doing what we like to do best, in terms of occupation, and that it doesn't end at 62 or 65, you know, that women are fully engaged in their occupations and their love of their work, into their seventies nowadays.

FOLLET: Absolutely. In fact, Gloria has a wonderful comment on that, because she turned 70 last year, and she says that people interview her about turning 70 and they say, either, When are you going to retire? or What are you going to do when you retire? And she said, "Retire? What do you mean by retire? What would I retire from, life?"

ASETOYER: Exactly, exactly.

FOLLET: It's such a great way of looking at it. I love it.

ASETOYER: And my sister says, afterward, she says, "I can't believe she's 70. She looks so young. Look how she dresses. She's so young." I said, "When was the last time you looked in the mirror? You know, some people want to know if you're my younger sister when they see us together. You really need to pay attention here, you and your size-10 self. You look very young yourself, and she's probably saying the same thing: 'Well, doggone it, Charon has a really youthful-looking older sister. I wonder how she does it.'" So, I mean, we don't have to be in the frumpy old-maid category. Women just aren't — we don't do that to ourselves anymore.

FOLLET: I love seeing vibrant older women. It just gives me such juice for carrying on, keepin' on keepin' on.

ASETOYER: Yeah, and that's so exciting. It's just so exciting. Retire? I don't know what I would do, because this is what I — this is my life. It's my life's work. And it's the reality of my life as well, because I lived and raised my family in the community, and so, these realities are my realities. So, as long as I am able to communicate, I will be communicating our realities to whomever will listen.

FOLLET: You clearly love what you do, and it shows. 33:25

ASETOYER: Thank you.

FOLLET: Well, speaking of down the road a few years, somebody will be watching this interview long after we're gone, long after we've had our vibrant elder years. As you think of, say, a young woman, who knows,

20, 30, however many years from now, watching this, what would you like to say to her?

ASETOYER: Always think of the future and the impact that what you do will have on the future generations. Never forget your history and where you came from and who you are. Always remember that. And always challenge the status quo. To rock the boat as hard as you can. To incite change, and to do it from your heart and from your gut feeling, because that's usually the right feeling. There's so many things. Don't take no for an answer. And always remember that we are the vessel that life passes through, and that is a very big responsibility, no matter what you do in life. If you are a mother, you pass life through you and there is no greater responsibility than that. So embrace it and enjoy it. And to take on the responsibility that comes with it. And you'll be fine. You'll be able to sleep at night.

FOLLET: Amen.

ASETOYER: Thank you.

FOLLET: Unless there's something else you would like to be sure to say, that hasn't –

ASETOYER: Well, oh, there's a lot of things, but, you know.

FOLLET: Go ahead.

ASETOYER: Oh, I don't know. I mean, I really don't. I'm talked out. But I could keep talking for another day, you know, go back and recap on some of the things that I could've elaborated on more. But I think we probably stopped at a good place.

FOLLET: Nothing in particular gnawing at you that you want to say?

ASETOYER: No. Not that I will say.

FOLLET: That's intriguing. (laughter)

ASETOYER: I'm sure it is. Oh, actually, though, I'm really glad that you all decided to archive us. You know, we are the largest, probably have the largest collection of Native women and indigenous women's reproductive health and rights information and it's so important that it's somewhere to be protected for the future generations. It's really important. And so, it's really an honor that you all selected this project. It was very smart of you, too, because there is such a void of women, and indigenous women especially, in history, in terms of documenting our history. So, you'll have quite a bit, at least a good 20-year chunk of our history. So that's really, really important. I'm glad somebody's finally doing it. And I

hope that it doesn't stop here, you know, that there is a commitment by Smith College to continue the archiving of indigenous women and include that, because the contributions that we have made is horrendous and it really hasn't been showcased and preserved in the way that it could have been. So, it's a very exciting turning point, I think, in our history — not in the history of the organization but for indigenous women.

So, I hope the materials that you all get, you're excited about them when you see them and it motivates you to continue on, because they're wonderful women out there. Gail Small and the work that she's done with Native Action and fighting the multinationals, doing the environmental work, and just so many, many wonderful women that have done incredible work out there.

FOLLET: Well, I'm honored to be in a position to be able to do it and I feel like you, that as long as we're able, we'll keep at it, because there's a long history of neglect to redress in a few years. And with only a few collections we will scratch the surface, but we're doing what we can with the time we have and the resources we will have, even with the short time that we've been able to work on it, we're making headway.

And yours is such a huge — not just a drop in the bucket — it's a huge splash, because of the work you've done and the amount of documentation that you've done, community-wide. The ripple effect of this Center is phenomenal. So it's a wonderful way to begin to fill that void and reverse the trends and bring the indigenous perspective into all the other reproductive rights collections that we have and make sure that it isn't shunted to the side.

Fortunately, we have staff that are steeped in — they really know the collections, they know women's history, and they know when a scholar walks in the door and is asking about women's health or reproductive rights, they will know to make sure that the full menu of collections there are at their disposal. So that's — I mean, our goal is yes, to save it and to preserve it and make sure it doesn't disintegrate or get lost, but the reason for doing that isn't just to put in under glass, it's to make sure that it is redistributed out to scholars and to the general public.

So that's the goal, because we share the same passion you have about the importance of the history. It isn't just part of the past. It's part of the present and if it doesn't inform the future, then we're adding to the problem rather than solving it.

ASETOYER: Right, right. Well, that's very inspiring, exciting project and I really would like to get back there and see, not only ours all completed, but some of the other organizations and individuals that you've archived. I didn't realize, until after I saw the video that you all had put out, that the history there that you have archived and how important it is and so on and so, after seeing it, then that's when I said, "OK, we'll give up some of the original stuff." Because, yeah, you know, [if] my grandchildren want to see it, well, they'll just have to go back there.

42:24

FOLLET: It will be there to be seen — there are tradeoffs, for sure, but you can be sure that it will be there — by your grandchildren and everyone else's grandchildren, too. So, the multiplier effect.

ASETOYER: Right. So, I'm excited, yeah. It's a great honor. (pause in tape)

Well, what I was saying is that it's just this whole process, and everything has made me — and seeing the video on the Collection, it's been enlightening for me. It's made me realize the importance of, you know, taking care of all these papers. I mean, it's like, you know, our history. I mean, who would pay attention to somebody's handwritten notes, somebody's doodles? I mean, what does that tell? And then you start to realize, Well, it tells you the thoughts at that moment of that person and it's a piece of the puzzle, and just all this time and resources in documenting and preserving everything.

And then I said, "Why do they want to do this?" And then when I saw the video, I saw pieces of the Collection, you know, that went back years and years, and it's like, Oh wow, they have her handwritten notes and photographs and stuff. And it put me kind of in the place of a researcher, you know: what a treasure to have those things. But I really didn't think that much of it prior to this. And how important it is, that they be cataloged and accessible and all of that. Who would want my notes, my thoughts at the time if I was in a meeting or putting something together? What's so significant about that?

But then, I had to look back at, you know, 20 years from now, or look forward 20 years from now, and say, Well, it might help somebody figure out why we're doing what we do, or how we got to this juncture. So, yeah, it is important. But I just didn't realize it until now.

And all these women back there working on, you know, each piece of paper and putting it in acid-free environment and logging it in, and how tedious and time-consuming this is. What's up with that? Because we also come from a culture that passes our history on orally. So, you know, why save the paper? But you know, it's really come together for me. So, it's an amazing process. So, another piece of advice for young women down the road: save everything. Document. Write. Keep journals. I look back now and I wish I would've kept journals while I was traveling — just for my own personal use, you know, to push those little memory buttons. But I will in the future. But that's a real important message to get over to women, is to keep a journal and to keep those notes and those papers and everything, because they are a significant contribution to this process of preserving our histories.

FOLLET: The fact that your culture is one that conveys its knowledge and history orally, I've wondered about that and how the documentary of — the little video, the SSC [Sophia Smith Collection] video — starts with this statement from the founder of the archive: "No documents, no history." Well, documents, yes, but what about cultures that transmit information orally? How –

ASETOYER: Oh, through song. You know, my son is a singer and if you listen to those songs, and translate them from whatever Indian language it is, oh, there's an immense amount of history in our songs. Indigenous people record our, or pass on our histories orally. And storytelling is a very important aspect. But our dances and our songs encapsulate the current event at the time, and it's passed on. And so, that's how we've done it. And they're very accurate. So, this medium of documentation on paper and computer and photographs is relatively new for us. Pictographs and winter counts, you know, is how indigenous peoples did that. And so, this is a contemporary way of doing it. But, yeah, we've done it other ways and like I said, song and dance is very important way of documenting our history and passing it down orally.

FOLLET: But we need to be mindful of that. If we want to preserve the culture and the lived experience in its totality then we can't depend on the paper trail. As important as it is, it's not the whole story.

ASETOYER: Exactly, exactly.

50:24

FOLLET: Work to do. OK. Thanks, Charon.

ASETOYER: Sure.

END TAPE 7