

PUNK ROCK, HOME BIRTH, AND INDIAN CORN
Full interview transcript

Guest: Shelley Buffalo
Interviewer: Joshua Doležal

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SB: We decided after the fact to make a little video for our Facebook page from one of the Saturday night pow-wow meals. Yeah, I had to do voiceover, and then some video interview. It was fun.

JD: Well, this is for me. It's out of my comfort zone because I'm a writer, and I like to sit in a room and talk to the wall. It's sort of a solitary kind of thing. I don't really talk to the wall; it's just a joke we have among writers. To be speaking – I've never been in theater, so I don't naturally have a flair for inflection, or whatever. Oral history is just being yourself. I know forms are obnoxious, but there's a list of bullet points there, mainly we're wanting to use this for the podcast. If there's anything you don't want to talk about, we could add that to the form. If at any point it's getting uncomfortable or something, just let me know, and we can change the topic. Brian and I might write a book with some of these stories later, but we'd probably have to come back around and ask more questions and things.

JD: I told you about the homecoming theme for this season, and because Brian and I are not native Midwesterners, it's been a good way for us to just listen. Brian and I both came with preconceptions about Iowa or the Midwest as kind of empty – the national prejudice against flat spaces.

SB: Yeah, just think about *M*A*S*H* and *Radar*. All these wholesome pop culture characters from Des Moines, Iowa. There's kind of this pressure to hold up that wholesomeness or live up to it. Going to Iowa State University in Ames, over and over again when I told people where I was from – rural Iowa – it became a cliché. They were like, “Oh, really? I thought you were from New York. Like, Manhattan.” Because I didn't fit the stereotype, and I don't know what to make of that. I like the theme of homecoming because for me, it's been several times that I've gone away and come back again. But it's been specifically to the settlement.

JD: Is it fair to say that you're back to stay?

SB: No. I think that when we talked on the phone and you described some of my restlessness, I was just like, “Yeah, yeah, I have a fair amount of that.” If we have time, I'll have you follow me up to where I live. It's up on a hill, back in the woods, overlooking the Iowa River. The train tracks go by there, so you've got the noisy train rattling by. It's a little remote, especially when I was growing up. We didn't have any neighbors close by on our side of the road so we had that whole hill to ourselves. Now I've got a neighbor that's downhill, but we have trees and stuff separating us. I remember living in Ames, and when Smashing Pumpkins' song, “Bullet with Butterfly Wings” was the name of the song, one of the lines was about feeling like a rat in a

cage. I was like yeah, that's how I feel like in Ames. I just feel very caged in. It's not comfortable. When I graduated from high school, I just wanted to get out of my situation. It wasn't the best situation when I was that age.

JD: Did you grow up where you live now?

SB: I think it was in 1979 when my mom and stepdad built that house. Prior to that, we rented a lot of farmhouses in Tama county. The tribe didn't have the housing program that we have now. There really wasn't housing available. Not much. It was Tama county, but it was rural. We never rented houses in town. It was always from a farmer.

JD: You're back to a childhood place?

SB: Yeah. It seems like I was 12 or 13 when we moved up there. I kinda wanna say 14 because it seems like the year I first got a real job besides delivering papers.

JD: You'd mentioned at Iowa State, people would ask you where you're from, and you'd say rural Iowa.

SB: Yeah. Tama.

JD: That's what you would say? Is that what you would say now, too?

SB: No. I say Meskwaki Settlement. I used to say Tama, Iowa, because people from Iowa hadn't ever heard of Meskwaki Settlement. They didn't know there was a tribe here in Iowa. There weren't that many people that knew that we were here. We were a little bit forgotten about, and in some ways that benefitted the tribe. I think that we are able to hold onto the culture a little bit more. We had a BIA office, but it's a settlement, not a reservation. We're such a small tribe. There aren't any major natural resources like oil or coal or copper or God knows what else to extract. The land base is pretty small. Right now, it's 8,000. It's grown. 8,000 acres – around there, I think. It was always just a small land base. Nothing that really interested anybody to exploit. We weren't messed with a whole lot. It worked. Until the casino.

JD: And the casino is a way of supporting the tribal community?

SB: Yeah. Well, the Tama County, Marshall, Poweshiek County community – it's the largest employer in the area. In the early 2000s, it shut down for a while because of some political upheaval in the tribe. All the area businesses really felt it. It never went up to the levels that it was before. When it started out, it was pretty much the only casino in the state. Now everybody – not everybody, but there's a lot of casinos now, all over the place. It's brought a lot of revenue in.

JD: If we go back a little farther to your earliest memories. You always think of Tama County as where you're from. What was your childhood like in Tama County?

SB: My earliest memories are of a farmhouse up by Garwin, which is only about 6 or 7 miles north of the Meskwaki Settlement. It's a tiny, tiny, rural town. It was bucolic. Those early years were, for us kids, kind of ideal. We rented a big farmhouse that was on the – our lane was the graveled end of a road that turned into a dirt road, basically. We had a long lane, too, so we had a big run of the place. It was really nice. Our landlord was nice. His son was the same age as my brothers. He was friends with my parents. Of course, I was really young, but to me it just felt like everybody got along. At that time, my parents were still married. The school I went to in Garwin – my brothers and I were the only native kids there, and in Garwin I never encountered any racism. I really didn't have a concept of it at all. I was in second grade the year my parents divorced, and then I did third grade up in Cedar Falls because my mom went back to school at UNI. Once again, I really didn't encounter any serious racism there. The most annoying thing was kids coming up to me and telling me their great-great grandma was part Cherokee. Even at a young age, I knew that was crock.

JD: A forced kind of kinship.

SB: Yeah. When you hear it over and over again, looking at this white kid, you know it's just "Why do they keep making this stuff up?" This fairy tale ancestry. That's a whole other thing. I've actually read about the history of that and how that came about. It was a way of claiming ownership of land. If you said you had some native ancestry, then you were of the land. These people coming from Europe, they came from places like in Germany with the idea that either you're of the land or you're an *ausländer*. They came with that need to identify as being of the land. People started claiming they had some native ancestry in order to feel that legitimacy. Back to the childhood thing. We didn't even live in Cedar Falls for a year. We came back to Tama County and lived on the edge of Toledo. Rented a crappy little cold farmhouse. Hot in the summer, very cold in the winter. Actually, we started renting a series of crappy old farmhouses. During the coldest months, my brothers and I almost always had to camp out in the living room, because the upstairs rooms were just too cold. That was really common back then, though. It still is, and there are still farmhouses like that, that are lacking that insulation. Most of them have been updated.

JD: You have some extended family on the settlement?

SB: Yeah, almost all of us are related, one way or another. We're one big, happy family. Going back, my mother's not from this community. It's my father who's Meskwaki. My stepfather is also Meskwaki. My dad's family – it's a big family. In fact, there's so many kids that somebody when ask, "Do you know so-and-so Buffalo?" and I have to think for a second. Especially since I've lived off and on the settlement, and some of these kids, they're being raised in Des Moines, or in South Dakota. Not everybody is raised around here. It's a pretty big extended family.

JD: I know you've mentioned in an interview that your father was part of the boarding school era? Is that something he told you about when you were growing up?

SB: No. I had no idea he ever went to boarding school. It came up at my nephew's birthday party, years ago, when my dad was still alive. One of his cousins, who is grandmother to my nephew, she brought it up, because they were the same age and were in boarding school together. She started talking about language, and she said, "I never passed on the language to my kids because I thought they're probably better off with the one language. I didn't want to confuse them." And then she said, "Now, we're being encouraged to teach our kids the language. When I was raising my kids, it seemed like it was the opposite." And that's when she said, "Do you remember, George, and we were in boarding school, and they used to beat us for speaking our language?" My dad just nodded. That was pretty much it. She had to change the subject because he wasn't gonna talk about it.

JD: How old were you then?

SB: My oldest son, Tom, was probably only about 2 years old, so maybe I was 34 or 35.

JD: And that was the first you'd heard?

SB: Yeah.

JD: But you've spoken about inherited trauma. That must have been invisible, but present as part of your childhood?

SB: Oh, absolutely. There was so much that my dad never talked about, that his siblings never talked about, that his parents never talked about. People just didn't talk about it. They just kind of pushed it down and tried to improve their lives the best they could in a colonized world. Which meant getting college degrees, professional jobs. That was expected. It was there. A good percentage of my family – on both sides, even though my mom isn't native – but on both sides there's a lot of alcoholism. There's definitely a lot of trauma that's never been dealt with.

JD: Were you taught about your Meskwaki heritage as a child or was that something you explored more purposefully later?

SB: I was, and I wasn't. What I was taught was limited. What I learned was more from exposure, just from being around. It was more these sensibilities rather than anything. My first language was English. My dad spoke some Meskwaki around us, but it was just a few common words. Commands, some animal names, some place names. I was probably about 37 years old before I learned the proper way to say grandmother. I had always said "gupu," which is pretty much a baby word. It's what little teeny kids call their grandmothers, instead of numukis. I still get that confused, whether you're saying "my grandmother" or "your grandmother." That's still gonna take a lot of practice to get that down, because you go that many years – that's almost four

decades. That's kinda crazy. Especially for the fact that I grew up around the settlement. We were always in the area. If we didn't live directly on the settlement, we spent a great deal of our time here with my grandmother, my dad's mother, weekend after weekend, or she with us. Before she got a hud house, she had this little shack of a cabin, and she could only live there during warm months. The roof leaked, and there was no indoor plumbing. The smell of kerosene lamps still brings me back to then. When my mom and stepdad got together, then it was his mother. We were always at his mother's place. The main difference between the two cultures was a certain sensibility. It's a way of being rather than these direct, tangible, culture things like language, and like food sovereignty – growing our cultural foods and the way we process it and cook it. All of that stuff. That's really tangible. What I inherited was intangible. It wasn't until years later that I could even articulate how much of a culture shock it was for me to go from living on the Meskwaki settlement to living in Ames, Iowa and going to school there. I just thought there was something wrong with me.

JD: Has there never been names for that difference? Or have you not been directly instructed in those cultural differences?

SB: Yeah. The one thing about growing up in Indian country is that sense of personal autonomy. That's one thing that I've noticed is changing quickly out here, too. Even Meskwaki community – it can't help but be changed and influenced by the colonizers and that culture. Growing up, it was a lot of personal autonomy. It's such an intangible thing. That's another that's changed too. A lot of the materialism, classism. When I went from third grade in Cedar Falls, and then I came to Tama schools in fourth grade, that's when I first encountered very clear, very destructive racism. I did, in continuum, through high school graduation and moving onto ISU, which was even more of a classism, racism – one of the things at Iowa State, people didn't believe I was from rural Iowa, but when I told them my ancestry and about the community where I came from, then often the response was, "Oh, you're so exotic." It was kind of icky to hear that. When I first started school there at Iowa State, I was 17. I really didn't have a way to put all that stuff into context or articulate it. Now, anybody in our society who's informed at all knows the exotification of groups of people is objectification. It's sexualizing or making a sexual object from certain ethnicities.

JD: Were there other examples you remember from high school that would be memories of racism?

SB: It's institutionalized. It's an ongoing thing. Fourth grade – that's an example of something that's really disturbing. My fourth-grade teacher wouldn't allow me to go use the bathroom. I'd have to raise my hand and ask to use the bathroom, and she'd just flatly refuse. She said, "No, you don't have to use the bathroom. You're just using it as an excuse to go sneak around and get in people's lockers." That was just one example of how she treated me, and I'd never experienced that before. I didn't know what to make of it. I ended up hospitalized with impacted bowels. I remember that. I remember having to have a barium enema and all of the x-rays and the doctors asking me a lot of questions. I remember the pain that I was in and having to go to

the emergency room. It turned out, it was because my teacher wasn't letting me go use the bathroom.

JD: How awful.

SB: It's laughable now, because it's so ridiculous. At the time, it was crazy. The doctors up there at the Marshalltown Hospital – the pediatricians – were very angry. I don't know if they called the school themselves, but the school got into a bit of trouble to whatever extent they could, because I was a native child, so it's not like they were doing that to a white child from an upper-middle class family that could get lawyers and sue them. And that wouldn't happen to that child, anyway. People like that only take their own baggage out on those that are powerless.

JD: One positive memory, as I understand it, is that you were an artist and a writer, or you got interested in art and writing as a child. How did that start? Who introduced you?

SB: Nobody really introduced me. Growing up in a household with two older brothers, and living in the country, I just had to entertain myself. My mom was always busy. My dad was away working. I had many, many hours to myself. I'm a natural introvert anyway, so I made things or drew things or wrote little poems. I created my own world and entertainment. I always wanted a doll house, so I made one out of cardboard. I used Elmer glue to create a wax floor look. It was just always there.

JD: What did you love to read most?

SB: *Tales from the River Bank*, or a book kind of along those lines that had Badger and Frog and Toad, and all those characters.

JD: *Wind and the Willows*?

SB: Yeah, I think it was *Wind and the Willows*. I read a lot of my parents' books. My dad was really into Tolkien, so *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings*. My mom, since she was a college student since the divorce – she went to college part time, so it took her several years to get her degree, but she had a lot of literature she was coming home with. I remember reading Kurt Vonnegut when I was 11 or 12. Half of it I couldn't get, but I enjoyed it anyway. Of course, I went through the whole *Little House on the Prairie* series, the *Black Stallion* series; anything to do with horses, I was obsessed with. I liked a lot of comic strips. Charlie Brown and Snoopy. Oh, that's the same, sorry. For some reason I think they're separate.

JD: "Peanuts." So, when did you discover punk rock? Was that in high school?

SB: Kind of. One of the girls I was in track with, she went to Florida for vacation over the summer, and she came back with a cassette tape with The Violent Femmes. Also, the Clash was on the radio, so "Rock the Casbah" and other songs. I loved New Wave, and I loved rock. I

remember when Bon Scott died, because my brothers were big fans of ACDC. It was my middle brother Jim who told me Bon Scott, the singer, had died. Something like he choked on his own vomit. I don't know if that's how he really died, but that's what my brother told me, so that really stuck in my imagination. If you go from a lot of that rock music of Led Zeppelin, ACDC, Alice Cooper – I think I first got a taste of punk rock from the Rolling Stones. I was cleaning out my dad's house. It was during one of his binge periods. Right when Iowa enacted their bottle return law where all of those cans had a 5-cent return on them. I cleaned out his entire house of beer cans. I had huge garbage bags of cans, and I went to the Casey's there, because he lived in town, to get my money. I had rinsed out – I didn't have to; I didn't know that – all of those beer cans. They were clean. Bagged them up and counted them, and I went to Casey's, and the lady was like, "We only take one bag at a time." I was like, "What?" "How much in each bag?" "I don't know, I just know the total." "Well you'll have to take those back and count them and bring them one at a time." So, Dad had a really good stereo and I remember turning that on as I was recounting these cans, because of the snotty white woman at Casey's in Toledo. The Stones came on, "Satisfaction" was the song, and it was just like, yeah, you know. If you're gonna trace back punk rock, it had to be that moment. I felt it, oh man. That's when music really started to articulate my experience of being poor and growing up in such a racist community. Rock and roll gave me an outlet for that. It was a continuum. Like I said, the Clash was on the radio. They were hitting the charts. Some of those other bands were hitting the charts. Billy Idol. That was my introduction to it.

JD: When did you think of punk rock as a family?

SB: Probably my second year at Iowa State. I was going on 19 years old, and I found a pair of combat boots at the army surplus store and shaved my hair. I just started turning towards complete rebellion. Of course, in a college town, you have college radio, and you get a whole lot of stuff there that you don't on the popular radio stations. It was stuff that gave me an outlet. Then I'd have to say that the few punk rock kids in town, we just started finding each other. We started identifying with each other. Not just that – there were some inner-city kids, too. They saw me, and they said, "Okay, we can relate to her. We can't relate to any of this other stuff that's going on here. We can't relate to the Greek system, any of that stuff, but we can relate to her. We can relate to that chick. She's cool." You just find each other.

JD: That was at ISU where you felt like in the foreign environment, you found something familiar?

SB: Like so many kids of that age, you have to. You find a new family. My Iowa State family wasn't just punk rock. It was gays and lesbians. It was international students. It was kids that I suppose describe themselves as hippies. I even went to a Grateful Dead show in Alpine Valley, Wisconsin with some friends that were total pot-smoking dead heads. I was the only one there with a shaved head and combat boots, but it was still a fun experience. It was worth the trip and my car breaking down. Sleeping on the grass. It was worth it.

JD: Why'd you pick Iowa State?

SB: I had initially, to please my father, going back to the fact that my dad's family was all about joining the middle class and beating the white man at his own game, I was trying to please my dad by picking architecture. That first year and a half at Iowa State (in the architecture program, that's the weeding out process), I really learned at that point in time, I was not a good fit. Form follows function. Growing up at the settlement where we have this beautiful applique and beadwork and so many artists and how it's almost like – yeah, form follows function, and you think of a pair of beaded moccasins, but they're constructed in such a way they're functional, but they're beautiful. When I started studying architecture and these buildings, I didn't see very much beauty in them. I guess I saw a lot of ego. It just rubbed me the wrong way. I also wasn't prepared for college. When I graduate from South Tama, and I think it's still this way to this day, it was rated the lowest academically in the state. I was not prepared. It would have taken me a couple years to even get into the architecture program, taking a bad track and taking some math and sciences over again and getting caught up. I was in college prep classes at South Tama, and I really excelled in the math and sciences, got to Iowa State, and I pretty much hit a wall. I felt like I missed about 3 grades compared to my roommates. One of my roommates went to Dowling.

JD: Was there a class like calculus during your first semester that was kind of that wall that you hit?

SB: Yeah, I think it was my second semester. It wasn't calculus. It was a math class. The TA was an international student, so I couldn't understand him. I wasn't doing too bad; I was keeping my head above water, but I needed some help. When I went and asked him for help, he just kind of smirked at me and told me I'd figure it out. So, that was a dead end. And unlike Kirkwood, which was thirty years later, they have a whole student resource center that was accessible to anybody. In fact, I referred a couple different classmates to the resource center and the tutoring there. Completely free. Very different environment. Iowa State – those first two years is about weeding you out. Either you sink or swim.

JD: How did you imagine your life as an architect when you were trying to do that?

SB: I've always been a maker. I probably would have been happier as a general contractor than an architect because an architect sits at a desk all the time, and I like making stuff. I think I had this idea of making really beautiful homes. Like a Frank Lloyd Wright. He was one of the architects who I think, to some extent, had it right as far as how he approached design. He was at that moment in time that the whole arts and crafts movement in architecture and design was happening. It's a pretty amazing time for that.

JD: Was there an escape for you? Did you think of architecture as an escape from anything?

SB: Going to college was an escape. Even though I struggled and even though I didn't really start figuring out how to do college until my last year there, I knew that was my ticket. That was

my escape. I had to stick it out. I had to get that degree. It was essential that I do that. If I didn't, I was gonna go under.

JD: When we talked earlier, I know you mentioned something about the ticket into the middle class, and you felt like there was still a pathway for that in the nineties. Was architecture sort of that ticket for you?

SB: Going into it as a senior in high school, I certainly thought that was a possibility. Once I got to Iowa State, I quickly realized that wasn't. For one thing, I saw the vast differences between the haves and the have nots. For instance, the roommate whose parents could afford private school, as well as just all of these kids that came in prepared for college. They had enough to eat, healthy diets. They had vehicles that worked. Some of them, their dad bought a whole apartment for them. They were well-provided for. They were fed, clothed, well-provided for; they were prepared for college academically. They also had that involvement from their parents through, helping to guide them through the whole system. The Greek system, that in itself, a lot of those kids are legacies. Their parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, older brothers and sisters were members of that particular fraternity or sorority and there's that whole support system. I quickly learned it's not so much about your ability as much as it is about your father's station in life and how many resources and connections he has. I became – “faded and jaded” is a real popular saying of the nineties – and there's a Stones song, and there's an Alice in Chains song that has those lines, so there's that continuum, but that was very much jaded. It's all very blasé. This is just an illusion of upward mobility. It's gonna be a tough road, and it's more about luck, if you're gonna make it or not, coming from my background.

JD: And you switched to study art? Did you get a degree in art then?

SB: I got a degree, a BFA in Fine Art with a minor in English.

JD: Did that different course work give you any relief from that jaded feeling? Or did it just reinforce that feeling for you?

SB: Actually, a lot of my art classes reinforced it. I didn't have money for a lot of projects. It was the English classes that gave me an outlet and gave me hope. The literature classes and the creative writing classes. They didn't even need a computer. Half the time I didn't even need a typewriter. I just needed a pen and paper, and to be able to read and write. Period. I think it was the year before the year I graduated – it took me from the fall of '85 to the spring of '92 to get my college degree – I think it was either the '90-'91 school year, something like that. I remember one of my friends – he was a grad student – bought me paint. It was like \$50 worth of paint. I told him, “I don't know when I'm gonna be able to pay you back.” He said, “Well, these are one of these loans. I'm only loaning you this because I'm able to.” I can't remember how he put it. Something like, “I'm able to afford, so you never pay me back. It's like if you can, you can. If you can't, forget about it. I just want you to paint.” Which is pretty amazing. I was just like, “Wow, thank you.”

JD: And I know that after Iowa State, you came back to the settlement for a while, and I think you told me you spent 10 years coming and going.

SB: Yeah. I graduated, and first I went to Lincoln, Nebraska. One of my really close friends just wanted to me follow her out there. But Lincoln, I realized, was another icky college town, even ickier than Iowa State. So, I did a detour to visit my dad for like a month. He was up in Aberdeen, South Dakota. My dad kind of was like, “Well, you could come up here and get a job.” Aberdeen, South Dakota – that’s another one. To me, that was just kind of really on the edge of civilization. I came back to the settlement, and I got a job working at the trading post, which is now the travel plaza. That’s our new convenience store and gas station, but it was the trading post. Then from the trading post, I got a job at the casino as a surveillance officer. One of the reasons they recruited me to do that – that was spring of ’93; that’s when it was expanded to have full gaming. They went out and they started recruiting people to work there, and I got recruited to do surveillance. The major reason is because I had a college degree, so they felt like I was capable of handling that responsibility. So, I did that for a number of months.

JD: Can I just ask what that work was like?

SB: I worked graveyard shift in a darkened room full of CC television monitors throughout the casino. I was trained on all the games. Trained on the cheats and what to look for. It was sitting at the table of different controls where you switch through these cameras, and you have a report, like a log, that you have to fill out. Even though it was a lot of sitting, I lost a lot of weight because I drank coffee all night, and the trading post sold a lot of truck driver pills, like ephedrine, to stay up all night and do that. Wasn’t my cup of tea, but it was job. But I got sick of it, because my supervisor was sexual harassing my coworker and I, and falling asleep all the time. My boss also was really creepy. It was good pay, but at that time, it just wasn’t worth it. When your boss is asking you what kind of underwear you wear, it’s like no, nuh uh. That’s before the time I knew my rights as far as sexual harassment or anything like that. It just wasn’t worth it. On top of it, crystal meth was just everywhere. I was only 25 years old. I still wanted to go out and have fun, but it seemed like everywhere I went, there was meth. It just started to feel like everybody and their cousin and their dog that was my age in Marshall and Tama County was doing methamphetamine. I went back to Ames, and I got a job with the house painter I worked with before. I gave myself three years, because I really didn’t like Ames that much. It’s funny, but it was an escape. I was like, “3 years in Ames, and you’ve got to go someplace else.” Those 3 years were to figure it out. But I enjoyed working with my house painting boss and the other people we worked with. I made decent money, and then I actually learned a trade that’s something I’ve always fallen back on. It’s been really handy. Especially when you get laid off or sick of a low paying job.

JD: Later, you would run your own contracting business in Iowa City for house painting?

SB: Yeah. From Ames, I escaped to Madison, Wisconsin. Madison was the first place I really felt comfortable in my skin because I just didn't stick out. Also, in Wisconsin there are a lot of tribes up there, so it's not an exotic thing to be native. It's just kind of commonplace, which was nice.

JD: I was curious about what was so different about Madison and Ames. I think of Wisconsin-Madison as another majority-white college town.

SB: It is a majority-white college town, but at that time, in the mid-nineties, it's one with a completely different vibe. Very, very different vibe than Ames. Way more creative spaces. Now, it's very gentrified. I don't think a whole lot of artists and musicians can afford to live there. The tech industry has taken over. Like Seattle, the grunge scene in Seattle – where there used to be affordable creative spaces, whether it's practice spaces for bands, kind of forgotten-about neighborhoods where you can get an apartment with some roommates and work in restaurants and whatever. Drink a lot of beer, I don't know. I didn't do that in Madison. My boss in Ames just encouraged me to have house paint, so that's what I started doing. I was doing some murals here and there, as well as selling some paintings, doing some commission pieces. I was doing a little bit of this and that. I've taken time off from it, but over the years, I've gone back to it when I needed to.

JD: Was it in Madison that you started getting more into the foodie scene? You worked at a co-op in Madison, is that right?

SB: I worked at Woolly Street Co-Op. Madison has always been a foodie town. But I think foodie stuff, that started in Ames. I had a good friend of mine that worked at the co-op there in Ames. When I'd go to visit her, I really loved the food she cooked. I started getting introduced to whole foods that way. I grew up on whole foods. The idea of whole foods as an alternative to what was taken over the American diet, which was a lot of highly processed stuff. Also, one of my good friends in Ames whose dad was a physician – that friend really introduced me to the idea of nutrition. Even my roommate my freshman year, she was a vegetarian, so she kind of got me thinking about the choices in what you eat. The foodie thing was a progression. Along the way, there were definitely people who made an impression on me. I'm glad I took it to heart and really thought about food and where it's coming from, because I know when my family had to depend on USDA commodities – government cheese and all of that canned stuff, powdered eggs – blegh. Powdered milk. We looked forward to getting our commodities each month, but at the same time, all of us were very aware that this food was inferior. That this wasn't really highly nutritious stuff. But it was food.

JD: What was maybe a vivid or important memory from the co-op in Madison for you?

SB: Some of it is a little negative. I was put on an early shift. I had to be there so doggone early. That was hard. My supervisor was a little rough around the edges. I guess I felt underappreciated. It's not a highly skill-based job. I worked in the grocery department. I'd come

from being a house painter, where it's a skill. It's a trade, and you make pretty good money at it. Not everything was really positive. I didn't work there a whole heck of a long time because of that. But on the positive, learning more about nutrition, learning more about people and their different nutritional needs. I learned about Celiac disease working there. The richness was in the people I worked with. One of my good friends worked in the deli. She showed me what roasted peppers are, and how you roast a pepper and how that changes the flavor. I think having that deli really opened up learning about quinoa for the first time, back in the nineties before it really took over as one of the superfoods. I don't know. Especially since I lived in that neighborhood, it made whole foods and healthy eating really easy, like super easy. Even when I didn't feel like cooking, I could get something from grab-n-go or from the deli. I had friends comment about "Oh, you always eat so healthy," and I didn't think I did that much, but I was like, "It just makes it easy."

JD: Did you have a community outside the co-op with those people you worked with?

SB: Oh, yeah. One of my favorite hangouts was Okay's Corral, which isn't there anymore. It burned down. But that was a punk bar. I just had a blast there, weekend after weekend after weekend, seeing bands. Some of the bands' names I'm not gonna repeat on this podcast. It was later, like Nirvana had played there, but I lived in Madison later after Nirvana had already hit the big time. But that's an example of the type of bands that came through there before they were really big. A heck of a lot of bands, punk and metal, rock. One band had a pretty fun schtick. They wanted to hire me as a go-go girl, and I'd be in a fur bikini with a gorilla mask. That wasn't the first time I had an offer like that from a band because I was good dancer. But also, I had, especially in Ames, I was approached. Girls who were exotic dancers tried to recruit me because "Oh, you're a good dancer. You've got a nice figure. You could make a lot of money." And they knew I was very poor, very struggling. I just instinctively knew that's a type of self-exploitation I wasn't comfortable with.

JD: And the band was after something similar.

SB: Yeah. Where on the surface, it sounded like it'd be cool to kind of be the girl with the band, but I just resisted it. I guess I had good instincts when it came to that. When I talk about having those offers, people are kind of like, "Really? That's kind of crazy." But I never took them up on that offer. I was always instinctually fighting objectification and exploitation. I just knew that I was one of those girls that was very vulnerable to that type of stuff. So, I fought it tooth and nail. That was part of shaving my head. It wasn't so much identifying with punk rock as it was taking away one of the most feminine attributes which is this beautiful long hair. Shaving my head and embracing more of this androgynous tough look as a way to put off a lot of people, hopefully. That was my goal.

JD: A protective shield.

SB: It was my protection, yeah. For sure. I felt powerful. I felt like a warrior. Every time I got out my clippers and cut all the hair off, it was cathartic. Like the snake being able to shed its skin. A kind of rebirth every time. A real rejection of my poor hair. I always had such pretty hair. It drove my mom and dad crazy. They always loved my long hair. I was just like, "Sorry. It's just some stuff I'm going through. I'm not gonna explain it to ya."

JD: What a great story.

JD: So, you were telling me about Madison and the food co-op. Was that around the time your son Thomas was born? Or where were you when you started a family?

SB: I met Tom's dad in Madison, but that was during a transition time where I was starting to spend more time back here. I did a project at the casino. I painted an area – at that time it was a new slot machine area called Nickel Alley – so I painted a fun alley scene. My mom at that time owned a little house in Le Gran which is very close to the settlement, so I stayed there. By that time, my parents had – it was '96, the same time I moved up to Madison, when the tribal housing program built them a house. I think that was '96. Around there. The old house I live in currently was vacant. It was full of junk, but it was vacant. It's next door to my mom and stepdad's tribally built house. Right around '99, I started coming back and working on that house. Having always lived out in the country, I just missed that. And I had some ideas of how I wanted to structure my life. Madison was getting a little expensive. I wanted to be able to still have some city time. I had some connections in Chicago, too, where I was laying the groundwork to be able to do some projects there – decorative painting, things like that. I had this vision in my head, that moving into the settlement in the old house would be my base, and that way, I'd get my woodsy country time in. My breaks. And then I'd share a little apartment, share the rent with somebody in Madison so I could keep one foot there. Kind of be a little traveler that way. But it was during that time, I guess early in the year 2000 that I became pregnant with Tom, my oldest son. When I had him, I had just turned 33 years old. I was ready to settle down. I was really into it. I didn't go back to work for a while. I was living in that old house here on the settlement, my parents' old house that I had fixed up.

JD: Is that where Tom was born?

SB: He was born in Marshalltown, but I was living there when he was born. I was receiving income from the tribe, per capita income. At that time, it was enough that I could pay my bills every month, and I wasn't dealing with rent or a mortgage. Basically, just living expenses and staying home with my baby. I was really happy to do that. When I went back to work, it was part time. I was still doing the house painting, so I'd pick up a project here and there. But most of the time, just being a mom – I just really threw myself into it. It just gave me a lot of relief to be able to just really focus on my child. Then 6 years later, I had Ryder. I had him at home in that settlement house, and I kind of started all over again. I did have some part time work, but for the most part was a stay at home mom, just stayed and had that time with my baby.

JD: How were those two birth experiences? I'd imagine they were really different. One was at a hospital; one was at home.

SB: The reason I had Ryder at home was because I had Tom in the hospital. I couldn't figure out why the OB kept talking about inducing labor with Tom, other than the OB kept making the case for Tom being a big baby. They wanna avoid the baby being 9 pounds or over because that can cause some issues. Honestly, I just didn't know why he was pressuring an induction. When I did go into labor, my mom kind of freaked out. She thought I was gonna have the baby at home, living in the country. It turned out it was just pre-labor. But the OB that was on call at the time said, "Well, you're already started. We could just keep that going along, but with induction." I was naive, and I just said, "Okay!" So, 12 hours later when that induction didn't take, they pretty much said, "Well, because of the induction procedure, now you're at higher risk for different types of infections. The best route to go right now is C-section." By that time, I was just exhausted after 12 hours. I was on monitors, so I couldn't even move around. I couldn't move through the pain or anything. I was just exhausted. They didn't let me eat or drink. I only got ice cubes. I just kind of felt defeated. It caused separation anxiety because I didn't get to hold my baby. I really didn't even get to see him after the C-section. I had to go to the recovery room. I was out of it. It was pretty horrible. It's a very violent procedure. Nate, Tom's dad, was in the room the whole time, and he went on to become a nurse, so he actually did his rounds, and he really loved doing the natal – I don't know what you call that – when you do certain areas of training.

JD: Pediatrics.

SB: Pediatrics. But it was when he did the maternity stuff that he told me a little bit more about those procedures and how violent they are.

JD: It's major abdominal surgery.

SB: It is. A lot of time, the OBs, they're not really seeing a person. It's a thing on the table. Against my wishes, they gave Tom a bottle, formula. I wanted to make sure the first thing in his belly was that first milk that comes in. There was so much out of my control in that climate. When I checked out of the hospital with my baby, the nurses – who were great – said something like, "Well, I hope you know it was a good experience." And I said, "Oh, yeah, the nursing staff was excellent. You really took care of me. But as far as the doctors are concerned, they just made me feel like a stupid cow." That shocked them to hear me say that, but I was just being honest. When I was pregnant with Ryder and going through, especially since by that time, I was 39 years old – the western medicine labeled me as advanced maternal age, high-risk pregnancy, all this other stuff, even though I was very healthy. When I started talking to the OB about having my baby, just really simple things, there was a lot of pushback. It was, "No, that's kinda silly. No, it depends on how things go." Blah blah blah. And I'm sure it was all very practical, but I just started getting that feeling again. I was on Medicaid at the time, too, so I think that colored things, as far as the way you're treated and bedside attitude. And I'm a woman of color, so I

think – I shouldn't say, "I think" – my experience is that there is assumption that we're all ignorant, uneducated, rough trade. A lot of these assumptions that we're all a bunch of drug addicts. I don't know. You just get this feeling that it's not just that you're poor. You're a person of color. There's a certain level of dehumanization that goes on.

JD: Did you have a Meskwaki doula?

SB: There aren't any. That was outlawed a couple generations ago. The Meskwaki women who were midwives were all threatened with imprisonment, and starting with about my dad's generation (my dad was born in 1936, so this was the 30s), all the women were threatened with imprisonment and the women were forced to go into town to have their babies in the hospital. There were still some babies that were born out here by moms that just refused. A lot of times it's like they didn't have the assistance of midwife. They just had them at home. On their own.

JD: On their own. Did you have help, though?

SB: Yeah, I did. I had my friend's wife, her helping me is and still is illegal in Iowa. But thank goodness I had her and a woman who's a midwife in training. I learned so much about pregnancy, about childbirth, about everything, from her. I was like, "Does the medical community know this?" She said, "it's a lot of this knowledge, but they just feel it's useless. They know medical intervention. That's what they know. They don't pay attention to pelvic types." That was one of the major things. Depending on the shape of your pelvis – there's like four or five different pelvic types – the shape of my pelvis is the platypelloid pelvic type. That dictates how long your labor is, because it dictates how your baby's head moves through the pelvis. You're gonna expect a longer labor. It's just gonna take time. But once you reach transition, then delivery was really fast, like forty-five minutes and he was out. But she already knew this. She knew exactly what was going on and what to expect. There wasn't anything alarming. But because of that long labor, she said, "Had you gone to the hospital, they would have never allowed you." That was key right there. "Allow." That's what really bothered me. This is my body. This is my baby. These doctors would not allow me to have a natural birth. That's what happened the first time, even though there were no major problems going on, I never got the chance.

JD: This is completely a side note, but my wife is really passionate about this issue. We had natural childbirths in the hospital both times, but we were incredibly aggressive about these things and avoiding interventions. She's felt the need to almost become an activist about this because of so many stories, like the one you just described. It's an issue of consent, and there's sort of a cascade once you induce labor that predetermines the cesarean outcome. It's a violation.

SB: And more money is made on a C-section, a lot more money, than a natural birth. So, that right there – it is about an industry, but it's also about attitudes about women, ultimately. That thing, that's one of those key words. Allow. They would have never allowed me to labor that long. Ryder was born in perfect health. He almost had a 10 on all of his scoring when she did all

the tests on him. Maybe his feet were a little blue or something like that, so he didn't get a perfect 10 on all of his scores. What is it, Apgar?

JD: Yeah. Apgar.

SB: Apgar scores. Yeah. He was just perfect. We did have to go to the hospital to get me stitches because I did tear, and my midwife was just a little too exhausted to tackle that stitching. It was an interesting trip to the hospital because the OB had to ask me a million questions and then tried to make me feel like I did something dangerous, but I was just like, yeah, whatever. Been there, done that. You're not gonna bully me. It's not gonna happen. I'm too informed now. Too empowered. I'm too empowered by having my child on the living room floor. And it wasn't by accident. It's not because I'm some dumb, poor, rural woman of color who doesn't know any better, who didn't know she was pregnant. This was all very intentional. This was an act of taking my body back, my birth back, and my baby back. I never had the type of separation anxiety with Ryder that I did with Tom. With Tom, I just did for years. Him going to the Army and going to bootcamp, it was time to get over that. Time to let him grow up and let him go.

JD: Well, I wonder if we could talk about Iowa City and then your journey back to the settlement. Somewhere in there, you went to Standing Rock. I think it was when you were in Iowa City. So, how did you get to Iowa City from Madison.

SB: From Madison, I came back to the settlement. That was about '99-2008. It's kind of interesting. In 2008, I went back to school at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids to finish – I had already started that in Madison. When Tom was little, I tried moving back to Madison and started going to school there for graphic communications. I was doing really well, but Tom wasn't. He was right around 3 or 4, and it was really hard on him, going back and forth between Iowa and Wisconsin, between the two parents. By that time, Nate was living in Marshalltown. He was going to nursing school there and working at the vets' home. He wasn't gonna move back to Madison anytime soon. I guess after the fact, I realized it was hard on all of us, including Nate. Nate's always been engaged in Tom's life. I wanted to support that the best I could. We broke up when Tom was about 18 months old, but both of us really committed to being partners in parenting before that was even a thing. We didn't want our son to hear either of us say anything negative about the other parent. We wanted to stay friends. It was just all about Tom. But in 2008, to a certain extent, it was another dad thing. I thought, I've had my second son, I'm not gonna have any more kids, it's time for me have a career. Ryder can go into childcare and stuff, he was a toddler by then.

JD: By dad thing, you mean your dad.

SB: My dad, yeah. A lot of it was trying to please dad, even though he never directly put that pressure on me. It was time for me to get serious. I was 40 years old by then and actually developing a professional career. My dad was a professional for most of my life. He died in

2008, but I didn't actually know until he died that he actually had a master's degree in social work. I didn't know that.

JD: What was his work?

SB: He worked for Indian Hills service in Aberdeen, South Dakota. Before then, he worked for the BIA. He actually worked at the field office here. Before he worked for the BIA, he worked for the alcoholism program, so he was the administrator for that. That was after he got his master's degree. Before then, he worked in TV repair, radio. He worked for Collins Radio in Cedar Rapids; he did things like that.

JD: I need to circle back. I know this is all out of order, but since we're talking about your father, you had first learned of his boarding school experience when Tom was two. I'm curious when your intentional search for Meskwaki roots began, and sort of what that journey looked like.

SB: My intentional search – there were a lot of failed attempts. It's hard to get your foot in the door. Out here, it's changed now. Now, I'm working in part of that change where I'm actively promoting the culture and actively inviting people to get involved in food sovereignty. They kinship garden, something that was new this year for food sovereignty, it was a garden that's for the entire community, regardless of enrollment status. Open to everybody, anybody that wanted to come in and grow their cultural foods. Over the years, I had made so many different attempts to learn, ask questions, to volunteer. I kind of just was discouraged every step of the way. One of the broken record things that I'd always hear was, "Oh, you should know this." So, there was a lot of shaming.

JD: Is there a place or time that would illustrate that?

SB: Well, some of it is kind of a passive-aggressive thing. For one thing, I love the Shawnee dance. I love the song, and I've struggled to learn the words to that. I remember asking my cousins, and I heard her singing every word beautifully, and I asked her if she would teach me. She just kind of looked at me and flatly refused. I asked why not, and she said that some of the words were about men and women, and metaphors about squash and something about how she was embarrassed to teach me the words. Now, at Meskwaki settlement school, they make sure all those kids know that song and that they can sing every word to it, which is fabulous. That's a younger generation. I'm in this generation where we had this boarding school fallout and the pressures of modernity and everything else, where we're a blank generation, in a way. Not everybody. There are people in my generation who if they're not fluent speakers, they can at least understand it. Typically, both their parents were fluent speakers. There's so many of us who's fathers were Meskwaki but our mothers weren't Meskwaki, so that's where the hiccup really started.

JD: Was there a moment when you felt like you were started to really make some progress in rediscovering?

SB: No. it's a constant struggle. There isn't really that moment. It's just been a slow progression. Unfortunately, it takes immersion. I think one of the language teachers said it takes three years of immersion, complete immersion, in a language. We don't have that here. We did when I was much younger, when I was a kid, where Meskwaki was the primary language spoken out here, but I didn't live in a household where it was the primary language. English was. I missed that. Now, English, by and large, it's taking over. It's always an uphill battle. It's kind of like a series of progress and then hitting some discouraging lessons. Some of that violence within the tribe, it's hard to overcome. That attitude. There's some knowledge hoarding that goes on here, too.

JD: Is it hard to talk about that kind of thing with someone like me, who's not part of the tribe? Is that privacy an issue with a public story?

SB: I'm not uncomfortable talking about it. My Meskwaki name is _____, and it means "bear who always travels." In reality, since I have a white mother and a Meskwaki father, my whole life has felt like I'm straddling two worlds. I've had to navigate both. I suppose some Meskwakis would make the case that I'm a little bit too comfortable talking to that outside world about my experiences or about these really sensitive topics. But at the same time, I'm still too ignorant of the culture to really reveal anything that I shouldn't. These are more issues, it's not really anything having to do with anything that's sacred or with the inner workings of the Meskwaki religion.

JD: I was going to ask if there were words that you learned that changed your understanding of your identity or where you came from, and I'd think of language as one of those private things.

SB: Yeah. As I gradually learn, it is tough. Even though I'm sitting here with you, freely talking about things and articulating my experience, it's not easy for me to find the right words. I'm not a naturally verbal person who can learn by hearing very well. I'm a visual learner. Whether it's the songs or the language, so much of it's verbal. It's still taught verbally, and I have to see it written. That's how I learn to relate to the world – through the written word, through writing, through reading. A lot of my early experiences are learning about the world that way. I'm just a visual person. I have memories that are snapshots of these really clear snapshots of things. If I can master a word in writing, then I'll remember it. I can't remember where I'm going with this.

JD: I was thinking of Meskwaki words – words are a way of seeing or perceiving, and the word Meskwaki is, I assume, not the word the tribe would use to describe itself.

SB: It is.

JD: Oh, it is.

SB: Yeah. But the government calls us the Sack and Fox of the Mississippi and Iowa. So, we're grouped – from the US government's label, with closely related tribes. You could say first cousin

tribes. Historically, the Meskwaki had shared villages with the Sage, so it's a very closely related tribe, but it's not the same tribe. We refer to ourselves as the Meskwaki, the red earth people. That's what that means. Just knowing that I'm Meskwaki and not Sack and Fox, I suppose that's pretty powerful right there because I always grew up identifying as Meskwaki not Sack and Fox. The French called us the Fox. In Wisconsin and Illinois there's places and rivers and things like that called the Fox river, that all comes from us.

JD: And the Meskwaki people originated on the east coast.

SB: Yeah. Upper east, St. Lawrence River.

JD: And that was the word for the community then? Meskwaki?

SB: Yeah. It's the word for the people – how we identified ourselves culturally.

JD: For your sons, how do you approach their introduction or their education into Meskwaki history and I guess how that relates to their own identities?

SB: Moving back here has been priceless for the boys, because at Meskwaki settlement school, they have culture class. So, these are community experts in language and culture. My sons actually know more than I do. That's a beautiful thing. I'm so glad they have that opportunity. Even Tom, even though he did his senior year here at Meskwaki, he had pre-k through 1st grade at Meskwaki, then we moved to Cedar Rapids and then Iowa City and then came back here, and he did his senior year here. Even just in that one year's time, with the language and culture, he took in so much. Both the boys have had a more complete education than I ever did in the language and culture. Tom had already taken four years of German, and he actually went to Germany at the end of his sophomore year, so even though it was frustrating for him to have the same expectations as all the other students in his senior class as far as the language and culture class and being proficient at the Meskwaki language, he felt a little frustrated because he felt behind. His language said he was doing fine and was catching up really fast. By the end of the school year, he had surpassed some of his classmates because he had already programmed his brain to learn language. I think that's an amazing story. Four years of German so that he could pick up Meskwaki quickly. I think that's beautiful. I think that's a beautiful example of resiliency. It's not always this direct route. Anymore, if you expect this direct route, it's just not gonna happen for people. We kind of have to find our own way.

JD: As I'm listening to you describe your son's education, it sounds to me like a really surprising outcome of your own return to the settlement. It's been a kind of homecoming for them that was maybe more profound or deeper even than yours?

SB: Yeah. I needed the homecoming. Standing Rock, I know that's the question you asked earlier, and I do get off topic. I meander. Standing Rock was a homecoming. Of course, anybody who knew what was going on out there with Standing Rock tribe and that pipeline and the North

Dakota government and police force and everything, of course, I think anybody with any sense of justice would have been passionate about that. But for me, what I realized through that experience of going out there is that I went to Standing Rock to learn what I really needed to do was go home. The real fight, the real battle, is to go home and to do whatever I can to reengage myself in the Meskwaki culture. And my sons, definitely. To bring my boys home. In 2008, I was making another escape. I was at a point where I needed to get away. I was in a destructive relationship. My own psychological relationship with the tribe was laced with all of this trauma and negativity. I was running away. I was escaping. And then family dysfunction. There's a lot of family trauma and dysfunction. There are issues with drugs and alcohol. All of that's intertwined with that. All of it. At that time in 2008, it was a jumbled mess. I needed a break from my extended family, too, because I needed to learn how not to be codependent.

JD: In that period in Iowa City around 2008 –

SB: Cedar Rapids. I moved to Iowa City in 2011.

JD: Iowa City would have been closer in proximity to Standing Rock.

SB: Yeah.

JD: Okay. So, it was in Iowa City when you began the Jingle Dress Society?

SB: Yeah. It was inspired by that Standing Rock experience, but this was another lesson in how I was trying to bring culture to Iowa City, and I was missing the point where it was like I needed to go home and immerse myself, to the best of my ability, engage my own people, my own tribe, and do the best I could to engage the culture of the Meskwaki.

JD: Is it right that whole idea of the Jingle Dress Society came from a conversation in HyVee?

SB: I think so, yeah. I bumped into a young lady – I hadn't been out home for quite a while between work and everything else, and I just wasn't coming out much. There were some other issues going on. There was a very abusive relationship with a man out here. When I moved to Iowa City, I was actually trying to put some distance between the two of us. When I was in Cedar Rapids, I came home practically every weekend. But then that stopped. The young woman in HyVee in Coralville, when I bumped into her, I saw her jacket from the pow-wow and I started talking to her. That was the style that she danced – Jingle Dress. It just inspired me. I had always loved watching the Jingle Dancers. There was something that enchanted me about the dress, that style of dress, and the history behind it. But for some reason, I just felt it inaccessible. I compare my brain to that of a hunting dog. I'll catch a scent and then I can't see that rabbit or raccoon that that dog can smell, but I catch the scent and I follow the trail. It can take all these twists and turns and downs and stuff, but I'll catch this glimmer of an idea. Usually it's not just a creative idea. It's something that gives me hope.

JD: And you follow it.

SB: I follow it until I hit a dead end or I find another trail.

JD: Doubling back, like a hunting dog, to Standing Rock. You describe this in other interviews as you went to the front lines. What did you see when you got there?

SB: Ryder wasn't old enough to really understand how perilous the scene I was walking into was. Tom did. I promised him that I wouldn't engage in any frontline action. Instead of doing that, I chose the passive aggressive route of pitching my tent on the very edge of the camp that was the very edge. The other side was all the security forces and stuff. There's kind of this demilitarized zone in between us, and I was on the edge of that. As well as other people. I figured this wasn't direct action. I wasn't directly engaging. But I'm holding ground for the time I'm there.

JD: When was it that you felt that sense of urgency to come home? Was there a moment at Standing Rock where you heard that calling back to the settlement?

SB: No. Not so much at Standing Rock. It was back at Coralville. I became so resentful of the community I was in. It was a storm that had been approaching. Standing Rock magnified that. It accelerated that storm. It just pumped it up to the point where that Iowa City community I lived in – I just couldn't relate anymore, to the fact where I started getting an Ames feeling. That anger, resentment, alienation. Not only was I reminded that I would never be allowed into that society. Iowa City is a very affluent society, and my neighborhood, my little modest neighborhood, is very solid middle class, very white. I'd never be a part of that. Not only would I never be allowed into it, I rejected it. I didn't want it. What it represented is everything that my spirit was fighting against.

JD: Is it fair to say that Standing Rock is a kind of catalyst for your work now in the food sovereignty movement?

SB: Oh, yeah. It was part of that reawakening. The fact that I was called to at least do something and say something when Standing Rock blew up, and then I discovered that I was empowered to do something and say something. That I had something to contribute that was meaningful.

JD: Maybe we can go back to Kinship Gardens. Just tell me about your work now. What drives you and what do you love about it? What obstacles do you still see?

SB: It's just kind of crazy how I ended up doing this work, because it was the catalyst for even applying at Red Earth Gardens was a white farm boy. It was kind of my heartbreak of the 90s. Someone I'd fallen in love with, our relationship was a train wreck, and it took like a good decade and a half to recover from it or even fully process everything that happened. I hadn't heard from his for ages. He went into being an organic gardener, and also involved with running

the farmer's market in Des Moines. He'd been working in whole foods or the food movement in the aspect of growing for quite some time. He had married and settled down and stuff. I hadn't heard from him in ages. We hadn't been in contact, and then I get a letter from him. This was after Standing Rock. I got a letter from him asking my views on how well the Red Earth Gardens was serving the community because he had met Jennifer, the woman who was administering the program, at Practical Farmers of Iowa. That put in my head, "Oh!" Because I was wanting to segue to make a transition back home to Meskwaki, but the first thing was finding a job. But I wanted to find not just any job, I wanted to find a job where I was doing meaningful work. I was like, "Yeah, gosh, I didn't even think of Red Earth Gardens." So, I went during pow wow time that year and I asked about it, it was pow wow of 2017 and sure enough, they had an opening for farm stand coordinator, and there I was. I just think it's funny that it was because of a white farm boy of German descent who put the idea – once again, it's the hunting dog and the trail. I don't care if it's a white rabbit. I don't make those type of discriminations. This is hope. I thank Rick for that. He inadvertently did that. To answer his question about whether Red Earth Gardens was really serving the community, the answer was no. Not effectively. So, I started advocating for fair pricing, and I started talking about the fact that I don't think that you people that are running this program and making these decisions about your pricing and even where you're moving these vegetables to – because my supervisor at the time was talking about taking the vegetables to Ankeny, and I was just like, "Ankeny? They have plenty of access to healthy foods there." They have plenty of organic foods there. They have the farmer's market. They have restaurants that serve whole foods. They have plenty of outlet for that. Why are we taking our healthy vegetables from Meskwaki and taking them to Ankeny? That made no sense to me. It's right here in Tama County that's the food desert for healthy whole foods, organically grown. I started really advocating for my community. Standing Rock had lit that fire where I just can't bite my tongue anymore. I'm gonna have to speak up. It definitely made my job as farm stand coordinator pretty rough because I was questioning the people who were making the decisions at that time, and they didn't like that. It was a year of hell for me. It was really rough, but I just kept at it because I felt like this is something I know. This is something that I lived. I remember those commodities and I lived in Madison. I lived in Iowa City. I lived in these affluent communities that could afford premium prices for healthy food. But I know my community, and most of the people in my community can't afford that. We have to at least match the prices at Walmart and Fareway.

JD: So, from Red Earth Gardens, you then transitioned into the food sovereignty program which is separate. As you were explaining earlier, Red Earth Gardens is part of economic development. The Kindship Garden is not a place of commerce. It's a place where anybody can come.

SB: It's a place of community, yeah. Meskwaki food sovereignty initiative – Red Earth Gardens came out of food sovereignty. It was a food sovereignty initiative. Of course, it became its own entity. I don't know exactly how food sovereignty ended up in economic development. All of that's morphing as the programs become stronger on their own and people clearly can identify where they fit. It's all a process. Sometimes they can be pretty critical, but this is something that I understand. It's all part of a flow. There wasn't any one person that was making a mistake and putting it here or there, but the people involved in the transition, the people who had really been

working on that and then taking food sovereignty and putting it in natural resources and then having Red Earth Gardens not only stay where it was, but I believe economic development now is morphing more into workforce development. That's what that program, under that leadership, has become really strong. It partners with Red Earth Gardens, so there's a whole cohort that happens each growing season. I think there's 2-3 cohorts through workforce development that then get their on the job training at Red Earth Gardens. That's like really turned people on to working in the gardens and growing vegetables. So, that in itself has become this amazing, powerful program. Now that food sovereignty isn't attached to all of that, now we have more of a clear vision, as well as we're a community-based program, so the Kinship Garden was a way to address barriers to cultural foods, practicing specifically growing your cultural foods. There are land barriers. There's access to land. There are tribal members that don't live on the settlement. There's a lot of women that live in town. And other people too, but it's a lot of women that don't live on the settlement because of certain housing policies for a couple decades where they were shut out of access to housing here. Then there's people who aren't enrolled. The whole thing with enrollment – that's a product of colonization. Enrollment was instituted by the US government. It was the Indian Reorganization Act, and that happened in the 1930s. Before then, you were just Meskwaki. You were Meskwaki by nature of speaking the language, of being part of the community, of knowing your culture. That's what made you Meskwaki. It wasn't your father had to be enrolled in order to get you enrolled. That was instituted by the colonizers. Some of this is a deconstruction. Deconstructing that pressure of colonization. The Kinship Garden is a resilient response.

JD: Can you think of a memory, knowing that you have visual memories, can you think of one that embodies that resilient response?

SB: The Kinship Gardens is new this year. This spring when we invited community members to come plant the garden with us, we had a family of three generations come out. The grandmother that was planting corn with us, she said, "This is the first time I've planted corn." Our corn. Our Indian corn. Our Meskwaki corn. This is the first time she's planted it. She's a grandmother. She had her daughters out there, and one of her daughters' husbands was out there and grandkids. Right there, that moment, of looking across these generations, that was that moment of really seeing resiliency in action.

JD: That's beautiful. We're kind of running a little over time, and I appreciate your patience. I was gonna ask you about Alice in Chains in Chicago, but I don't know if we have time.

SB: I love that. We can go there.

JD: Do you wanna end with that?

SB: Yeah.

JD: Can I ask you a couple of harder questions maybe?

SB: Sure.

JD: How would you define Iowa?

SB: Iowa is this land that's been ravaged by agriculture. By the need to extract resources. By the need to get as much produced out of as little acres as possible. It's the most transformed landscape in all of the United States. But because things grow here, so amazingly, the forces of nature are always bouncing back. In my lifetime, I'm not gonna see Iowa return to the marshes and to the marshlands and to the oak savanna and the prairies that it once was, but all of that stuff is still there. It's still here, I should say. It's still here. It's not just the memory of that, but the seeds of that. The land knows what it wants. This is really, really powerful land. Iowa, culturally, is not a homogenous zone. Depending on whether you go to Cedar Rapids or Tama County, which has a wonderful Czech cultural base that people are aware of, and they're proud of their Czech heritage, or Decorah, and that's Norwegian. Now, we have a tradition with Governor Ray where we've welcomed waves and waves of immigrants and refugees. A more diverse population than people know. Even in these little, teeny rural towns that, on the surface, look like they've seen their best days and they're dying out, there's resiliency. The people there are holding together. A lot of the small towns are immigrants and refugees. They're making their home here. Iowa is where stuff grows. It's a beautiful place.

JD: That's a beautiful answer, too. Tell me about Alice in Chains in Chicago. You went there recently, and you said you were rethinking your life all over again.

SB: Of course. I do that every other week. I am going to turn 52 September 10, so that's just a matter of days. Alice in Chains represents music movement of people the same as me. The grunge era. All of those grunge bands, they were all just born in a space of a couple years from each other. Like Kurt Cobain of Nirvana – we were born the same year. Also, so many of us have these similar histories of going through divorce, some of us have had parents that had seen combat in Vietnam. The one thing that identifies us Generation Xers is that rate of divorce and how that affected us as kids, how that affected our lives. With Alice in Chains, for one thing, I became obsessed with them this spring because I was going through a really difficult period withdrawing from Prozac. I needed it to manage my anxiety when I had started taking it about a year and a half before. The problem with Prozac is that it takes the edge off so well, it just takes the edge off completely. So, you're not really caring about stuff that much. I just didn't have that creative energy. And I was ready to also dive deeper and to start really unpacking a lot of trauma. I felt like it was time to do this. It was time to just unpack the stuff and dive deep into it and deal with it and process it so I can freaking get on with my life in a way that's more rewarding than just being in survival mode. Alice in Chains became an obsession because it wasn't only a distraction. I had this generation I could identify with. I had all these stories I could go online and read about that were relatable. Most importantly, I had these artists that were still going who were still being creative. They were still doing it. It was like this example to me to look up to. Just because you put your artwork on the back burner to raise your boys doesn't mean you lost it.

These guys haven't lost it. That's your choice. That's your decision. That's what I wanna do. I'm not ready to give up my work in food sovereignty. That's also passionate, and that takes a lot of creativity, too. The visual arts are something that I'm actively working on reclaiming. It's like the Rolling Stones or punk rock and ACDC, Cheap Trick – all those bands that got me through my teenage years and my early twenties – now music is helping me get through midlife. I'm always gonna be restless. I can't help it. It's something I've had to own and find a way to channel it instead of it frustrating me and eating me up. Let the hound loose.

JD: Wandering bear? Is that right?

SB: Bear who always travels.

JD: Embracing the travel.

SB: So, yeah. I'm going to Seattle this month for vacation.