

PUNK ROCK, HOME BIRTH, AND INDIAN CORN

Guest: Shelley Buffalo
Interviewer: Joshua Doležal

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

JD: This is Shelley Buffalo: visual artist and Food Sovereignty Coordinator for the Meskwaki Settlement near Tama, Iowa. The Settlement is the first of its kind in the United States – not a reservation, but over 8,000 acres of land that is privately owned and managed by the Meskwaki Nation. Shelley was born near the Settlement, and much of her extended family still lives in Tama County. But her own journey has led her away and back more than a dozen times.

The Meskwaki Settlement most recently called Shelley back with its food sovereignty initiative, which restores ancestral foods, like corn and squash, and the traditional recipes that go with them. Shelley hopes to reverse the influence of government commodities on indigenous diets. She also hopes to revive the stories of resilience that guide the Meskwaki lifeway.

Shelley's story is defined by this very resilience in the face of inherited trauma: from a history of forced removal and forced assimilation during the boarding school era. The violence of this history, and the silence that often accompanies it, fractures the foundation of belonging. Coming home, for Shelley and other Native people estranged from their own language and customs, is not as simple as returning to a physical place. Homecoming is a lifelong quest to recover the words, ceremonies, and food systems that define Meskwaki life. But for Shelley, sources of hope can come from anywhere - like her lifelong identification with punk rock.

I talked to Shelley outdoors, in a meadow up the hill from her office. We went there to escape foot traffic and slamming doors, but you'll hear a chorus of cicadas in the background, the occasional bee, and now and then a train whistle in the distance.

Before we met, I imagined Shelley's return to the Meskwaki Settlement as a permanent one, like our other guests in Season One who claim to have come back to Iowa for good. But despite her ties to the Settlement, Shelley makes no promises about staying put. For now she is trying to animate the silent spaces in her past, knowing that her work may mean more to future generations than to her own.

I'm Joshua Doležal and this is Mid-Americana: Stories from a Changing Midwest.

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. 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.

JD: I know you've mentioned in an interview with Charity Nebbe 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. 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. 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.

JD: Were there other examples you remember 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: 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: 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: So, when did you discover punk rock? Was that in high school?

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.

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. 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. 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. If I didn't, I was gonna go under.

JD: Shelley changed her major and completed a Bachelor's of Fine Arts with a minor in English. She came back to the Meskwaki Settlement for a time, then returned to Ames to work painting houses. She gave herself three years to formulate a life plan. Eventually she knew that path would lead further north.

SB: 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. I worked at Woolly Street Co-Op. Madison has always been a foodie town. 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. 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 a vivid or important memory from the co-op in Madison for you?

SB: 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.

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 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.

JD: As it always had, the Meskwaki Settlement was calling to Shelley even as she had found her community among the foodies and punk rockers in Madison.

SB: 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. 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. 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.

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, and it was just plain traumatic. 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.

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 was a lay midwife, 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. 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. 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. 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: Shelley is no stranger to letting go. Throughout her life, she has lived in more than a dozen communities across the Greater Midwest. As we talked, I tried to keep them all straight, in linear time. But the more I listened, the more a different pattern emerged, and I began to wonder if her story might be better understood as a series of migrations. Not straight lines, but circles. All beginning and ending back at the Meskwaki Settlement.

JD: 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. 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, to quote Richard Hell, 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 whose 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.

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 Kiwate 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: 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 Sac 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 Sac and Fox, I suppose that's pretty powerful right there because I always grew up identifying as Meskwaki not Sac 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. 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 was a homecoming. 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.

JD: When the Standing Rock protest erupted in South Dakota, in response to the Dakota Access Pipeline, Shelley was living near Iowa City. Soon after she had joined the protest and felt the familiar tug back to the Meskwaki Settlement, Shelley heard about an opening at Red Earth Gardens, an organic farm managed by the Meskwaki Nation. She began as Farm Stand Coordinator and soon after was promoted to the position she now holds in food sovereignty.

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. 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, 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.

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. 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: Shelley still finds resiliency in one of her earliest touchstones for identity: punk rock. When we spoke, the memory of a concert she had recently seen in Chicago was still fresh in her mind.

SB: 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. Alice in Chains became an obsession because 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. 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.