



**SHOSHANNA WASSERMAN,
American Indian Cultural Center and Museum, Oklahoma City**

KENNEALLY: Welcome to Beyond the Book. My name is Chris Kenneally, Director of Author Relations for the nonprofit Copyright Clearance Center, coming to you today from Indianapolis while we're attending the Museums and the Web conference here. And joining me is Shoshana Wasserman, who's Director of Marketing and Public Relations for the American Indian Cultural Center and Museum in Oklahoma City. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Shoshana.

WASSERMAN: Thank you, and thank you for having me today.

KENNEALLY: It's a pleasure to do it, and I would like to have you tell the audience right at the top about what the American Indian Cultural Center is trying to accomplish. And you told me last night a bit about it, and I was fascinated by the enormous effort that you're undertaking here in a state that has more communities of Native Americans than I even knew about. Tell us about that.

WASSERMAN: Right, thank you. The American Indian Cultural Center and Museum is an absolutely amazing place of story. We're creating a place – Oklahoma has a very unique and rich history. No other state has this kind of landscape, where we have the presence of 39 tribal communities. And when I say tribal communities, I'm really talking about nations, sovereign, independent nations, in Oklahoma. And so really, if you were to travel all over Europe, you wouldn't find, in such a small geographic, that many different languages spoken, that many different kinds of lifestyles, from the different tribal cultures. And so what we're doing is creating an orientation kind of experience that hopes to tell the story of these tribes and their original homelands, and how they were removed to what was then Indian territory, now the state of Oklahoma. And really, throughout history there have been about 67 different tribal nations that have a historic relationship with Oklahoma. So we tell that larger national story of all of these 67 tribes, but primarily focusing on the 39 tribes that headquarter in Oklahoma today.

And not really – we have a thematic approach to the way we present content in our museum, and so it's really about a living, breathing cultural center, because these are living, breathing cultures that have evolved and adapted, and have shown great resiliency. So rather than assigning square footage to each tribe's history – which they can do much better themselves, and so many of the tribes are building their own cultural center and museums to tell their rich histories. So we're an



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orientation experience, and we hope that the visitor will come through and just understand the unique presence of these many nations in one state.

KENNEALLY: And at what phase of development is the center right now?

WASSERMAN: Well, we're building the museum. We just completed our 4000 square foot visitor center. We're actually four projects in one, situated right on the river. Three hundred acre development, so quite large. The visitors' center really will serve as a hub or a satellite to all of the not only tribal nations throughout Oklahoma, but also all of the arts and culture throughout the state of Oklahoma. And the museum itself is about 125,000 square feet. We have the – sort of the footpath of the museum in the ground. We completed our promontory mound, central promontory mound this summer, which is a earthen architectural feature that pays tribute or finds its inspiration from the Mississippian mound building cultures, so an amazing kind of earthen mound feature that you walk up, and at its highest point it's on a 90-foot peak. And in the plains, that's really magnificent. So the building footpath is there. We'll be erecting steel at the end of the summer, August-September, so we're moving forward.

And then it also has about 20 acres dedicated to an arts marketplace, to a conference center. We hope that this will be almost kind of like the United Nations of tribes. This will be a place in the heart of Indian country, at the crossroads of America, where you can come together and be in direct contact with these tribal nations, and really explore these tribes, and what the issues are today in the contemporary context, and that relationship with the historic past.

KENNEALLY: Well, it's quite an ambitious undertaking. And what I'm interested in is exploring a little bit about how you're going to handle the collection and the sharing of all the information, the culture, that so many different nations are going to be having at this one center, because there must be a challenge there. You want to share, but you also want to be there to protect that information. Talk about that.

WASSERMAN: Yeah, right. It's a very unique situation. We're a non-collecting institution, if you will, as far as cultural artifacts or objects. However, what we have is a collection of stories, and a collection of amazing tribal nations, and all of the intellectual property that resides in that particular native community. And we are advocates of protection, and yet advocates of knowing that we live in a global community where so many indigenous cultures around the world share a common experience. And when we come together and understand each other's life ways and cultures and traditions in a new and informed way, that that makes a difference on how we build relationships for the future. And we're really hoping that people



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will come to this place and individually find a place of connection in their own lives based on something that they've experienced here.

So we've been – in bringing together all of these different stories, which, as you can imagine, with 39 tribal nations, is quite different, because you have such different experiences, different languages, different life ways, different cultural practices, and coming up with a cohesive and concise story was quite challenging. But what we did is we began a process of tribal consultation many years ago. Took about seven years, and went out and visited each of these tribal nations and communities, and began to understand, what did they hope and dream that a museum such as this could share about their individual culture?

And from that process, we aggregated all of that information, and we began to work with the architects. And that informed the architectural structure. And so, for example, one of the things that we found that was so common to all of the tribes was that there is this idea or this philosophical understanding of life as a cyclical kind of relationship, or a circle. It's a never-ending circle. When one person dies, someone else is born, and there's this continuum. And we have this continuum of culture, so it was very symbolic. And so the very architecture itself is two concentric circles, with this place of optimism and enlightenment in the middle that we call our Great Hall of the People.

And so these tribal consultations, of course, in that phase, were yielding the hopes and dreams and vision for the structure of the museum, and how we would tell the story. And now that we have that conceptual framework in place, now we've gone back to the tribal communities and elders, and we have said, OK, these are the stories that have emerged. One of the things that we understood was that common to most of our tribes was this relationship. We call it a natural democracy. We have this kind of understanding that we are part of a greater structure, and there is a natural order and democracy to our place within Mother Earth, within the animal kingdom, within our plants, and even into the universe and so forth.

And so we began to find that fire, wind, earth, and water were four elements that were very important and common throughout each of the tribes. So as we did that, we began to weave a thematic approach around some of that. We came up with these ideas of community, of governance, of knowledge and how we transfer knowledge, both in a traditional manner and in an academic manner today, and what the federal policy impacts of our country have had on these different kind of life ways, and then of course this natural democracy.

So we're out in community right now, and we're harvesting cultural materials, stories, imagery, all of these different things that really are alive with story. But we



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approach that in a very respectful manner, allowing and actually empowering each of the tribes to determine what's appropriate for public consumption, what they want shared about their culture, what they do not, and very respectfully moving in alignment and in accordance with that tribe's desire to put forth material. And so we feel like we are, in many ways, kind of cultural ambassadors and preservationists of this content, but only when it's appropriate for consumption. And I think in the '60s and '70s there was a lot of anthropological communities and different kinds of interactions with tribes that sort of went into tribes, took content, published it, reinterpreted it, and many times it was reinterpreted in a way that was perhaps inaccurate, or not the way we filter and view things from a tribal perspective. And so what we're trying to do is give voice to these communities to share this content and philosophy, and the very structure and fabric of their cultural life ways from the inside out.

KENNEALLY: As you describe that naturalistic approach to existence, really, I was imagining that it comes into contrast with the very legalistic approach of so much of our country right? And is there a kind of a challenge there to mediate – you talking about being an ambassador – you have to mediate that naturalistic, holistic approach with the legalistic requirements of having an organization getting federal money and so forth. It must be a challenge.

WASSERMAN: It is a challenge. And I think one of the greatest challenges that people don't realize, number one, we're a state agency. So we're very lucky, because in the state of Oklahoma in 1994, there was a group of individuals, then-Senator Enoch Kelly Haney, who was the first Native American Senator, and the late Robert S. Kerr, who recognized that Oklahoma had a unique history that should be shared. And so they created a state agency, or they – excuse me, they authored a bill and created the – went through the legislative process to create an agency that would develop such a project, but that would develop a project in a culturally sensitive and appropriate manner. And so they really empowered this project from the very beginning to work in a respectful manner with communities.

And when I say communities, this is one of the ways in which you're talking about, there's these sort of legal ways of referring to things that differentiate from the realities. And we have 39 what I would say tribal communities in Oklahoma that are vibrant, evolving tribal communities. And when we say community, many people in their minds conjure up this loose-fitting group of individuals that come together with a shared purpose. But we're talking about 37 federally recognized nations. And because of legality issues, there are a number of our tribes that either have been – their federal recognition has either been removed, or they are seeking federal recognition. So these are the areas that we really grapple with in the area of governance when in the museum, where we're talking about how federal policy and



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treaty making and all of these kinds of things that have happened historically are having a real time effect on tribal members in a contemporary context.

And so that's what we're hoping to show, is that these are nations. And so one of the challenges is, as we begin to assemble this story, what – the way you would negotiate with one nation in a global community is very different than the way you would negotiate with another nation. And that is very true of the tribes too. So something as simple as – this is a great example. We were hoping to use all of the tribal seals from each of the tribal nations. Well, with one tribe, that process was a fairly simplistic process where we worked through committee, we worked through a particular way of doing things, made a formal request, and that permission was granted. On the other hand, with a larger tribe that was very different in its compositional makeup, there was a process that had to be employed, a diplomatic process that had to be deployed in order for that request to be fulfilled. And so we had to – and that was the Muskogee Creek Nation, which happens to be the nation that I'm a member of. And so we had to work through our national tribal council, and go and make that formal request to the speaker of the house, and a bill had to be introduced, much like the way we see our national government.

And in fact, our nation, our confederacy, the Muskogee Creek Confederacy, is the founding of the United States democracy, along with like the Iroquois Confederacy and stuff. So, yeah, so we get into these very legal governance kinds of issues, because these are not just loose-fitting communities, but rather sovereign nations.

KENNEALLY: And it's interesting to me to listen and recognize that this is a very modern undertaking, but it's got to mediate the traditional view of things. And that is exciting, but I'm sure is a lot of work.

WASSERMAN: It is a lot of work. It's very rewarding. And it also creates appropriate lines of demarcation. There are some tribes that are very forthcoming, just like we're seeing here at the Museums and the Web conference. You have some institutions who really have this sort of philosophical approach of total sharing of content, and transparency, and then you have other institutions who maintain a different kind of philosophy base – we have tribes like that. And we're very respectful of that. And I think it makes for a complex and interesting story, because some of the tribes are very protective of their culture, and traditionally they don't share those cultural life ways or stories or content outside of that tribal community or structure. And that's a remarkable story in and of itself. And so what we're looking to do is, never ask somebody to share anything that shouldn't be shared, but rather, have people express that authentic, traditional concern for what is appropriate for public consumption, what isn't, perhaps giving some understanding of why. And I think each of the tribes has a certain line of



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demarcation within their tribal structure of what is reserved for tribal members for the continuance of culture, versus what is just sort of communal knowledge. And so it is a balancing act, but it's a really beautiful and interesting process to walk through, and to see that you can have both ends of the spectrum. And neither is right or wrong, and it's just self-determination. So it's beautiful.

KENNEALLY: I think that's a great way to end it. I was thinking that it's not an either/or proposition, it's and, and, and, and, and – traditional and modern and community and legal and natural, all those things all together at the same time.

We've been talking with Shoshana Wasserman, who is Director of Marketing and Public Relations for the American Indian Cultural Center and Museum in Oklahoma City. I want to thank you very much for being on Beyond the Book, Shoshana.

WASSERMAN: Thank you very much, and I might just add, in case people are interested in the museum project, that they can go online to AICCM.org and see a little bit more about what we're building and how we're working with these tribal nations.

KENNEALLY: We welcome them to do that, and we will put on link on Beyond the Book just for that, OK? My name again is Chris Kenneally, and very much appreciate having you with us for another edition of Beyond the Book.

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