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Transcript for Courtney Lewis, November 15, 2023, on Zoom.

Bio- Courtney Lewis is the first tenured Native American, American Indian, professor at Duke University in the cultural anthropology department as a result of Native student activism; she followed in her father's footsteps of being a trailblazer for Native people. She participates in many committees on campus as well as off campus. She is advocating for Native students and Native studies by championing the Native American Studies Minor and the Native Cluster Hire Initiative. Both of these projects will help non-Native students and Native students learn more about Native culture and ways of life. These projects will help Native students navigate post-secondary education at Duke University and be able to learn, lead, and connect with Native faculty in ways that they have not been able to before.

NAOMI GOLDSON: I'm so appreciative that you've agreed to be interviewed today. If at any time you need to stop, take a break. If at any time there's a question that you don't feel like answering, you are uncomfortable or anything of that such, you can just say pass and we don't have to go into it. This is a safe space for you, and this is your interview. Whatever way you want it to go, or if there's something that I haven't touched on that you would like to touch on, feel free. It's basically just your time to share your greatness with the world and your contributions. We'll go ahead and begin, I tried to research and prepare for this interview, but you have done a very good job at keeping your life very private, which I

commend you on, but there is not a whole lot of information about who you are and where you began. So, if you can enlighten us, that'd be amazing!

COURTNEY LEWIS: So that's a pretty big question, I was born in Denver, Colorado but moved around quite a bit. I've lived almost everywhere regionally in the U. S. except for the Pacific Northwest, although I love the Pacific Northwest, and that was because my dad[1] was a professor. He was the first American Indian to get a Ph. D. in social work, and that meant that he taught at a lot of different venues, not just in social work, but he would also teach at, for example, medical schools talking to doctors about how to relate to American Indian and Indigenous patients. So, I moved around quite a bit; I liked moving around, I liked being in new places. I grew up on or adjacent to many different campuses, most of them are R1[2] campuses. That's where the majority of my time was spent and that's a little bit about my upbringing and where I'm coming from.

GOLDSON: How did that dynamic and lifestyle of constantly moving around, seeing so many different places and people impact and shape, who you eventually became?

LEWIS: I think there are two things here, a lot of that shaped my interest in anthropology. So being able to move around a lot and experience different regions of the United States.

[1] Ronald Gene Lewis is Courtney's father
[2]Research 1 institutions are schools that receive high amounts of funding, focus on doctorate programs, and spend a great deal of time on research.

Meeting that many people, I think, subconsciously sparked my interest in anthropology but that was also an intersection with growing up around other Native scholars like Vine Deloria, who are very critical of anthropology and part of me viewed going into anthropology as a way to get in and then see your anthropology in a new direction. So, the upbringing contributed to my interest in anthropology and moving around, but also my upbringing of being raised around very local Native scholars also contributed.

GOLDSON: I'm really glad that influenced you to become and do what you're doing now, which can you tell me a little bit more about your dad and his accomplishments? I read some amazing things about him, if you would like to share.

LEWIS: Yes, absolutely. Oh, and I should mention Bob Thomas was another anthropologist, Native activist that I grew up around that also inspired me as well. My dad was born in Muskogee, Oklahoma. He was the first of his family to go to college. He was heavily influenced to go into social work because of the Indian Adoption Project that was happening in the second half of the 20th century, which is where the federal government would pay social workers to go on to reservations and take kids. The idea was to take these Native children and place them specifically in white homes. This was kind of a new boarding school project, right? So instead of kidnapping children and forcing them into boarding schools, the federal government was now taking children and placing them in white homes. It was part of an assimilation project and many of these children were abused, many of

them would not be told until they were adults that they were members of a Native community. My dad watched this unfold, and that was part of his reason to get into social work. As I said before, he was the first American Indian to receive a PhD in social work, eventually he would become an NASW[3] pioneer and known as the father of American Indian social work. Because he was the first, there are many other things that follow, he was the first American Indian tenured in the University of Wisconsin system, the first American Indian fulltime professor in social work, the first American Indian to hold the position of dean in Canada. Once you're the first in one realm, you tend to be the first in a long series of positions. But for me, the most impactful moment when I was being raised was his work in helping to construct the Indian Child Welfare Act. When I grew up thinking about what a professor does the idea, I had in my head may not have been completely accurate because for me, watching my dad, what a professor did was very applied work and very activist work. I have memories of going to Washington and watching him testify before Congress. When I decided to become a professor very early on, and I think I've always had the idea of following in his footsteps, this was the conception I had in my head. It was a little surprising to find out that many professors, most professors in fact, do not do that. His applied work and his activism directly influence how I view what my job as a professor is.

GOLDSON: That's incredible, he seems like a really amazing person. You mentioned that you're a professor, obviously. You have taught at many different places, so what did

[3] Native American Social Work

teaching at these different schools look like as a Native American woman?

LEWIS: I've taught at different institutions, different types of institutions. I've taught at R1 institutions, I've taught at liberal arts schools and colleges, and then I've taught at, obviously, places like Duke, so smaller, more elite institutes of research. I think the biggest difference in my experience as a Native woman professor is really tied to the college or university's commitment to Native studies. Although I didn't teach at University of Michigan, that's where I got my bachelor's. In that environment where you have a large Native population of undergraduates, graduates, and faculty was far different, it's very supportive. Also, when you have a larger Native student body and a larger Native faculty, the faculty at the university as a whole tend to be better educated about Native American studies. It's a much more supportive atmosphere, in some ways easier atmosphere to be in. Smaller institutes tend to be a little bit easier to work with because you can talk with students and faculty very easily, the more difficult places are large research institutes with no real Native Studies programs because in general, they don't have it because they don't want it. So that's something where being there, especially a Native woman, is a much more challenging job because it's a constant battle to have the university acknowledge the position of Native peoples in general, but even do program building, right? Even just to get speakers in can be a battle. There are some institutions where I refused to recruit other Native faculty because I knew that they would not be supported, especially with junior faculty and their tenure cases at these institutes. I think the big difference is really the institutional support for Native

American studies that makes a difference in how I engage with the university or college.

GOLDSON: This kind of transitions into my next question of how you got involved in the "Duke world" or the "Duke University world?' What were the first steps? What did that look like?

LEWIS: I'm still pretty new here, this is just my second year at Duke, but my relationship with Duke goes back a little bit. I got my PhD at UNC Chapel Hill, and this was at a time where Chapel Hill and Duke had a lot of partnerships going through the American Indian Center and through Native American Studies programs. So, although I wasn't attending Duke, I was able to have access to Professors at Duke as I worked through my PhD and talk to them about some of the work that I was doing. When the job opportunity at Duke came up for me to apply, I felt very comfortable applying because not only did I know that I liked the area for me to live in, but also, I knew who my potential colleagues were going to be and that was very important to me. Knowing that I had a supportive department and a supportive university environment is one of the things that as a tenured professor is the most important because I want to be here for a long time. I was looking for my forever home with this job. There's some kind of nascence during the PhD, but it's really when this job hire came up because of the student activist work that led me to be comfortable in applying to Duke.

GOLDSON: Someone I also interviewed was Quinn Smith and he was talking a little bit about how the process was of the activism portion to even fight for Native American professors to be hired. How instrumental do you say, or do you think that that was in your hiring process?

LEWIS: How instrumental? 100 percent instrumental in my hiring process. Before that, as I've mentioned, there was a partnership between Duke and Chapel Hill and Chapel Hill had such a strong cohort of Native American Studies programs and faculty and students that Duke didn't really need to have Native Studies, they relied on Chapel Hill for this. But at the same time, the Native population at Duke wasn't being served in the way that it needed to be. There's an undue burden in asking students to travel to Chapel Hill. Because Duke had relied on Chapel Hill, there was this gaping hole that was left at the university; this is where the students came in. I would say that this was generationally for the students, so this didn't start with Quinn, but Quinn was being mentored by the Native alumni who had also been working on this. They come together and present this petition and it intersects at a time where the deans are very amenable to working with the students. The students create this wonderful document, they go to the deans, and this is how the cluster hire starts. So, my hire is directly related to the student's activism work and their work being mentored by Native alumni and that's going to produce my hire, which is the first American Indian professor that we know of in Trinity ever. It's the students that did all of this.

GOLDSON: So, you've touched on this piece that I was really hoping that we would get to which is the cluster initiative or the cluster hiring initiative. Tell us a little bit about what that is.

LEWIS: The cluster hire is the hire that I was initially hired under; it's a little bit unusual. Most of the time with faculty hires, they happen just the department level, but this cluster higher signals Trinity's[4] commitment to building a Native American studies program, so not just at the department level, but a commitment at the college level to build this program. The cluster hire will continue until we have about 10 Native faculty, which is enough to build a very robust Native American Studies research program here. The way that it works is that I am chair of a search committee at the Trinity level, we open up the job to any Native American Studies faculty that are within the departments of Trinity. So, history, cultural anthropology, for example; not Sanford, that's different, not Nicholas school, that's a different school. The Trinity committee gets the applications, we then go through the applications, and we narrow it down to six candidates and then we forward those candidates onto departments. At that point, it's up to the departments to determine if they want the candidates, if they want to interview the candidates, and then if they approve of the candidates. The departments really have a lot of autonomy in whether they want these candidates and if they do, then we decide who to make offers to. The benefit of this is that we get a wide variety of Native research as opposed to just English, or just history. Because

[4] Duke's Trinity College of Arts and Science- Front Page | Trinity College of Arts & Sciences (duke.edu)

what we're looking to do is build a diversity of Native American Studies research here at Duke. So that's how it allows us to bring in faculty from all over the Arts and Sciences.

GOLDSON: That sounds like a very complicated and complex process which leads me to a question of what does a typical day for you at Duke University look like?

LEWIS: Very good question, I don't know if there's a typical day at Duke, but I can tell you what a day might look like. This summer I started the Native American Studies Initiative and I'm also chairing the search and doing quite a few other committee responsibilities here at Duke and then committees outside of Duke too. That means that my day starts with about 75 new emails in my inbox every day, that's just my primary inbox, that's not including my newsletter inbox which is a whole different inbox. I usually have quite a bit of email work to do because I am directing and chairing a lot of these programs; there's a lot of organization that needs to be done. Helping to organize on-campus visits to make sure everybody's visiting the candidates appropriately, organizing events. Organizing my own calendar, I think that's the biggest challenge. So, the day starts out with this kind of work and I'm also teaching a full load. So, then I would go and teach my American Indians Today class, have a short break where I meet with students or other folks during my lunch break, after that, I would move on to teach my Southern Activism class called Southern Voices which also includes an American Indian component that is often left out of Southern Activism. Then after that I would have a couple more hours to not only review my notes from class that day,

but prep for the next class, prep exams grade the weekly assignments from students. After that for example, this week, my work would go into the evening where I would have maybe another meeting around four or five o'clock and then last night, I had a dinner with a candidate at eight o'clock so my day would not end until probably after eleven. Usually there may be like a reception or a dinner at night, but sometimes I get to go home and have dinner at home, which is also great. I'd say that encapsulates kind of what this particular week might look like.

GOLDSON: That sounds like a lot to deal with and handle, how do you handle the pressure that comes with being not only the head of so many committees and so many projects, but also the pressure of being one of the few Native people on campus?

LEWIS: Being one of or even the only is not something that's new to me, it's something I've had a lot of experience with on other campuses of being sometimes the only Native faculty on campus. I don't feel too much pressure with that these days, at this point in my career, because I have been doing this for so long it's very easy for me to talk with faculty who may not have a lot of knowledge about Native American studies. I've had a lot of experience talking with upper administration about the needs of Native American students, Native American faculty, so that feels very normal to me, I'd say not comfortable or easy, but it feels very normal to me. The time pressure of being one of the few Native faculty is something that you just kind of have to handle the waves of, so it's very important to me

that I'm available to the students, undergraduate students, graduate students. When you're one of, or the only Native faculty, that means you're getting not only all of the Native students but also all of the students who are non-Native that are interested in Native studies. I tend to prioritize the things that are most important to me and my career right now so that means prioritizing student needs and prioritizing the forwarding of Native American Studies research on campus. That is mainly time management because one thing that you learn very quickly is that if you don't have very good time management skills that also include a healthy work life balance, you are not able to serve the students; you are not able to grow programs on campus if you are completely exhausted and overwhelmed and overworked and that's something you can do for a brief amount of time. This semester is a particularly heavy semester for me. but also I'm going to be on sabbatical in the spring, I know that if I set up things now and I kind of front end things work wise now that I will be able to take the time I need to do both my research and kind of having this breathing space to really think about research, which is what academics need. You have to have space to sit down with your thoughts, so if I don't take care of myself and my work life balance, I'm not taking care of the students or the university or my research or my health in general. It does take practice and it can be difficult to say no to things that you really would love to do, that's the hardest part, but they will always be there, it will be waiting for you.

GOLDSON: You've touched on this very hard concept for most people, this healthy work life balance. When the pressure does get too much or when those are a little unbalanced, what

do you typically do to either restore the balance or just relax and take some time for yourself?

LEWIS: One of the things I may do is just take a mental wellness day. I already have things built in like I never check emails on Saturday. If I'm prepping for classes on Sunday, then I might check emails, but I only answer the super important ones. If things are particularly difficult or if I've just finished a particularly difficult time, I may actually just leave town for a day or two. It may be something where I need to go to the beach for a day and part of that is just disconnecting with the technology, because that's one thing that kind of keeps us pulled back into an unhealthy work life balance a lot. Sometimes staying at home, even if you're not working, because remember academics, your home is also a place of work, right? So, you need to kind of quarantine off your office, but it can also pull you back in. Sometimes it takes literally just leaving for a day trip to really disconnect and again, allow your mind to think bigger thoughts, allow your body to recover from the stress of a particularly difficult week. That might be something that I do if I'm feeling like I've had a particularly difficult a week or a month but generally I try to quarantine off my time; no email during these particular times and that alone is really helpful.

GOLDSON: That's much easier said than done and I commend you for that. Kind of shifting gears to the topic that some people have debated or don't really understand why it's so

important to have Native representation in classrooms. Can you touch on and explain a little bit of why it's necessary to have things like the cluster higher initiative?

LEWIS: I don't think that students in the United States have a well-rounded education if they don't know about the Indigenous people's land that they're living on, and if they don't know about the U.S. Indigenous people who they are going to school with or teaching. This isn't tangential, this is foundational to our understandings of not only how this country works but broadly how it works politically, economically, culturally. There is no aspect and no field and no discipline that Native American studies does not touch on and does not inform. It is not only critical it is non-negotiable in a liberal arts education to include Native American studies research in all fields; without it you're not fully educated without it you are missing an enormous chunk of understandings of how this country has worked and continues to work to this day. When you leave out this critical information then how robust is your research, right? How robust is your teaching when you're leaving out these foundational components of your discipline?

GOLDSON: I know that there are a lot of NAISA[5] members and just passionate Native people at Duke, how does that atmosphere kind of work in coordination with your passion for Native American activism as well?

[5] Native American Indigenous Student Alliance is a resource for Native students on college campuses across the country to help facilitate awareness and education of Native American culture.

LEWIS: It fuels it, absolutely. One of the things that I love about being a professor is being surrounded by these amazing, incredible students. It fuels my own passion. Every time the students come to me with an idea, it just inspires me more to do more work. Without that particular kind of passion coming from students I feel like I might not enjoy this job as much. I feel like not only would I not enjoy it as much, but I feel like my own work and my own activism wouldn't be fully informed; because it's really the students that are driving a lot of this. And I help the students by showing them the different ways that we can go about work, progressive work and activist work and I can help them prioritize different kinds of work that they're passionate about. Really, it's me directing them and just mentoring them as to how to do this work and then me just being inspired by all the amazing things that they do all the time. It's very much a reciprocal relationship.

GOLDSON: The Native student organization on campus is, NAISA, which is Native American Indigenous Student Association.

LEWIS: Alliance, I think it is.

GOLDSON: Oh, Alliance, it is. What does your relationship with the students in that organization look like?

LEWIS: Formally, I'm their faculty advisor. Informally, I have the students in my class, I attend some of their meetings. I try not to attend too many meetings because that's their student time I don't want to intrude on. However, it's my job, especially as director of the Native American Studies Initiative, to make sure that the students are informed of any Native American Studies events or activities on campus, and they keep me informed of what's going on at an undergraduate level so really, we overlap a lot. I'm not sure that more than two days goes by without me talking with some of the students about something. It's a very consistent relationship almost daily at times of us just talking and communicating about various Native American Studies things going on.

GOLDSON: How would you best educate a typical undergraduate who's non-Native about how to best support their Native peers?

LEWIS: One of the things that I tell my students in my American Indian class, which is mostly non-Native, first I tell them to attend the public events. NAISA has events, some of them are publicly available to all students, go there, talk to the students. College is about learning, college is about learning who your neighbor is, your roommate is, about the other students in your class. The best thing you can do is just get in there and talk with students. Once you have these conversations that kind of naturally leads to looking at what the NAISA organization does. What have they requested in this petition? What are their concerns? How did their concerns inform non-Native students? So, when NAISA is concerned about not

having Native faculty, that also means it's not just them that don't have access to Native faculty, it's all students at Duke. Then learning about the concerns of Native and Indigenous students on campus. Oh, and then after that it is actually amplifying the voice of Native students and Native people. So, NAISA has an Insta account, share that, share their voices, share the events, share their concerns with other students and really amplify what's going on. Native people in the United States are only 1 percent of the population, so our allies are extremely important in getting our voices out there.

GOLDSON: That touches on a lot of different elements of what faculty can do as well. Are there any additional elements that you would share with faculty that you wouldn't necessarily share with students?

LEWIS: For non-Native faculty, some of the same things apply, which is amplifying voices and I also think it's the responsibility of non-Native faculty to really engage with the Native American Studies work going on in their field to seek it out, to seek out let's say panels at conferences, articles that would fit in with your classwork. These citational practices of non-Native faculty are extremely important. We have Native American Studies in every discipline. Non-Native faculty should be seeking out these types of citations for their own work and for inclusion in their classrooms. This is something I'm hoping to offer here soon, but something that might make that easier that I've seen at other universities are workshops in the summertime that actually teach non-Native faculty how best to do this. What is the

critical research happening in your field? What's the important research happening in your field? And how do you include that in the classroom? So, having something like just a week in the summer where non-Native faculty learn how to access this and how to incorporate it makes that a whole lot easier.

GOLDSON: What would be your number one piece of advice to either Native activists or activists in general who are part of the youth that just want to get involved and want to start raising awareness for their cause?

LEWIS: Work life balance. With being a serious activist, burnout is real. If there is a student thinking about going into some sort of activist work, I think it is even more important to be grounded in your community, to make sure that you have a very strong support system because activist work isn't one and done; it's something that you do for your whole life. Also thinking about it as a long-term project and how do I nurture myself so that I can forward Native causes, I think is very important. A lot of times activism seems very immediate, and you feel like if you're not doing something right now all the time, then somehow, you're failing and that's not true. Having a long-range picture of what activism looks like helps you to kind of take things a step at a time and really work towards these goals while making sure that you're your best self for supporting your community. That can be your particular community, for me, Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma, or that can be the wider, US Indigenous community if you're doing work at a federal level, for example. I think that would be one of

the biggest pieces of advice would be to really have this long-term outlook on what activism means.

GOLDSON: What is next for Native students at Duke? And what is next for Native faculty at Duke?

LEWIS: For Native faculty, that's pretty easy; we're working on this cluster hire for Native faculty. The next big thing is more Native faculty, the initiative is a good start for supporting the research of Native American Studies faculty. It also is in place to support the research of our Native American Studies students'. The initiative is a really good first step in bringing Native American Studies research here at Duke and making sure that we're forming partnerships with other institutes of Native American research. But really this, as soon as we get more Native faculty on campus, this needs to expand. So right now, we're starting with a minor; with more faculty, we'll be able to offer a major to students, possibly a graduate certificate for our graduate students. Then after that I think, naturally it will be moved into a center where we can actually host these kinds of events on a larger scale. Right now, the initiative is me and a small committee but what does it look like when we have a robust faculty that can support the students larger research projects; which also means our ability to support both undergrad and graduate students increases exponentially. That's where we're moving towards.

GOLDSON: How do you think that the day to day lives of students will be impacted if those plans come to fruition?

LEWIS: For students, what I'm seeing right now is they're having to cobble together minors and majors and that's extra work. So right now, students who want to go into Native American studies have to do more labor than other majors and what I want is less work for students. I want them to be able to go through the list, pick out classes and have a major like every other student. So, for me, part of this is reducing the labor for both undergraduate and graduate students. Could you tell me your question again?

GOLDSON: It was, how do you think that the day to day of students' lives will be impacted if those plans come to fruition?

LEWIS: Not only do I want less labor for students, but I want more support. I want them in their day-to-day experiences to not just need to come to me as a mentor, but to have ten Native faculty to mentor them. Again, that reduces their labor, it increases the ease of their student experience. So, with these ideas, I hope to decrease their amount of labor, increase their ease and also make sure that they're getting the resources they need as students to do their work. Is the library stocked with the appropriate journals? Which the library has been phenomenal in pursuing those, by the way. Do they have access to funds that will help them

do summer research? So really, I want their day to day lives to be easier on every level of being a student.

GOLDSON: I appreciate that so much as a Native student, that's so important. There's something that I want to touch on that is kind of hard to talk about, but some people at Duke are not very receptive of Native students, Native culture, the growing of Native community, just talking about Native people at Duke. How did that kind of unreceptiveness not kind of "scare you away," in a sense?

LEWIS: I think one thing to remember is that's not abnormal. I've been on university campuses for, let's just say, many decades now. and I watched my dad fight, fight in the early days, just to have a voice at any table in a university setting. So, I consider myself lucky today that my fights are on a much smaller scale. When my dad was fighting, he was fighting the presidents of universities, provosts, these were large fights just to get them to acknowledge a Native presence on campus. On a campus like Duke, even though I came in specifically hired to do program building, which meant that I was being hired at a place where there's not programming, which I came into eyes wide open; this is what I want to be doing as a post-tenure professor. I find that overall, across campus, there's actually a lot of support from faculty, students, and staff. So that means that the folks who aren't as supportive, don't have as big a voice. For me, as long as they're not impeding the progress of expanding educational opportunities at Duke then it actually doesn't bother me because

there will always be people that say, do we really need this? Do we really need to put this in? At this point, specifically at Duke, it's nothing that impedes the progress of increasing educational opportunities for our students. So, I tend not to worry about that too much as long as administration remains supportive to these educational opportunities. I actually feel pretty positive about the work at Duke, even if there are some detractors. Also, one of the things about bringing Native American Studies research to a campus is that oftentimes, a lot of those folks who didn't think it was critical changed their mind. It's not that these people will always be critical, but by bringing things here, we actually may form more allies of these very same people. A lot of the initiative is building a kind of unity across campus and exposing a wide variety of people to the reasons why this is so important. I don't mind them, and I view them as potential future allies once they actually see what a robust Native American Studies program looks like.

GOLDSON: In your opinion, how would a student in a less receptive university, what is the best way and strategy in which they can bring Native culture and Native studies to their university?

LEWIS: Keep at it, keep at it, do like the Duke students did. Duke did not always prioritize Native American studies; this is a fairly new thing that is happening. The Duke students just... kept persisting. Again, this did not start with our current generation of Native students; it started with alumni 10, 20 years ago; keeping this persistent pressure up is crucial. Progress

can be quick, but most of the times it is incremental, especially at universities where we have deans turning over, provosts turning over, presidents turning over. Sometimes you just have to keep the pressure on until the right combination of, especially upper administrations or boards, comes through. Form your communities, form your Native faculty, staff and student committees or communities, and then just keep that pressure on; keep writing that letter every single year. When there is a new dean, a new provost, a new president, write a new letter and eventually it will come to fruition.

GOLDSON: I know that you are very busy, and I value your time a lot. Is there anything that you would like to say, or that you do not think we have touched on enough that you would like to include in the interview?

LEWIS: I think we have covered a lot of it. I just want to emphasize that although you know faculty are in a position of power, our power is also amplifying student voices, working with students, and working with student needs. That is something I want the students to know, that we are here to work with them. We are not here as faculty that come in and take over what is going on, on campus. The students really are the heart of what we do so I want them to know that.

GOLDSON: Well, I appreciate the work that you're doing, I appreciate you taking time out of your very busy schedule to do this interview and I hope that Native faculty in the future and

Native Duke students in the larger world are able to look back on this video and be proud and feel represented and feel like there is at least someone out there who is advocating for them and championing for them.

LEWIS: Yes, and soon there will be so many more of us

GOLDSON: Thank you so much!