Interview with Shandiin Herrera
Conducted by Meghan Quinlan
Via Zoom
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Shandiin Herrera grew up on the Navajo Nation in Monument Valley, Utah and graduated from Duke University in 2019 with a bachelor's degree in Public Policy from the Sanford School of Public Policy. In 2019, she was selected as a Champion for Change for the Center for Native American Youth. Herrera co-founded the Navajo & Hopi Families COVID-19 Relief Fund which transformed into the Native women run nonprofit *Yee Ha'ónlíi Doo*.

Interview Transcript

MEGHAN QUINLAN: The point of the recording is its going to be transcribed for the Duke Library because we want youth voices in the mix of all the manuscripts we have there because we are really interested in how the young people are making change and often they aren't respected and we want to change that. We really value all the young peoples' voices. I'm going to ask for a lot of detail just because we really want the detail. It might seem like I'm asking really small questions about some little topic, we really want to know more. I'll also going to send you a copy of the consent form so you'll have that, and once I have the recording transcribed I will send you and you can make any changes or anything you want before it is made part of the archive.

Can you start by telling me about your background growing up and what led you to start with activism?

SHANDIIN HERRERA: Yeah sure! Cool. All of that sounds great. I grew up in Monument Valley, Utah here on the Navajo Nation, so it's a really small and rural community[1]. We have about 1500 people here, and I went to high school in Monument Valley Highschool in Kayenta, Arizona—graduated there as a Gates Millennium Scholar and continued my education at Duke where I received my bachelor's [degree] in public policy in 2019[2]. I think a lot of my childhood on the reservation definitely inspired me to continue my education and get a degree and come back home to share my knowledge and do what I could to catalyze change and improvement for the families in my community and across Indian Country really[3]. I would say throughout high school I was definitely and still very much an introvert. I didn't necessarily come to Duke to become an activist per say or speak out on a lot of things. I definitely kind of grew into my role in that regard and especially with public speaking, but my freshman year at Duke, so back in 2015, I was still trying to figure out what I wanted to do other than the overarching goal of I am going to get my education and go home and change my community. I wasn't sure how to do that

1. The Navajo Nation refers to 27,000 square miles of land in Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah. It is home to national monuments, tribal parks, historical sites, and the homes of many Native people. It is a Native American Reservation.

2. A Gates Millennium Scholar is a recipient of a scholarship from the Gates Millennium Scholar program with the goal of providing opportunity for outstanding minority students. Opportunity includes financial assistance, renewable awards, and leadership and development programs.

3. Indian Country is a broad description of Native spaces and places within the United States where Native American community is found. In law, Indian country is a reference to the land of Native American reservations in the United States.

or in what way I could even do that, so I would say much of my first year of college was figuring out myself and what kind of leader I wanted to be because I think because I'm an introvert. I am always a listener first. But I found that it is actually helpful especially when I am representing my community and oftentimes, if I am the only Native person in this situation, I am reflective of all Native people which is a lot of pressure. I always try to make sure I am truly reflecting, representing whatever topic I am discussing or the people I am representing at that time. Freshman year, again just trying to figure out the lay of the land at Duke, obviously completely different from the Navajo Nation where I grew up. My childhood definitely taught me to be respectful, to be patient, to be understanding, and to be a listener first. I think a lot of elders in my community really instilled that in me, that's definitely my character. At Duke, I would say that was challenged a lot. You know, you're a student at Duke [I am a first year student at Duke], a lot of big personalities, a lot of extroverts, and so it was really intimidating for me, to be honest. I felt very ostracized just dealing with the culture shock of Duke. I was immediately the only Native person, the only Native woman in all of my classes pretty much. I don't know, I think after one year of just being a student at Duke and understanding more of the culture there and how excluded Native people were, not just in the campus itself—in the classes. The lack of Native students and Native professors and staff at the campus was really frustrating for me. Especially when obviously, I could have chosen to go to another university that has ample support for Native students, a school like the one down the road, UNC [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill], has an entire Native studies department, you can get your degree in Native studies, and just has so much support there. At the same time, I was so drawn to Duke and felt like it was an amazing institution that created so many opportunities for so many people and was just unfortunate that they were not already providing support for me or other Native students. I just felt really passionate about trying to change that. So I think my start in quote un quote "activism" and I am quoting that because I do not necessarily see myself as an activist. I do not outwardly describe myself as an activist. I know many people do, but really I would just describe myself as trying to be a good community member. To me, that means being a good community member in all of the communities I am a part of. So my immediate community here in Monument Valley, more broadly, the Navajo Nation, or more broadly, Indian Country. Also the smaller communities the institutions I am a part of, the groups I am a part of, showing up in a good way for them and bringing my energy and my positivity to that and hopefully improving it along the way. In the context of Duke, after I felt like I had acclimated to the culture, I felt more confident and secure in my place there as a student, I felt like I got a little more comfortable in the terms of speaking up and voicing my opinion and did so throughout my college career. I would say definitely my senior year was pretty pivotal to me in terms of my advocacy at Duke and beyond that. Just really kind of finding my voice and my purpose and recognizing that not only is my voice unique but that it could be really powerful and transform change for those people coming after me. At Duke that meant the students coming after me, or the young people returning back to their rural tribal communities with the same goal to instill change and improvement. I can stop there and see if you have a follow up question.

QUINLAN: That's awesome. Were there any specific people or figures in your life either, home or Duke, throughout your experience who were very pivotal in shaping who you are?

HERRERA: Yeah, definitely. First and foremost, I think the matriarchs in my life. My mother who was a high school counselor for over 30 years, so, I just saw growing up how much she helped youth in our community and helped shape their futures and just gave so much of herself to investing in the generations after her. I've always found her really inspiring, always ready to lend her knowledge, lend a hand in any way she could. Then throughout my education, I've had, I would say at Duke I've had a great support there so I was actually recruited by Steve McLaughlin, who was—he doesn't work there any more, unfortunately, but he was in admissions, and I met him at this program for Native students at the college prep program called College Horizons[4]. I met him when I was a junior in high school. He was a great mentor to me for all four years throughout my Duke career. He was really great, definitely just was nice to have that longevity of the relationship, especially someone who kind of knew me before Duke and then helped me through Duke. At Duke, too, my junior year we had an advisor, her name was Ashley McMillan, and she was actually a student at NC State [North Carolina State University], a grad student, and she was working part time at Duke in the Center for Multicultural Affairs, and specifically with NASA, so Native American Student Alliance[5][6]. It was just really great to have another Native person, who wasn't a student but was more of the advisor for us. I really learned a lot from her, and especially during my time at Duke and figuring out how I could both be a student but also try and encourage the institution to do better and provide more support for students like me, so definitely see her as an inspiration and helped me through a lot of challenges I faced at Duke. And then, I think the staff at Sanford was really great, so the Sanford School of Public Policy[7]—I just had a lot of mentors there, Elise Goldwasser, Suzanne Valdivia, definitely every one of my professors: Professor Deondra Rose was amazing, Professor [Jay] Pearson. So I think definitely growing up, my biggest role model was my mother and then as I transitioned into college really gained amazing mentors through professors I had or advisors. Then as I went further along in my career definitely gained more access to other Native women. Actually now, I work with a Native woman, lead nonprofit that I helped cofound, so learning from the matriarchs, I think, in my life, but also people who have kind of been in the spaces that I am trying to get into before have guided me in that.

QUINLAN: Awesome. Thank you for sharing. When you were growing up in Utah, did you feel any pressure to make change, or what was that like as a child?

HERRERA: Right, so, yeah, I think growing up in a really rural Utah community definitely had its challenges. For example, we still have—40% of our households don't have running water or electricity. 70% of our households experience food insecurity. So basic human rights really is still what we are trying to access out here for our families, but I think all of that definitely seeing

4. College Horizons is a non-profit organization and pre-college program for Native American high school students that provides college admissions workshops to minimize the gap in the access to education for Native American students.

5. The Duke University Center for Multicultural Affairs is a community center for creating an equitable and inclusive campus environment by emboldening students to examine their identities and think critically about diversity and social justice.

6. The Native American Student Alliance (NASA) is the primary cultural organization for Native American students at Duke. NASA is an educational, career, cultural, and social resource for Native American students on campus and works to advance awareness of Native culture throughout campus and in North Carolina.

7 The Sanford School of Public Policy is the public policy school at Duke University that offers undergraduate, master's and doctoral-level degrees in public policy and international development policy.

that first hand growing up and experiencing some of those challenges motivated me to ask questions I think first and foremost. Especially the more I travelled outside of my community and outside the reservation, the more I recognized the disparities we continue to experience. I think my first step was really questioning why that is or how that is. Like even now, its 2021 why do a lot of our households still not have running water or electricity? So, I think for me, the first step—asking questions and being curious and figuring out, okay, what could I do to address this issue or even highlight this issue? The biggest problem is people are unaware or people don't understand how their actions implicate them in the realities of other communities. Embracing that and recognizing that was an important first step for me. Growing up, I definitely felt motivated to figure out how I could help members of my community and improve my communities so that ten, twenty years from now that statistic of 40% of households lacking necessities and resources goes down. That's always at the forefront of what I do—is just trying to, yes, make progress today and improvements, but also think about the next generation, you know, are they going to have to fight the same battles as I did, or experience the same struggles and challenges, and figuring out what I could use so that they don't have to experience that or they don't have to reinvent the wheel in terms of addressing challenges. I think I had a lot of inspiration growing up here and just needed the guidance really, and the mentorship and education and figure out what I could do to make some type of impact.

QUINLAN: You mentioned your mother. Can you speak about what the rest of your family looks like or what your home is like?

HERRERA: Yeah, sure. So, my mom is Jenae Herrera and my father Jose Herrera, and I have two older brothers, Mateo and Jose. I grew up as the youngest and the only girl in the family but had a really great childhood. My family is very family oriented, so we do a lot of things together. It was just great growing up in a really stable family. I'm definitely very grateful for that because that's not really the norm on the reservation, unfortunately, so having a really strong family unit, definitely made me feel supported and really just encouraged me to chase my goal and my dreams, whether that was being a part of different programs throughout my youth, or in high school, or applying to schools like Duke and then attending Duke. I had a really, really great childhood. Then generally, living in a predominantly Navajo community definitely was amazing for me cause I know that not everyone has that opportunity, but to just grow up, surrounded by my culture and my people, I think really early on, gave me a deep sense of purpose and belonging, and was always my safe haven. Every time I'm like away from home, whether it was at Duke or working in [Washington] D.C. or whatever it might be, I definitely felt confident and felt like I knew my purpose and my roots. I think that has really helped me in my advocacy, just feeling strong in my identity and where I come from and who I'm advocating for.

QUINLAN: Thank you. Do you have any specific stories or moments you remember where it made sense that you knew that you were called to help your community or felt that purpose just hit you? Any stories from home or anything?

HERRERA: Yeah. I think that the thing that comes to mine is—I was just maybe like 12 at the time, but, in my community we have the local tribal government, so it's called the Oljato chapter and they have these monthly meetings which are pretty similar to town halls, but I would go with

my mom. Pretty much everyone who could, would go and just stay up to date on what's going on in the community, but there was this one elder who was speaking, and she was in her nineties at the time. And she spoke all Navajo, and I'm not fluent in the Navajo language, but my mother is, so she was translating for me. She was just speaking about how for the last 20 years or so she had been trying to get water and electricity to her home. I just remember thinking like, oh my God, like, that's crazy. Obviously at the time I was very fortunate to live in our household that had both of those things. Being like 12 and really thinking, “Oh my God, like people don't have this at home. How do they do it? What is their day to day look like?” Also to hear her talk so passionately about how she's she never gave up trying to advocate for what her family needed and just seeing an elder do that, but also like thinking about how it's been over 20 years and we've made zero progress in terms of connecting our most rural families. So I think that moment for me, it just reinstilled this drive. “ I am going to do whatever I can so that when I'm 90, we're not having the same issue.” Cause I think what also just kind of blew my mind is I was 12, and I could go to a chapter meeting right now and I'm 24 and hear the exact same problem, hear the exact same families trying to access these resources. So, it just was frustrating for me to see the lack of progress being made. I was like, “okay, I'm going to go to school. I'm going to become a lawyer. I'm going to figure out how we can get resources, for people, how we need to defend our sovereignty and make sure our treaties are upheld because our people should have these resources.” I've always just had that fire in me, I think since then. And then while at Duke, a lot of my advocacy on campus really just stemmed from—yes experiencing my own challenges and struggles, but, again, I've always felt like pretty confident in who I am and overcoming obstacles in my life—but I think just really hearing the struggles of my peers, other Native students there who were really struggling to fit in or do well in their classes there and dealing with struggles at home. Actually seeing some of my Native peers transfer from Duke to another institution that supported them better. And so, I think for me that just made me upset because you're at this huge institution that’s top rank, that communicates that it's doing well when providing support to students. And for students like me, that was completely not true. I think for me, again, like seeing my friends leave, even though they love Duke just as much as I did but weren't able to stay, again, just kind of catapulted me into this role of advocacy because I just felt like it was so unfair that we were at such a disadvantage. Even given things like, okay, first of all, Duke is on Native land—that's not acknowledged. Second of all, Duke used to be a boarding school for Cherokee students—that's not acknowledged. North Carolina has such a huge and vibrant Native community, but you step on Duke's campus and you, you don't even know that. So, these are the things that I, again, wanted to highlight and felt was important people knew because, like I said earlier, half the problem is so many people just didn't know. I had so many uncomfortable interactions with non-Native Duke students who were so oblivious to Native people, Native communities, Native existence. I was just like, how can you go to a top school, like Duke, and come out still so oblivious? So I think I was like, “okay, how am I going to change this,” because I have the ability to do that. I knew that if I had enough strength to step forward and speak up, that I had supporters who'd stand by me. And so was able to do that at Duke and made some type of impact, and I'm very happy to see that it's still happening on campus. There's still a lot of action and movement going on in terms of trying to raise awareness and bring better support for Native students.

QUINLAN: Could you—you mentioned that you're a listener first— could you feel yourself changing from the listener to the speaker? Do you have any moments where you realized that?

HERRERA: Yeah. You know, I think that in, in my life, I've been very fortunate to be in a lot of spaces where there are Native elders, who've shared their knowledge and their wisdom. And for me, these have been moments that have just reinstilled my leadership approach. I know plenty of leaders, great leaders, who are the first to speak or just have a louder voice, and then have experienced leaders who are listeners first kind of like how I am. Both are important and both are needed, I think and so it wasn't until I think college for me, my senior year, that I felt that transition in myself. If we're like in a group setting talking about something, I'm not the first person to speak or first person to raise my hand. But, I think I like that because allowing others to speak gives me more perspective and allows me to better frame what I'm saying. Because I understand, my words are powerful, and they have a lot of meaning to people. And so it's always an opportunity to make an imprint on someone. And so I don't want to say something that I felt unprepared for, or maybe miss said something that could be misconstrued later. I'm very particular with how I'm speaking and conveying the message that I want to get across. Back to my senior year, I felt like I had gained a lot of really good experience throughout my college years and applied for this—it's called The Center for Native American Youth at The Aspen Institute in Washington, D.C. [8]. They have what they call Champions for Change and essentially they choose five throughout the country who've really just embodied leadership, but also, advocacy and activism in their own way[9]. Whatever it is they're advocating for, they've really just kind of stepped out of their shell and really tried to make change and highlight important issues. I applied senior year. Not really, obviously I wanted it, but also feeling like it was a little bit of a long shot. But when I did receive the nomination and was selected a Champion of Change in 2019, it was just this moment of, "okay, now is my time to share everything I've experienced." And was really embracing this newfound speaking role. I think throughout my life I've always been a writer, so I've always written essays, written blogs. That was just my first mode of communication and felt that was the best way I could express myself and where I felt more comfortable when I wasn't so comfortable, speaking in front of 50 people or something. But I think that year for me, I was like, okay, I'm at a place in my life and in my advocacy where I felt like I knew what I wanted to say, and it may have taken me all the way to my senior year in college to figure that out, but again, it just came back to me feeling confident and feeling like I would be a good representation of not just myself, my family, my community, but the Navajo Nation in general or Indian Country in general, or even representing Duke. So I just felt like I was ready to take on that role. And so that year, I think it was when my advocacy really took off, not just on campus, but, being in D.C. and being a part of a program where I was literally talking to so many people doing presentations on Capitol Hill meeting with senators and representatives, and then found that I'm comfortable doing this. I still love writing, but also I know if I have to be on a panel in front of a hundred people or leading a small group or sharing my story, that's something I am capable of doing and something that is important to me now. So yeah, I think it

8. The Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute is a policy program and resource center working to improve health, safety, and well-being for Native American youth.

9. Champions for Change is a Native youth leadership initiative that provides advocacy training and experience-based learning to five selected Native youth applicants each year who display a desire to better their communities.

just took a lot of years of learning, but also being patient, not feeling like I had to force myself into this role just because no one else was going to do it or I just felt that was missing. But really just taking my time and naturally growing into this leadership role.

QUINLAN: Is there any advice you'd give someone who's young, who's still looking to find their voice?

HERRERA: Yeah, I think—that's a great question. I think definitely not forcing yourself or not feeling like it has to come right now. Like I said, it wasn't until my senior year that I felt particularly called to publicly speak on issues or be a representative in different ways, but I honestly think that leadership comes in different shapes and sizes. And also depending on whatever field you're in, right? So for me, I chose public policy, which has a lot of speaking involved and it has a lot of like analysis involved, but I think whatever field you're in, whatever space you're in, there are different ways to be a leader. I think just recognizing that is important because I've seen and interacted with a lot of youth who felt like just because they didn't want to be a lawyer or be into policy or government, that they didn't necessarily fit that like leadership role, but I think that's completely false. Yeah, those leaders have the loudest voices, a lot of the time, like people in those fields that's who you're seeing shape policy. But I think that everyone has a hand in influencing policy and shaping communities. And you do that in your own way, right? Whether you're an artist sharing your music or you're a writer influencing people because all of that matters and all of that makes a community strong. I think I would just encourage youth to find their muse and know that that's important and it's influencing people whether they realize it or not. And to just not feel that outside pressure of—and it's hard to feel that, right? I'm not saying it's easy, but to try and just cancel out the outside noise, that's telling you what a leader is or what you have to do to make some type of impact or change because, I think people are leaders in their own way and that everything and everybody is important. My biggest piece of advice is just to acknowledge that and embrace that and find your passion and find what it is that you want to contribute to your community.

QUINLAN: Thank you. Circling back, I had a question about your experience with people who know nothing about Native American rights and what's going on. Was that ever annoying to you or bothersome that you had to take a step back ever because you had to educate the people around you about basic knowledge?

HERRERA: Yeah. The first adjective that comes to mind is it was surprising to me, again, I grew up on the reservation, so I was around tons of Native people. And then to be dropped in the middle of Duke where I was the only one was a surreal experience. Most of the time I was just shocked that I think, especially as a freshman. Just felt like, okay, I'm new here. I don't necessarily feel the confidence to like, say anything, even though that person was completely racist or said something, out-of-pocket. I didn't feel like I had like the energy honestly, to deal with it or to try and fix the situation or educate them. Fast forward to junior, senior year I definitely felt like this is not okay. This is ridiculous. I guess the word I would use is fed up. I was just like, this is crazy. So I took the opportunity to educate people, even though I've had situations where I was in a class and the professor maybe said something weird, or wasn't including Native people in whatever the topic was, and after class went up to the professor and

was just like, “Hey, you said, this, that wasn't correct, or that was not okay to say. I'm Native and here's how it was received.” And yada, yada. A lot of times, sometimes instead of professors trying to correct themselves or improve their curriculum, they're like, “oh, okay. Sorry. I didn't know we had any Native students in here. I've never taught a Native student”— these excuses, right? I'm like, okay, this is awkward. And then—instead of like, okay, “I will do better. I will educate myself so I can make my class better”—instead just put it on me,. I literally had a history class where a professor was talking about typical like Columbus, expansion and all that stuff. But you’re in North Carolina where there's so many tribes that are still here, and that was not included at all, especially when they're talking about state history. After class, I went up to the professor and told him how I felt and there was, it was a big class, it was over a hundred students. It was one of those big ones. And so instead of being like, “okay, Shandiin, I understand, I will improve my curriculum,” he was just like, “okay, well you teach the next class.” And I was like, what? And I was, oh, I don't even know what year this was; I think junior, I think it was a junior. Anyways, so I taught a whole class as a junior to this class of a hundred plus students. Literally he’s like, “all right, you have an hour and a half to give Native history.” I'm not a teacher. I don't know everything. I just know my experience and situations like that, where it's people just projecting, not even wanting to improve their own perspective or grow. It's just like, “then you do it.” And so that's one experience I had teaching a whole history class at Duke. And then on an individual basis, with, my peers who were like “I didn't know Native people still existed” or “do you still live in a teepee” or just these questions where I'm like, seriously? And most students, I would say, were receptive to me. “You should go read this book. You should watch that. You should educate yourself. I can share a little bit of what I know from growing up the way I did in my culture. But again, every tribe is different.” All Native people are not the same. So I definitely had awkward experiences with peers that were just asking very racist questions. But I feel like for the most part they were very receptive to educating themselves, especially with current issues. A lot of people just paint Native people in this historical perspective. And not knowing there are so many current issues our communities are facing. But I feel like peers were more receptive to “I didn't know. I now know. I'm going to educate myself and follow Native activists, like keep up with issues and be involved in whatever way I can.” Whereas I feel like professors, or the more institutional level was defensive about it. It was just this weird dynamic I had to navigate throughout college. Even when advocating to administration level people like, “Hey, like Native students need more support or you all definitely have funding, how about you put some towards supporting Native students?”
It was almost not like a, “okay, yeah, you're right. You pointed out a weak spot we were unaware of, we'll do better.” It was more of a defensive thing. I don't know. It's kind of hard to explain, but that underlying sentiment was really interesting to experience.

QUINLAN: How was teaching that class? Like, how did you feel about that?

HERRERA: I had no idea what I was doing. And I think it was one of those classes where we met on like a Monday. So we met on a Wednesday or something, so I had one day to prepare on top of, of course all the other classes I had to do homework for and everything. But, yeah, it was stressful to try to fit what I felt was important into an hour and a half. There’s so much to cover. Yeah, it was really challenging, but essentially, I talked about basic—I don't know— history, basic times in history, I felt were important for Native people—different treaties that, you know,

I felt were important at the time Standing Rock was happening[10]. So talking about that. Then with respect to my own tribe, a little bit of our history, the Native rights movement, all of that stuff. It was this super fast "this year, this happened and this year, this happened and here's what's happening now," and all of that. And like, I don't know, it was just crazy. I can't even tell you what I talked about. It happened so fast, but, what was interesting though, is on our final exam, there was this section of questions from my lecture on that. So, it was so funny cause I was like, "dang, if you weren't listening to me, you would have gotten five questions wrong." But, it was just crazy. I was just like, this is too much for me. And there were so many times where I just wanted to be a student, you know, it's hard enough just trying to get through Duke and have good grades and set yourself up. But I also, you know, have to be an educator so many times. And with that, like, you know, is a lot of free labor. I was doing so many talks to classes who wanted to have me as like a guest speaker to talk about issues, which I'm happy to do, but also it's a lot of work. It's a lot of energy. I only had one professor throughout my whole time there. So I would say like my junior, senior year, when I really started being public about things, I would have professors reach out to me and ask if I can come speak to their class about a certain topic, or just to share my experience or whatever. I only had one professor who actually paid me. He was amazing, one of my favorite professors as well. And he actually told me; he sat me down because he knew I was just overworking myself because I think that a part of the challenge of being an advocate and an activist is you get to a point where you kind of feel like if *you* don't do it or you don't do this talk or whatever, you're missing an opportunity to educate people. It becomes a personal thing you have to do, but on top of being a student at Duke, none the less, it's a lot of pressure. This professor asked me to speak to his class and I was like, "okay, I can try. I'm super busy, but whatever." And he, paid me for the talk. And then afterward, told me, "Okay, you're doing a lot of stuff for free. You need to stop. Your experience, your knowledge, and your education is so unique, and your time is important to you." And I had reached a point where I was just giving so much of my time away, and I just felt myself burning out. And so that's when he was just kinda talking to me, and that happens to a lot of people who are doing activism work. You do a lot of work for free. And so he was just like, "okay, you need to set some boundaries. When people ask you to do like these talks or whatever, let them know, like you're happy to do them, but also they need to pay you for this work you're doing." So that was really helpful for me, because after college, I definitely received a lot of inquiries to do things, and obviously wanting to say yes to everything cause I felt like it was an opportunity, but I had to learn how to set boundaries, had a lot of growing experiences.

QUINLAN: Okay. Thank you. I so appreciate you talking to me. Can we talk a little bit about the work you've done? Advocacy wise, what you think is most important?

HERRERA: Yeah, of course. Definitely I would start with my time at Duke. Going back to like me being a writer, I published an op-ed[11] in *The Duke Chronicle*[12] that just outlined my experience there as a Native student and was this call for action by the institution to do better[10]. I

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10 The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe on the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota held several protests in 2016 against the building of the Dakota Access Pipeline, an oil pipeline that would cross through the reservation territory and threaten water sources

11. Link to op-ed here

12. *The Duke Chronicle* is the student-run news organization of Duke University.

would say once that was published, you know, I was in meetings with Duke admin, just trying to further argue my case is what it felt like, unfortunately. Like as, “okay. You guys want some more support, why?” or “What would that look like?” Kind of thing. So, I think just learning how to stand my ground and the first thing I was pushing for was just a space for Native students on campus because a lot of the other cultural groups had spaces and we didn't. That was my first big thing was “we need space where we can convene, where NASA could host events for students.” So I think the spring of my senior year, they actually finally converted a space in the Center for Multicultural Affairs to be for NASA. That was a really big accomplishment. Also, I know Duke had put together—cause another one of my calls to action was we need to hire Native staff, Native professors. There are so many amazing Native professors out there that would love to teach at a university like Duke, and the students would benefit so greatly from them. I know that before I left, they had put together, and I sat in on one of the initial meetings. They were putting together a commission for some of the current staff and faculty to sit on and they were going to be intentional with recruiting and putting out their calls for Native staff and professors to apply to Duke. I know that this year, I believe or last year they actually hired a Native professor, Ryan Emanuel. He is amazing, also a Duke alum, but small steps and trying to build on that too. I definitely see that as a huge win as well. When I decided to come back home after Duke, which is really hard for young people in general to return to their communities, but more so for Native youth, just because there's not a lot of opportunity. Here on the Navajo Nation, our unemployment rate is regularly at 50%, so we are experiencing a lot of brain drain. I was very fortunate to co-create a fellowship for myself. I worked with an organization called Lead for America who essentially funds and recruits recent college graduates and sends them home to work in their community on whatever project they feel called to regarding community development.

So I think co-creating that fellowship and that pathway home for me was really pivotal to a lot of the work that I'm doing now. So when I came back home in 2019, I worked as a policy analyst and project consultant for the Oljato chapter of the Navajo Nation, and that was really a great experience just kind of getting my foot in the door, learning a lot about how our tribal government functions. This was after I had done an internship in Senator Tom Udall's office in Washington, DC, so I had learned how the federal government operates and especially, through the Senate committee on Indian affairs, how they work with the sovereign Native nations in the country. So, getting that experience was really great, and then coming home and actually seeing the day-to-day functions of like our tribal government was helpful for me just to learn even deeper how I could be impactful for my community. And then once the pandemic started, I was—so the thing about working in a tribal government too is I was one of three women. I was the youngest person. So, it was challenging in that— like you mentioned at the beginning—was fighting so hard to be taken seriously. When I came home as a 21 year old, 22 year old and sitting in these policy meetings and I have all these ideas and they're like, “okay, you're like 20, what do you know?” Feeling that, especially because most of our, well, at the time, all of our chapter leadership were men, older men. It was, again, then the time of intimidation, but also motivation for me to be like, “yeah, I'm young, but I know what I'm talking about. I know my community and, I need to be taken seriously.” I think having that experience just again, was another moment of growth for me. And then once the pandemic, I co-founded the Navajo & Hopi Families COVID-19 Relief Fund. I joined 12 Native women and created this relief fund,

which transformed into a nonprofit called *Yee Ha'ónlíi Doo*, which in Navajo means "may our people have fortitude." It was really cool for me to go from all of those experiences, dealing with trying to be taken serious, trying to navigate spaces with predominantly men and now to be a part of an organization that is Native woman led—I can't even explain it. It's just a relief, but we co-founded the relief fund in March of 2020 and had this year of service to our communities. We provided direct relief to Navajo families, also Hopi families, so we service the Hopi reservation. We had some amazing milestones. We, in 2020, raised over $18 million, so over $7 million of that was raised on our GoFundMe platform. We mobilized over 1300 volunteers across the reservations to provide this relief. So we provided households with food so that they could stay home and stay safe. We did PPE pantries, providing community members with free PPE that was hard to access. We had a clean hands project where we provided portable hand washing stations to our households without running water, and just various projects to try and bring resources into our communities. And we actually provided service to over 500,000 households throughout our operation—sorry, 500,000 people—and so that was like over 80,000 households. So I finished out my fellowship, working with *Yee Ha'ónlíi Doo*, and then, now, I am currently the director of our first community center. So as we were in this non-profit space talking about providing direct relief through our COVID relief fund, we also were thinking more, long-term; how do we provide long-term sustainable change for our communities? For me, and where my community is situated, like a lot of reservation communities, the access to basic resources is a huge challenge. And that included resources like WiFi; less than 4% of our households have access to broadband. I know, and we saw throughout COVID how important it was to have internet, right? Everything moved online. That left out so many communities like mine who just didn't have this access. We were thinking about what we could do, and with funding we were able to obtain, we decided to start a community center. In Monument Valley, I knew that was the perfect thing for us to do because back in 2019, when I started my fellowship, I did a listening tour. So I spent four months doing interviews with community members and entities in Monument Valley, just really diving deep into, you know, what challenges and issues they face on a day-to-day, what do they want and need from our community? How can we grow and make improvements? And one of my biggest findings was people wanted a community center. So for me to have this whole report and have the data on that, and then for *Yee Ha'ónlíi Doo* to have the money to do it, it was just this perfect match. So we started, and my fellowship ended July (2021), so a couple of months ago, and I was actually going to start law school this fall, but, stayed another year, so I deferred a year, and now I am the director of our first community center, the *Tsé Bii' Ndzisgaii* Community Center here in Monument Valley. It's been really amazing to see this idea, come to fruition and to now offer resources to my community. So in our center, we have a business center with computers that has WiFi, printing, scanning, faxing, all of that stuff. And I think that's really important because people in my community would literally travel 70 miles to the nearest border town to get on a computer or to print something or fax paperwork, so now we have that available here and then we have other things like a shared workspace library classroom, for people to just utilize and have like this space to convene. And so we're just really hoping to support our, youth leaders, our entrepreneurs and small business owners, and offer resources that people otherwise had to travel really far to access. That's what I'm currently doing, and then I'll be starting law school next fall.

QUINLAN: Amazing. What does the organization behind the nonprofit and the community center look like? What is your day?

HERRERA: It can be a lot of different things. I think definitely now it has changed a little bit because I'm the director. So just day-to-day operations of the community center and programming. Like right now, I'm in the middle of planning, some of computer skills workshops for next fall for our community members to have access, and then we actually did relaunch our COVID relief program, on a smaller scale, providing assistance to households who are COVID positive, so I help a little bit with that coordination in terms of getting deliveries out to families in my area. Then today I did an interview on a radio station, doing different interviews with different newspapers or online blogs to highlight our work, and get the word out there. Also, doing different projects, so this week *Vice News* is coming and I'll be doing an episode with them talking about the digital divide and how we're trying to provide resources to our community and why some of those challenges continue to persist in places like Monument Valley. There's a lot of advocacy still intertwined in the work that I'm doing. I definitely have become a lot better at managing my time, and even if that means turning down certain projects. I think last year of COVID, because I was primarily doing COVID relief, that also meant trying to share our stories on social media, which was such a powerful tool and one of the reasons why we raised so much money. We had over a hundred thousand donors on GoFundMe who found us through Instagram or Facebook. I think my day to day is definitely still doing a lot of advocacy work to bring light to the issues that our organization is trying to address, but also just providing direct resources and support to my community members.

QUINLAN: Do you see the land—you talked about how you were the youngest member of that council—do you see the landscape of Native American advocacy changing?

HERRERA: You know, I think that's always an interesting question because on a national stage, yes. We are definitely seeing a lot of Native women and Native youth who are just absolutely amazing, and their advocacy for issues in their community or just visibility in general and representation and organizations like IllumiNative are doing amazing work as well as the Center for Native American Youth[13]. And so yes. I know that when I was younger, I didn't necessarily see a lot of what you see today. Like the activism on social media. I didn't even have social media when I was younger. Just access to information is awesome. And we've definitely seen more youths and more Native women have these platforms to do some really amazing advocacy work. I will say though that on a very localized level, and again, this might be different for different tribal communities, but at least here in my community, the landscape of leadership has not really changed a lot, unfortunately. I think it's still really difficult for youth, and for women in general, to obtain a leadership role within even if you look at the Navajo Nation Tribal Government[14], we have two women who are a part of our council, and the first one joined just a few years ago. So up until then, there was just men who were a part of the council or the tribal government leadership. So I'm definitely hopeful that we'll continue to change, but there's just so

13. IllumiNative is a Native led initiative to advance a more accurate narrative about Native Americans.

14. The Navajo Nation Tribal Government is made up of an executive, legislative, and judicial branch.

much history that has gone into the landscape of my tribal government. But I definitely have some hope because I know that my tribe was a matriarchal society, so our women were actually the leaders in our communities. So of course, when the federal government came and they uprooted everything and framed our tribal government pretty much like the federal government. We saw a lot of men take on these leadership roles and really kind of ostracize women in our community. I think Native women are still leaders in their families and in their communities in their own ways. So for me, and a lot of the women I work with, though we're not directly a part of like the tribal government, we've created a nonprofit, so we're creating our own spaces to be leaders and foster youth leadership as well. Nationally, there's been so much improvement and progress, which is amazing to see, but locally it's slow, but I think at some point we'll definitely catch up.

QUINLAN: Do you feel respected as a young woman in the Navajo community as a leader?

HERRERA: I think right now I can say yes. I think two years ago when I first came home, I probably would have said no. It's difficult for women who are embracing leadership roles, but I think over time, you gain a lot of respect. I know I've definitely felt that in my own community. When I first came home, people were like, “okay, she just graduated college.” I guess I didn't necessarily have the experience. Just kind of a little wary, which I guess, was understandable, but I think I take a lot of pride in backing up my words with actions, or not even saying anything, really just letting my work speak for itself. I think in that regard over the past two years, I've definitely gained a lot of respect from my community members because everything I've set out to do, I've done in my community, and I've always just aimed to be a good community member and help where I can and be impactful where I'm needed. I definitely feel like, today, I do have a lot of respect.

QUINLAN: Good. Okay. Awesome. So, you're going to law school next year. For you in your life and the Navajo Nation as a whole, what do you see as the path forward from here?

HERRERA: I think that we've made a lot of progress really, but I think something that—I actually had an opportunity to meet with Madam Secretary Deb Haaland[15]. I've met with her a couple of times, actually, in the past few years. And I think from her, I've just gained a really strong sense of just empowerment, but also I remember she said to me when she was first elected as a representative at the time, she told me, we've made so much progress as native people and in our communities and people are finally recognizing us and working with us to improve our livelihood, but she also said we, we have to be careful. We can't become satisfied. When you live so long without certain resources or under certain constraints, and you get a little bit of freedom, you get a little bit of attention and aid, it's easy to become satisfied when there's so much more that needs to be done and so much more that has to happen for your communities to thrive. So that's always stuck with me. I think now, recognizing the progress we have made, but also understanding there is so much work to be done, and if we are excited and content with progress we've made now, imagine what we'll feel in like 10, 20 years or what our children will experience. I think for me, that gives me a lot of hope, not just for my future. I'm definitely going

15. Deb Holland is the first Native American to serve as cabinet secretary and one of the first Native American women to serve on congress.

to law school. I want to be a lawyer. I want to work for my community and Indian country at large, just to continue to defend our sovereignty and make sure our people have basic human rights, and being a lawyer for me is just another way of being a protector of my community. Yeah, definitely for the Navajo Nation making progress, seeing more women in our leadership roles, reinstilling our traditional values, and rebuilding our communities in the way that fits and works for us best. Then, even as a country, recognizing these shortcomings and these histories of injustice and the continued injustice we see today. I'm acknowledging it and just continuing to work together to improve communities across the country. So I definitely have a very positive outlook on the future. I'm just excited to see all of the work that continues to be done.

QUINLAN: What has been the impact of working in D.C., with D.C.? Do you want to end up as working in politics someday?

HERRERA: I never saw myself being involved in politics or, I've had people ask me "oh, are you going to run for office one day or something?" And I've never seen myself in that role. I'm also not opposed to that role if it ever came up, but I think what's important for me is just trying to get as many people as possible involved in the policy making process, making sure people have voting rights, that we're aware of what is going on around us because I've just seen in so many instances throughout my life, and of course throughout history, how Native communities are disproportionately impacted by policies and get the short end of the stick a lot of the times. We're talking about environmental racism, healthcare, infrastructure, just everything you could think of. So my goal has always just been to be that resource to help people understand this, especially in my community. I think a lot of times once you start talking about politics and policy, there's a lot of rhetoric that is very niche. And people don't really understand; "how's this going to affect my family" or something? And so I think for me, it's just being that resource and spreading information and making sure people are informed. That's always been my passion. D.C. is a really great place to be, especially—it's very important for Native people to be there and to be advocating for our rights and just defending our sovereignties. I definitely am open to that and seeing that in my future.

QUINLAN: Is there anything else you think that's important for somebody in the future or now studying, activism with Indigenous communities to know?

HERRERA: That's a really good question. I think that when you're thinking about activism or just the realities of Indigenous communities, it can seem very far-fetched, I think at times. I've had situations where I've talked to someone living in Phoenix, Arizona, for example, that's five hours from my community and it's a major city and talking to them about issues in my community can seem kind of farfetched. And they're like, "yes, it's important. I understand. But how do my actions, or lack thereof, impact your community?" And then when you really look at it, a lot of the electricity and water taken from Navajo goes to Phoenix, so they're literally benefiting from the depletion of our resources. So I think tying those connections and making people understand "your actions, and whether you see it, acknowledge it, or not, they're impacting Native people because you are on Native land." So just encouraging people to really dig deep into that and understand that. Again, we've had people who wanted to volunteer with us, for example. They wanted to come to the Navajo Nation and physically volunteer and they felt

like that was the only way to contribute. But I don't think it takes someone physically going to a reservation, half across the country— cause most people were from the East Coast who are reaching out—to feel like you're contributing. There are tribes throughout the country, in your community, just recognizing and learning the history of displacement in your community, where the nearest tribe is, how you can become involved to mentor, to be a good community member, but to also highlight issues that are very seldom highlighted in Native communities. I think that's just my biggest piece of advice and recognizing there is so much you can do where you are at, and it's just really acknowledging how your impacts really do impact Native people in our land.

QUINLAN: I wanted really quickly wanted to circle back. You mentioned interviewing for four months. What, what was that like?

HERRERA: One of the projects as a Lead for America fellow—they really encourage was the listening tour because we were all recent college graduates, so all of us were away from our community for four years. So we're going back to these places that may look a little different, may have new faces, so it was just all about trying to get reacclimated to our community. Also for me, I really wanted to come up with a really good report so that I would know, again, like being a representative and speaking on behalf of my community is really important to the work that I do. And I want it to be truly reflective of that. Through this research, I now know the needs of my community and the desires of my community and how to support them because they've literally told me. So it just has made me a better leader in understanding how to advocate for my people. Also it's a really powerful tool, not just to like go through that experience, on a very personal basis. But just really getting to know the organizations and building partnerships and collaborations, and the work that I do has been really beneficial and important. But just also talking to community members, I was able to talk to like some elders, talk to parents, students, different youth in our community and hear what their stories are. Because these are all stories that make up our community. And this is a place that I call home and that I love, and so it was amazing to hear from so many people, how *they* view our community or, what challenges do they face, and what can I do to help? It also helped me frame the projects I wanted to work on. I now knew what the top five things were in my community that people wanted to see change or needed support in. So it gave me essentially a roadmap for how I could be impactful in my community, but also how to just be a really good advocate and representative because having that four month research experience really opened my eyes and it was really great to just learn stories, like what you're doing, right? I did this for four months. So that's why when I got your email, I was like, "of course I will do it." I've sent, like I know what it feels like to just send cold emails or try and reach out to people to interview them, and I was always grateful when I got a response. Yeah, it was such a great experience, a very in-depth experience for me to just learn my community better, learn more about our people and what I could do moving forward to address some of the challenges that I learned.

QUINLAN: Are there youth in your community reaching out to you as a leader or just talking to you because they look up to you?

HERRERA: Yeah, I've had actually youth from like all over the country, Native youth who would reach out to me like via email or Instagram or want to chat on the phone. I'm always open

to that because I was once that person reaching out. I'm always happy to share my experience and be a resource and be supportive of them in their journey. Because like I said, I had a lot of really great mentors in my life who made the time and took the time to help me and speak with me and mold me into the person I am today. I really love talking with youth to just share a little bit about my journey, to encourage them, and to also let them know I'm here for them. If they ever need to vent, need to talk, need a letter of recommendation, whatever it might be, I just want to be a resource for them as well.

QUINLAN: Thank you so much for answering all those questions. Is there anything else you can add or you're thinking of that? Anything?

HERRERA: I don't think so. I think we covered everything.

QUINLAN: Okay. That's awesome. Thank you.