

Council Oak Oral History Project Transcript

M – Marge Hebring

J – John Thompson

J – So, what can you tell us about the council oak, either the original oak tree or the dedication ceremony?

M – I don't remember the original oak tree, I came to this campus in 1989 as a student and, I joined the Native American Student Association, and in 1990 we were asked to come to a ceremony – a sunrise ceremony – and help plant the new council oak tree. That was the first that I had heard about it – about the tree, and I remember the people that were there: my mother (Caroline Martin Benson) was there, Veda Stone who was an advocate for Indian students and John 'Little Bird' Anderson was there, he's a Lac Courte Oreilles elder and he used to be a chairman of the Lac Courte Oreilles Reservation. I remember a Ho Chunk drum singing, and I believe there was an Ojibwe drum and Ernie St. Germaine was there he's also an Ojibwe elder, and they had a microphone and they asked people to speak. I remember afterwards my mother said she could hear the words echoing up and down the...building – in-between the buildings – words like harmony and peace when they said those words they like echoed among the trees and the buildings there. I remember Ernie St. Germaine telling us...cause we stood there a long time and he said, "don't worry this tree is going to have to stand here a lot longer than you...than you ever will have to," I remember that part, and I remember everyone took a pinch of tobacco and put it in the hole where the tree was being planted, and...I think there was a drought that year, and my mother prayed for rain when she put her tobacco in and I remember that we got lots of rain after that – in fact 1993 there was a huge flood in the Midwest, and I still have pictures from Life magazine about the flood. And those are basically the things that I remember, I remember many students who were going to school with me at that time, we had a very active Native American student association, and we were all there – community members that came... we had a run/walk that day, and we planted the tree at sunrise. Those are my recollections of the day.

J – Does the tree have any personal significance for you?

M - Tons because after I graduated from UW-Eau Claire I had a job with the office of multicultural affairs and I was planning pre-college camps, and for probably the past 10 years – or maybe a little longer – we have started every pre-college camp under that tree.

Students would circle around that tree and we would tell them the history of the tree, and how the first Council Oak was destroyed by lightning and wind and how we planted a new tree, and then we ended every pre-college camp around that tree. I know that when the elders come – or Native people – they know where that tree is and they will go there and see how it's doing. I've had elders ask me how tall it is now, and...so they have fond memories of that tree. I remember as a student thinking...this is a real commitment on the part of the university to invite native people here for a ceremony to plant this tree. And what I understood at the time was that they'd had difficulty planting a tree and having it grow until we did this sunrise ceremony and then the tree flourished after that. For years I've put ribbons in that tree, when it was planted we put ribbons on it and a couple years later I noticed that the ribbons were no longer on the tree. I don't know if people took them off or if they just, you know, deteriorated, but I remember a few times in the last ten years replacing all those ribbons...colors of the Four Directions.

J – Can you tell us what the ribbons symbolize, or if they have any symbolic significance?

M – Well they symbolize the Four Directions and also Father Sky and Mother Earth.

J – Can you explain the Four Direction?

M – Well...not exactly because it depends on who you ask. If you ask an Ojibwe, or if you ask a Lakota sometimes the colors are different. But I know yellow is sometimes used for the east, or red. For the south sometimes green sometimes black, I'm not real sure about it. And red for the west, sometimes black or white for the north...but always the blue is the sky, green represents the earth...I've also been told it's the color of the four races –the red yellow black and white

J – Ok...how do you believe the – or do you believe – the UWEC community's opinion of the tree has changed over the years?

M – Well in view of recent developments concerning the Council Oak and the possible destruction of it and the rallying of the staff and students, I think there's been a new awareness about the Council Oak – I'm not sure if people knew where it was or knew the significance of it. Someone told me they didn't think five people could tell you where it was and I said I'll tell you where it is its on every piece of stationary, on every podium, on virtually every t-shirt, you know, from the UW-Eau Claire – maybe not every one but a lot of them so it's all around our university – it's a symbol of our university – so

everywhere you go you see the tree, so I think it's important to know the significance of it, and the history of it.

J – You mentioned the recent controversy about the council oak; I was wondering could you elaborate a little bit more on what that entailed?

M – Well I found out in July that the new student center would be placed where the council oak now stands and that there were plans to cut it down – destroy the tree – and that was a real concern to me because of my past history with the tree and all the people I knew had been involved with it, and I wondered how alumni would feel about that – all the students that I'd gone to school with who are now out working around the state – how they would feel about that. And we were asked to come and help plan the building – I was very proud about that, that we were asked to give our opinions about the design and the function but I don't remember there being any discussion – at least at meetings that I was at – about where it would be placed, or that the Council Oak tree would be affected. And so, a couple of us went over to the tree and we're talking and we decided to meet in a couple of days – because we had been called to a meeting by the university concerning the tree and what we should do about it, and we decided to have a meeting – brainstorm some ideas about what we could do to help save it, and a couple of days later when we met there was a huge group of people surrounding the tree – I was a little late when I first got there and I was very surprised at the number of people – I recognized all the staff that had been members of American Indian studies, and staff that were there when we planted the tree they, they've been here for years and they, they know the history of it...so, and because of their expertise in relating the history and the importance of the tree...the chancellor finally made the decision to, to save the tree which I think was – I was so proud of him because I believe he could see the significance of it and he could also see the opportunities around saving the tree. I work here at the university with k-12 schools. I have 95% Native American students in my program, we bring them to this campus all the time and our goal is to increase the number of American Indian students who go to college and I have two – from my last grant – I have two on campus right now who were former students of mine who are at this campus, and so I believe that there will be more and more Indian students coming and I was afraid that might not be the case if the word got around that the tree was gone and that the university...you know I might have felt like they didn't value Native students, so I'm very proud that they made the right decision in that case.

J – Ok...how do you believe the council oak will be viewed by future generations?

M – Well, I see a bright future for the university where Native students are concerned. I think we need to do more things on campus that related to Native history and culture and I see us doing that now. The university is talking with Native people about the tree, and about the plans and things that will happen in the future, so I think maybe the administration is more aware of the strong ties to Native students and Native communities around the state and how we can have a relationship with those communities and how it could be a positive one

J – Ok...would you like to...tell us about the picture...[motions to picture on bookshelf]

M – This picture is Veda Stone, she was an advocate for Native students, here – especially here in Eau Claire in the early 80s – well actually early 60s I think – she was a good friend of mine and of my mother's. She was one of the reasons we have an American Indian Studies major on this campus because she was helping to plan it and advocated for it, and I remember her telling me she would ask her mom, “are you sure I'm not Native,” and so she really had it at heart for Native students. She supported us when we were in school, and invited us into her home; she was just a great lady. And we have one of the – we had the first American Indian studies major in the state because of her, so – because of her advocacy. So I was just proud to know her.