

Danielle Smith

Full Transcript

Interview Conducted October 30, 2020

Interviewer

I want to start by asking you for a brief bio. How would you want to be introduced to a broad audience of people who might come and interact with this project?

Danielle Smith

My name is Danielle Smith, and I am part of the Onondaga Nation, and I am Hawk Clan. Because we're a matrilineal society, I get my clan from my mother. So she's Hawk clan; her mom's Hawk clan. And I also have a Onkwehonwe name, which is basically just a name in Onondaga that represents what clan you're from. I grew up here on the Onondaga Nation. I'm thirty-five years old. I have a ten-year-old daughter. And I currently live here. I had moved off at different points in my life, and lived in different states and areas. But for the majority, I've been here, home, on the Onondaga Nation, and I have this deep connection to the land itself, and also to the people, my family.

After I'd had my daughter, I had decided that I wanted to go back to school. I was about twenty-six, and I started here at our community college, Onondaga Community College. And then I finished there and transferred to Syracuse University. And I was able to go there due to the Haudenosaunee Promise that is offered to the different Six Nations. So I was able to get my undergraduate degree there through scholarship, and I got my undergrad degree in social work, and then I decided to pursue my Master's in social work, and I actually just graduated in August 2020.

That ties really tightly into my activism, and things that I'm really passionate about, and where I'm from, and where I grew up, and the different values that I was taught as an Onondaga woman; and the different teachings and ways in which I am going about living my life and making my decisions are heavily influenced by the Onondaga ceremonies and my family and our teachings. So one of those would be the Great Law. Also, I'm not sure if people know, but the Onondaga Nation, that's part of the Six Nations as a whole. We're the central, basically, nation. We're the Firekeepers. That means that we hold the central fire, so that's where Grand Council, which is our form of government, meets, and that's where our Tadodaho is from, here in Onondaga. And what I was going to say was, what's really significant about this area, and especially the land where Syracuse is situated, is that it's Onondaga Nation ancestral land, and that land is unceded. That means that the land was never given up, it was never sold, it was illegally taken from my ancestors, and that is also another reason why a statue such as Columbus being in a public space, such as Syracuse right downtown near the court, is really problematic for a lot of Indigenous people, and specifically Onondaga people.

Interviewer

Thank you so much, and also congratulations on this summer's graduation.

Danielle Smith

Thank you.

Interviewer

Picking up on the last things you were saying about the monument, I'm going to ask a couple of questions about the monument and just broaden outward. So what are your thoughts about the Syracuse Columbus monument?

Danielle Smith

The Columbus monument is really a source of pain for Indigenous people as a whole, and also specifically Onondaga people, because like I said, this is our ancestral land. So to have this figure, this iconography, that is basically representing the Doctrine of Discovery—it's representing domination, superiority, white supremacy—to have that on our land is really painful and disrespectful, and it sends this message to our youth. And I know that it sent this message to me as a child when I saw this statue, especially with the Indigenous heads that are propped at his feet. I always wondered, why is it just heads of Natives that he's standing on? It sent this message that we as Indigenous people don't matter, that we as Indigenous people are subhuman. And if you look at the Doctrine of Discovery, really, what is detailed in the Doctrine of Discovery is that Indigenous people were seen as less than human, subhuman, savages, you know, the list goes on. And the reason I bring up the Doctrine of Discovery is obviously because Columbus—that was the premise, or why he was doing what he was doing was because there was this doctrine that allowed the European countries to go out and dominate and colonize, assimilate, and you know, that also continues to happen today. There's different ways in which we, as Indigenous people, continue to be oppressed and continue to be silenced and erased. That happens in a number of ways throughout society. And so I've always just been really offended by the statue, and I just thought it was really disrespectful to Indigenous people, and then later learned that it's not only Indigenous people, it's really all people of color. And at one time the Italians, because at one time the Italians were oppressed too. A big reason why they chose to cling on to this figure, Columbus, was because they thought that it was going to bring them to be more accepted, which it did, and to be seen as "white." So I definitely understand why Italian Americans did that during that time, and I know that a lot of the literature and research didn't really start coming out until the 80s or 90s around the different atrocities that Columbus himself did during his time, when he landed in—was it the Bahamas or in that area?

Interviewer

Yes.

Danielle Smith

So just reading the different research that I've read and also been taught about, you know, when the Indigenous people who were there didn't obey, or bring enough gold back, or whatever it was, they would get their hands chopped off. And then there were diary entries or something of babies being thrown and slammed against trees to basically kill them, and women being raped. He talks about girls as young as, I think, nine or ten—maybe it wasn't that young, but I know it's really young—talking about how there's a plethora of young girls that basically are at your service. So why I bring that up is because I would hope, and I had hoped, that once people knew the truth about what Columbus did, they would no longer see him as an idol or as someone to look up to or to worship, and for the most part, I feel like a lot of people over the years have come to that realization and are more aware of what Columbus has done, and no longer view him in that way. It's obvious in the climate right now in the U.S., the Confederate statues, all the different Columbus statues are getting taken down. I had just really hoped that here in Syracuse that group of older Italian Americans, once they heard our pain, and heard why we find this offensive, and the reasons why, and we presented the research—but they don't want to let go of that. And I get it, because that's a sense of power. It's a sense of having some false sense of power, that if the statue gets taken down, somehow they're going to lose their power. But that's not the case, because Italian Americans are basically seen as white people now. They're no longer oppressed. And so it's just sad that there's still certain people who don't want to see the truth.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. What other stories and histories do you want people who come to the site to learn about?

Danielle Smith

I think when the statue is removed, and it's no longer there, I would hope that people will continue to learn, and continue to ask questions, and try to find the answers, and not just depend on one narrative,

not just depend on one person's view of the history. Because I know one of the major things that I've run into is that somebody reads something written by, say, an old white man—because a lot of the literature is written by old white men—but there's also other sources or sources out there. For example, the Onondaga people, we are really big into oral history. So our teachings are passed down orally. And there's a lot of things that have happened in this area that are really significant and that bring a lot of value to this area, specifically, when it comes to the Onondaga Nation, and how the Peacemaker came across Onondaga Lake. And that's where our main teachings come from, from this era of peace, when we decided to put down our arms and to work together instead of fight against each other. So I just really hope that if people are—if you're you're not sure, or if you can't answer the question [of] why you would support the statue or why you support Columbus in general, and you can't really get deeper into that, like, what's underneath that and the impacts that his discovery had on Indigenous people—I hope people would really just do more research and look at different sources, you know, ask more questions. Don't just read one thing and think that's it forever, and that's the only truth and I'm never going to hear anything else. I just encourage people to keep researching and learning and have an open mind, really.

Interviewer

This really follows on from what you were saying and you might feel like you've answered it already. But how do you think we should think and talk about the site in ways that can decrease polarization and address its complexities?

Danielle Smith

Yes, it's hard, because I'm thinking about the Action Group in itself, and the discussions that we had, and how it was really polarized.

I think one of the ways to not make it so polarized is, first of all, people have to want to learn. They have to want to just be open to learning new things. Because if someone goes in with a closed mind,

and is so set and stubborn in their ways, then it's really hard to get them to see anything else. And that goes for a lot of different issues. So I think it really starts with coming to the table with an open mind and thinking about what you're learning, and what Columbus has done, and the different impacts that it's had on the different Indigenous people—to look at that and to really try to put yourself into their shoes, and think about if that was your grandma, or that was your mom or whoever, someone in your family that had gone through something like that. And there was this guy who kind of helped get that all started. Would you want people to idolize him? Would you want the public to accept him? So people really have to want to learn and be empathetic. And that's not really anything you can teach anyone, either. You can't tell somebody, "you need to be empathetic to me," you know, they have to want to be.

Interviewer

Thank you. Are there specific objects or places or images that you would want visitors to the site to see and learn about?

Danielle Smith

That I would want to see at the site?

Interviewer

Or that you would want to see images of. Part of what we're incorporating into our project is visual images. So essentially, any places, any images, any objects that you would like to see, or you would recommend that we should expose people to, that you might be willing to tell us about?

Danielle Smith

One of the major things that I feel is missing from Syracuse in general, especially in public places, is to recognize whose land they're on, so, the Onondaga Nation. So with that, if they wanted to honor and

acknowledge and recognize that this is Onondaga Nation land—it used to be your land but let's have this respectful, open relationship—So, I would hope that they would come to the Onondaga people to ask them, “what is it that you would want to see to represent your culture?” From my perspective, I think having, obviously, someone who is from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, or someone who's Onondaga, even, to create something to put at this site that would represent us and our teachings. It could be the Great Tree of Peace, you know, that represents the Peacemaker's story and his journey, and the coming together of the different Six Nations to become the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. I think that would be amazing. And also, one thing that I've always said, and I spoke about in the Action Group, was that it's not that we don't want the Italians or—I'm speaking personally, I don't not want the Italians to have something to be proud of, and to show their pride, but all I asked was, don't have a figure that continues to harm communities, such as Columbus. Pick somebody else who has done amazing things. And I know there are so many different Italian people who have contributed greatly to the arts and music, and all different types of things. So I would really like to see something like that, where they can be really proud of it, and however they see putting up something visually. Another thing that we talked about in the Action Group was—it's not just Italians and Indigenous people, right, that this issue impacts. Like I said, it's other people of color. So if we're thinking about Syracuse, Syracuse is, I think, third in the country in welcoming new refugees into the country, and we have a really big refugee population. So the new Americans, I would hope that they would be able to have something at that site. Also the Black community and Latino community, because we have a big Latino population in Syracuse. So just to show how diverse Syracuse is, and to show that pride and coming together, and it's not that whatever, say, this group chooses to do needs to be high and above and standing over, no, let's just all be the same size or whatever, you know, nobody needs to show this superiority. That's just how I see it anyways; I don't think that's going to help anyone, and it's not going to contribute to the community if it's like that.

Interviewer

Thank you. I think you've mainly answered my questions, and I want to ask if there are things that you'd like to share that I haven't asked about, or that we haven't covered?

Danielle Smith

Of all the different organizing and different activism that I've done throughout the years, one of the main things that I feel like gets left out a lot, especially when changes actually happen—So for example, the mayor announced that he's going to take down the statue, so we'll use that as an example. So it wasn't just InterFaith Works and their dialogue group and the Action Group, you know; it wasn't just the Resilient Indigenous Action Collective who basically brought attention to this again. It was years, and I mean decades, of people fighting to get this statue down. You know, Onondagas have for decades been asking that this statue needs to go. So when different changes happen, we need to also recognize the labor that went into it from the beginning, not just the end result and the person who was most recently connected to it or whatever. So I think that's really important.

Interviewer

Thank you. I appreciate that. And really, thank you, thank you for everything that you've shared here and for taking the time and the effort and the willingness to share your views.

Biography

My name is Danielle Smith, and I am part of the Onondaga Nation, and I am Hawk Clan. Because we're a matrilineal society, I get my clan from my mother. So she's Hawk clan; her mom's Hawk clan. And I also have a Onkwéhonwe name, which is basically just a name in Onondaga that represents what

clan you're from. I grew up here on the Onondaga Nation. I'm 35 years old. I have a 10-year-old daughter. And I currently live here. I had moved off at different points in my life, and lived in different states and areas. But for the majority, I've been here, home, on the Onondaga Nation, and I have this deep connection to the land itself, and also to the people, my family.