

Sophia Powless

Full Transcript

Interview Conducted March 12, 2021

Interviewer

I want to start by just asking you for a brief bio. How would you want to be introduced to people on the street or a broad audience of people who might interact with this project?

Sophia Powless

Well, I'm just going to start with my introduction in Onondaga. **Nya•wéñha Sgé•noñ'**, **Hothahyoñnih nwa'wage'se•e'deñ' gaiye•i wa'ganoñhsgeh Ga nëndawaks' ongya•stha'**. So that roughly translates to: Hello, I'm thankful that you are well. My name is She Shakes the Hemlocks, and I am Wolf Clan, longhouse from the Onondaga Nation.

All of us have that introduction. And I think a lot of people aren't really aware, we each have our own Indigenous names, that are connected to medicine. And that, of course, is very powerful. That name is mine. And mine since I was given when I was a child, and that's what I like to be known as. Of course, I go by Sophia, in the regular sense, but I also have that identity that's very strongly tied to me. That's how I like to introduce myself any time I have events that I'm a part of, because I think showcasing myself as being Indigenous is such an important thing. Because not many people get to meet someone who is Indigenous, or don't know about my life or point of view, or how I grew up, or anything like that. So that's how I like to show myself first.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. To start very open ended, what are your thoughts about the Syracuse Columbus statue?

Sophia Powless

I would say that, because I grew up Native, I naturally have an opposition to it. Because it just creates such a one-sided story. And from my point, at least, it glorifies a person who did horrible things. And it doesn't seem to me that it should be a controversial subject. If Indigenous peoples' lives matter, then it shouldn't be a controversial subject, because we are a group of people that still exist. And I think that only showing one side or dedicating a whole day, and only telling the side of one individual, pretty much erases the history of a whole culture. And I personally—I don't agree with that. So I have quite a strong opposition to it. But I understand that everything is intertwined these days, with monuments, and cultures can have attachments to those, and I understand that, but, I think that history should be considering of all sides of the story, not just one, and not even just paying attention to one side. It's really important that all sides are considered, especially since one of them was more severely affected than the other.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. You've alluded to it a bit already, but what histories does the statue and that space where it's housed—What histories does it represent to you?

Sophia Powless

I see that as a sign that Native people aren't acknowledged. I see that as a staple and a point of ignorance, of us not being acknowledged. Although we have the Onondaga Lake right here in Syracuse, we have the Onondaga Nation, where I'm from, 15–20 minutes away from that monument, not many people know about my culture, heritage, our nation, the things we have done for the nation,

our history. There's so much focus on the monument. I went to school at the Onondaga Nation school. But then for high school I went to Lafayette, and they celebrate Columbus Day. But we are all tied in. So Columbus Day was on our calendar for a while—I forget if they took that off now—but I think that is also a sign that that monument, the day itself, show the general ignorance and lack of awareness of Indigenous peoples. And it's—it's a little bit far to say that it's a slap in the face, but I will say it goes [inaudible] to say “We don't see you. We know you're there. But we're not going to acknowledge you.” And I think that is where the problem lies. And that it's a problem for me to say that people see us, but they're not willing to hear us. And I think that's where a lot of the problem lies, especially when it comes to these monuments, when it comes to changing the days. People are willing to look at us and say, “Okay, you're there. What we're seeing you now as, that's enough.” And I don't think that's enough, personally, I think that there's definitely always more to be done. I think there are bridges that need to be built, I think that people need to come together and figure things out, because I believe we can. But I see that monument and the lack of awareness as signs of people not wanting to. So I see that as, not necessarily a sign of disrespect, but as a sign of unwillingness to move forward. Because I was taught that we respect all the people that we're around. We have our Two Row Wampum showing that we are side by side with people. I think it was the Dutch or something, where they're in their boat, and we're in our canoe. And that acknowledges that we have different perspectives on things, we do things different ways, but we can work together side by side, but we don't have to necessarily intermingle. I can understand their perspective, and what their thoughts are. But I know that I'm in my canoe, I'm in my space, and I respect your space as well. But we have to understand that we're working together. So that monument, and the day itself, really goes to show that there's a little bit of an unwillingness to do that, which in my opinion is very frustrating.

Interviewer

Thank you. And that's such a helpful formulation of so many things, but especially that distinction between seeing and listening.

Sophia Powless

As time has gone on, I definitely feel the presence of Indigenous people has become more known. But people not wanting to do anything about it or just benefiting from the fact that they know someone who is Native or has some Native blood in them, and then that just being enough—It really isn't. And I think people really need to think about how if you want to be in support of Indigenous peoples, and you want to be in the culture, you want to wear the jewelry, you want to stand strong with Native people, you want all these things, you have to understand that there's a history that's combined with it, that we're still fighting to this day, and that you can't separate one from another. Those two are combined. They're all in one. You can't be wearing, you know, certain Indigenous things—like, you can support Indigenous businesses, but you also have to come with the fact that you have to acknowledge the history. You have to look at the problems that we're going through, the environmental, the social, the political, everything that we're going through in that aspect. Those are both very important subjects that need to go together. And I think people tend to just put the blind eye on one subject, and then tune in and put the spotlight on another. But I think in general, all Indigenous issues need to be addressed.

Interviewer

Yes, absolutely. Thank you. What do you think people should learn about the history of Columbus and the effects of his voyages?

Sophia Powless

I believe people need to know more about the Indigenous people he encountered. I forget the name of the tribe, but I definitely remember learning in school when I got older. All you hear about is his voyages, what he did when he discovered America, but you don't really hear about the people, how they were affected, what things were said about them. I believe they refer to it as bringing "civilization" to these peoples. That's kind of the general term. They said it was bringing civilization to these peoples. And that's kind of the outlook everybody sees it as. It's "Columbus came, discovered it, he brought

civilization, now we have America, everything's great." But what is really not considered is the fact that there was already a culture, a developed culture, a developed civilization with language, food, ceremonies, dances; everything was already here. And you don't learn about that. Even when you say, "Oh, yeah, they met the people," they don't talk about, like, what were their names, what they wore, what they looked like. There's none of that. And even if it is described, what they looked like, it's usually inappropriate terms like "savages," "Indians," being kind of—I forget the exact word of it. But it's not the kindest words to refer to us, very much like—"uncivilized," I guess, is the broadest term that they refer to us as. But I think what people don't really know about it is how the people were treated.

I think that's another big thing, that people were treated—Yes, we know about the genocide and everything now, because more people are bringing that up, but I don't think people realize the extent that it went to. I think Columbus was a figurehead for the first step. Because my nation, especially, experienced that with George Washington—or we call him Hanadagá•yas, which in English terms is translated to Town Destroyer, because he launched the Sullivan campaign, which just burned our crops, killed our people. I can't even speak about how many lives we lost. But that's another event of a historical figure that is very much glorified, but then on the flip side of it makes us uncomfortable, because there's a history tied with that. And no one knows about that. Nobody knows about that. So I think, definitely, that's what I want people to learn from Columbus, and education should definitely pay more of a focus on Indigenous peoples.

We can still learn about Columbus. But it's more of the side that you don't see him as. I'm not saying that we're going to erase him from history, because at this point, we are very much intertwined. And I think we have to accept that, that we are very much intertwined with one another. And because of that connection we have, we have to make sure that we're learning both sides. So that's the culture of both. That's how one affected the other one. And that's even learning about times before Columbus, learning about the people, their culture before that, what their language was like, and even in the

present day supporting those tribes who still exist today. So I think that's definitely what needs to be talked about more.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. Building off everything you've been saying, are there other histories and stories, additional ones, that you want people to come to that site to learn about?

Sophia Powless

I can't think of any right now, but I definitely believe that there are a lot of similarities to—I'm comparing a lot of what Columbus has done to American figureheads and presidents in our time. There are a lot of similarities in that white man comes in, says that something needs to be fixed, or they see something that they want to put in there, and then they just go ahead and do it. I believe Columbus said something that "These people are willing to share, and we will take everything from them." That's a rough paraphrase of that. But I think what was misinterpreted is that we, as a culture, we're always taught to share with one another, because we're not selfish. The earth does not belong to us. We didn't have structured borders, state lines; we just lived on the earth. And we went where the resources were, we gave back to the earth, and that was the cycle. And I think that I see a lot of similarities with Columbus, George Washington, Andrew Jackson: all of those glorified figures have the same past in hurting Indigenous peoples. And I think those are stories that also need to be acknowledged. We know about the Trail of Tears, but we also don't know about the modern day.

I think another thing that I find quite frustrating is that what is also tied to Columbus Day is the fact that Natives are also referred to in the past tense, almost every single time. Even though I talked about it earlier, and I want people to learn about what happened to the Indigenous people in the past tense, what their culture was like before Columbus came. But I think it's really, really, really important to emphasize that Indigenous people are still alive today, still exist today, are still practicing their cultures, are trying to build a community back up. Because so many things have been hit at us. I think

Indigenous peoples as a whole are a very strong, resilient group of people. And I think the stories of Indigenous peoples need to be heard more. And I wish they were, and I'm happy that I'm being given this opportunity, and I hope other people of my background feel the same way and that when given the opportunity, we will 100% tell people our stories, our traditions, our cultures. And I think that's another thing that Columbus didn't really understand and that we want to share because we see the benefit in sharing with one another. We want to help people, we want people to understand our side, we want to learn about other people in the sense that we want to grow together. Not in the way that we're sharing so that way you can exploit us and then take it from us, but in the sense of, we want to share this with you because this is something that we care about. And we want you to also care about it and acknowledge that.

I think that the stories of other presidents and what they've done to us, and I think definitely what has been going on in the environmental sense—I'm an environmental major, so that's what a lot of my focus goes to; so a lot of issues with the pipeline; I focus a lot on Onondaga Lake. Those are our little modern day fights that we have, although people don't really notice them, because it's a negative. It's a negative to say this, no one is dying anymore, in the sense that, from the past, people say, "when Native people died, that's what we need to focus on. Native people are dying." And I'm like, All right, but now in the present day, our lands are being taken from us. We are being affected by, we have an unfair disadvantage, we're already put in unfair disadvantage in a lot of our communities, from environmental to economic, everything is at an unfair disadvantage. And that's not talked about enough, because we're still being referred to as something of the past. We're still being referred to as being a history of an important figurehead, as a stepping stone for a figurehead getting his gold medal. We're always that first step. If you hear a lot in other people's stories of even classic terms like "cowboys and Indians," so and so conquered this land, and they chased the Indians out, and then he was able to become the best in this and this and this. So we're always talked about in the past tense, and as a stepping point for someone to become great and famous. And I think that really needs to be heard and actually considered in that if you look at the entire history of the Americas, we're there. We're there for

all of it. But because it's history, we're referred to in the past. And we need to shift that focus and we need to have that perspective and narrative changed because it's affecting a lot of people and it's making it seem that we're gone, or we're not here, or if we are here that we don't really need to be paid attention to, because there's a false narrative that the winner has created.

Interviewer

Absolutely true, yes. Thank you. You talked about this a little bit, but is there more that you want to say about how your personal history or your family history shape your feelings about the statue or the site and its meanings?

Sophia Powless

Yes. So I was born on the Onondaga Nation. And I live next to my aunt and my grandpa lived down the street, so, very close community. And then I was able to go to the Onondaga Nation school from when I was in kindergarten until eighth grade. So that really shaped my perspective, and I was taught our language, our culture. And my k'niháh, my dad, he made a really big conscious effort to make sure all students knew the Native history. So when learning about the Revolutionary War, we didn't focus on more of the America versus the British side, we focused on more of the "All right, how did Indigenous people do this and this and this." But it wasn't even like, once the war was done, we stopped learning about that. It was more of, "All right, so then what happened after that?" So then, we learned about how our lands diminished, we learned about the treaties that were broken. And then as we got older, we went more forward and forward into the modern times. Okay, now that our lands have decreased, how did that affect us? Again, that brings us to more of the environmental standpoint, which then brings us to Onondaga Nation, and the Onondaga Lake, and that whole land rights case as well. So that really shaped my perspective on these issues, because I grew up hearing the Native perspective. I grew up hearing the Native point of view. So although it is a unique one, I will say it is one that sometimes prevents me from wanting to hear the other side. Because besides that I'm hearing it, there's so much—it's unequal, from my point of view. I don't see it as being the same struggles. I

don't see it as having the same weight. From my point, ours were affected so much more. So it's hard for me to see, there's—we have feelings tied to this. And I'm like, I have a lot of feelings tied to this. Because I'm not carrying my own. I'm carrying the feelings of my ancestors, I'm carrying the feelings of my community, I'm carrying the feelings of other Native, Indigenous tribes with me, because we all have these feelings within us. But we also have the feeling of a little bit of frustration, and at some points anger, and exhaustion, but we all know and recognize that that doesn't get us anywhere.

And my grandpa did a really good job in teaching me that respect is the biggest thing that we have. Something that was taught within our community was respect. And my grandpa did a really good job. That was Chief Irving Powless Jr. He did a really good job in listening to other people. And I think that taught me a lot, because he was always willing to listen to somebody whether or not they agreed with him. And what he was saying, he always knew that his words needed to be heard. But then he also knew that the others deserved the chance as well, because he knew that even though he was coming from a point that, sure, he could have been right, but he knew that he had to hear the opposition as well. And my dad and my mom have done the same thing for me in saying that you can have your view, and sure, it's a strong one, you have a lot of emotional connections to it, but we have to come to understand that we have to have a peace of mind and go into it with a calm attitude. Because nothing gets done when it stems from anger and frustration, which—It's difficult, but it comes with a lot of practice. And I think that's what a lot of us are taught, that although we're very frustrated, and we can be angry, and we can be rightfully upset about this, it is something that we need to realize: that this has been a fight that's been going on for a long time, and we have the ability to change it, but that's only if we're able to sit down and listen to one another. Because that's a lot of how things were solved, in the old days with treaties and everything. That's just everyone sitting down and talking with one another. In our history, our nations were fighting with one another, and then our Peacemaker came. And because we were all fighting with one another, we buried our weapons beneath the tree. So we had all our weapons buried beneath the tree, and then we were able to come to peace. So I kind of put a—in the modern twist of that, the weapons are just hateful words towards one another. And I think that's

what we need to bury beneath the surface, take those down, and then just listen to one another, all of our sides.

Interviewer

Thank You. I think in many ways, you just answered the question that I was going to ask next. I'll read it to you anyway, in case there's anything you want to add to it. How do you think we should think about the site and the history behind it in ways that can decrease polarization and address its complexities? That's something you've been speaking to, and it's also a question I have a bit of unease about, because while we talk about decreasing polarization, I think we also, as you've been saying, need to be careful not to make a false equivalency, that these issues, that this history hasn't affected every side equally, or in the same ways.

Sophia Powless

Yes, it's difficult, for me, definitely—I believe, over the summer, when the protests were going on, and then people were going after monuments, and then the Columbus Day monuments were being taken down, I had a different reaction than another person might have had, and I believe that that [the removal of monuments] sparked a lot of outrage, because as I've been saying, there's emotional connection tied to the statues. But I would like people to consider that we have an emotional connection tied to our history. We don't have statues. We don't have monuments. On my nation, there isn't a single monument or statue, really. We don't have figureheads and things plastered across our nation. But I see that as something that is very common in very large cities. And of course, the one that we have in Syracuse, the Columbus monument. I've always seen it as a little bit silly, and kind of ridiculous, and at some points very disrespectful. But as you mentioned the polarizing in that one community is definitely more affected than the other one, I don't see the purpose in continuing to put so much focus on one side. And I don't see how we can continue to glorify and honor one side, because that's not fair. Because my perspective is, if the roles were reversed, there would be an uproar. If the roles were reversed, if we had a Native figurehead that had done something to a certain community,

they would have the same reaction. So I would just like that same feeling to be respected from our point of view, because I don't think many people try to put their feet in our perspective; they don't try to see things from our side, they kind of stick to theirs. And I would like people to actually address that, because I think it'll be very healthy and helpful for them to see that, yes, you have this important figure to your culture, but we also have an important figure to our culture, and you have to understand what you have done to us. And I think that's the biggest thing that we need to acknowledge in a lot of these discussions.

Interviewer

Thank you. I have two more questions for you, if that's okay. We talked a bit earlier about other histories that you would want people to be made aware of, or to become more familiar with. Are there places or visual images or cultural practices that you would want visitors to the site to learn about? That's a question with a little bit of an ulterior motive, because in addition to audio clips, we're also planning to integrate visual images into this project.

Sophia Powless

Yes. Onondaga Lake, for one, is a big one, and there is a lot of history tied to that as well, in the past tense and in the present modern day. When speaking from the past, our community, we are all on Onondaga Lake, that's why it's called Onondaga Lake. Our communities were there, and that's where we remained until the salt factories were set up. You know, Syracuse is known as the Salt City. Onondaga Lake had a lot of salt in it. And that's when the factories and the industries all came up. And what had happened was, then the Native people were basically removed from that area. We're not tied to that land anymore. Or at least now we're trying to, or we've been trying. And so from all those factories, and producing all those—I forget exactly what the material was that we were making, but that eventually led to a lot of chemicals, waste being dumped into Onondaga Lake. And Onondaga Lake was, for a long time, a Superfund site. As a child I learned about that, because that was a very big issue growing up, and it still is a very big issue because although the lake has undergone a lot of

treatments, I believe it's still not to the standard that it could be in terms of the health and cleanliness of that lake. So then, that ties into the modern day in that we did file a land rights case for that, just so that we can have more environmental control and so that we can clean the lake.

I believe that the biggest common thread in a lot of these stories, especially when it comes to land—a lot of it's land acknowledgement, and a lot of people get scared and that we're going to kick everybody out of their houses and live in them. From that, I find it a little bit ridiculous, because I don't see how that would be productive from our point of view. But I think Onondaga Lake's definitely a site that people should visit. I believe there's the Skä•noñh Center, which is right near Onondaga Lake, that has a lot of our history and our traditional ways of dressing, clothing. I wouldn't recommend this, but I will say that the Onondaga Nation is right near Syracuse. A lot of people don't know about the Onondaga Nation. I played sports in high school, and then in college, but when I was in high school, we had a pretty big Native population on my team. But when we would go to other schools in, like, Solway, and we'd be like "Oh, we're from the Onondaga Nation; we're Onondaga," they'd be like, "What? Where?" And even in Jamesville they don't know about the Onondaga Nation, even though that's their closest Native community. And I think a lot of people don't know that—again, no awareness that we exist. And that just really goes to show that—I'm not saying that people can come and visit us, we're not really a tourist site, but we are just a community. But I definitely think that there needs to be a marker and that the Onondaga Nation is here. These people are still here. And I think that's a big focus I would like people to know about.

Interviewer

Thank you very much. I'll ask you one last question, and then leave space for anything that you want to talk about that we haven't got to. What do you think would be ideal next steps for that site, once the statue is removed—assuming that the statute is in fact removed?

Sophia Powless

Yes, I was going to think—I believe that I would like for Native art or Native design to be showcased in that area. My school, the Onondaga Nation school, has done a beautiful job in incorporating all of our belts into the architectural design of our building. We have the Hiawatha Belt on all of our windows. Our school, if you could see from the aerial view, is in the shape of an eagle. And we have the Cultural Center, which goes up and it has a little bit of a circle, and then the sun's able to come through, which then reflects on the flooring, which is a turtle because we're on Turtle Island. And then, of course, surrounding the cultural center are all the clans of our nation. And I think that incorporating Native artists—we have a lot on our nation, even in the Haudenosaunee as a whole—having artists contribute to that process and redesigning that space would actually create a very welcoming, educational sort of space. And I would love to see that—more Native art existing in Syracuse. I think that it would make a really good impression. And it would at least make me feel comfortable and happy that I'm being acknowledged as an Indigenous person, just to at least have those little hints of Indigenous art and design somewhere in the city. So I think that would be actually really cool if they were able to do that.

Interviewer

I agree, that would be really fantastic if they were able to do that.

Sophia Powless

I think that would be so beautiful.

Interviewer

That really would, yes.

Is there anything that you want to add or that you want to speak to that I didn't ask about?

Sophia Powless

I don't believe so. I feel like I've spoken on a lot of what I want to say. But I think that the Columbus monument isn't just an issue that is between the Onondaga people and Syracuse. I think it's a lot that's connected to the Haudenosaunee, our Six Nations, and Indigenous people as a whole. And that point is just to restate that it isn't one side versus another side, but more like a disagreement between two groups of people. Because it's not just one person versus another person or a certain group over just us; it's an issue that affects a lot of people emotionally, historically. And I think that the narrative needs to be changed a little bit in that people only see it as "this one Native tribe is against this." And then it's like, no, everybody has that, kind of, side of it. And even if you're not Native you can have uncomfortable feelings about that, or a little bit of, "That's not fair." And that's another thing I would like to bring up. You can have these thoughts and feelings as well about that monument. These are not just exclusively Native feelings. Even if—I like to welcome anyone else who, as a cultural group, has experienced, kind of, this treatment. And I think, especially with the protests with the BLM—we had a kind of protest here as well, we had a march just in support of BLM. So I think it's because we both understand what they're going through.

And I believe it was with 81—but this is just a little bit of a side story. So I believe it was in the 70s that the city wanted to expand 81; they wanted to make it bigger. But doing that, it would encroach on Onondaga Nation lands, so it would be taking more away. That sparked a lot of—a little bit of uproar within our community. So the Onondaga, we then launched a protest, stating our sovereignty, and saying that New York State does not have jurisdiction on our nation. And that was a big moment for us, because then they did not continue construction for 81. But the reason why I'm saying the story is that's sort of happening now in Syracuse, with the construction of 81, and affecting now the minority groups who live there. Because, you know, they want to do more with 81. And I believe it was Senator May, I was on that panel with Senator May, and a lot of community leaders were talking about that. And I was telling them, I was like, there's a lot of similarity in that. And I think, again, my grandfather had said, pay attention to what they're doing to us, because they will eventually do it to you. And I

think that's kind of the way that things go. Especially coming from environmental issues. You try for one group, and once that group makes an uproar you go to another group. And unfortunately, that's happening for some communities. That's what happened with the Dakota Access Pipeline, but there was a lot of uproar about it. But, again, state and government had a lot of power, and, again, we're a small group of people. And I think getting the word out for a lot of these issues is really important. And I think that's when—there's a lot of similarities in history.

I think that's a little bit of a smaller example, in that our 81 issue, we were able to protest, resolve, but then, again, now it is moved to another area, and another group is being affected by it. So I think that's kind of the—what I want to get into is that the monument does the same thing. Especially when—[there are] kind of parallels between BLM and we're now expressing that as well. Like, this is our issue, the monument, that's kind of going alongside their issues. And if there's uproar about that side, there should be uproar about our side because there are a lot of similarities between them.

Interviewer

Yes, absolutely true. Thank you so much, Sophia, for taking the time to share your views and really rich and thought provoking perspectives. I really appreciate it.

Sophia Powless

Oh, yes, no problem. Thank you so much.

Biography

Nya•wéñha Sgé•noñ', Hothahyoñníh nwa'wage'se•e'deñ' gaiye•i wa'ganoñsgeh Ga nëndawaks' ongya•stha'. So that roughly translates to: Hello, I'm thankful that you are well. My

name is Shakes the Hemlocks, and I am Wolf Clan, longhouse from the Onondaga nation. All of us have that introduction. And I think a lot of people aren't really aware, we each have our own Indigenous names, that are connected to medicine. And that, of course, is very powerful. That name is mine. And mine since I was given when I was a child, and that's what I like to be known as. Of course, I go by Sophia, in the regular sense, but I also have that identity that's very strongly tied to me. That's how I like to introduce myself any time I have events that I'm a part of, because I think showcasing myself as being Indigenous is such an important thing. Because not many people get to meet someone who is Indigenous, or don't know about my life or point of view, or how I grew up, or anything like that. So that's how I like to show myself first.