

Adam DePaul, Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania

Interviewed by Jessica Ch'ng and Kareli Lizarraga for Activism Beyond the Classroom
Recorded on Monday, November 11, 2019 at the Greenfield Intercultural Center

Jessica C.:

Hi everyone. My name is Jessica Ch'ng. I'm a student at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education.

Kareli L.:

Hey everyone. I am Kareli Lizarraga, also a student at the Graduate School of Education.

Jessica C.:

We are students in a course called Activism Beyond the Classroom, which engages students in participatory inquiry and public scholarship related to activism, education, and social justice. The University of Pennsylvania is located on the lands of the Lenni Lenape people. We take this opportunity to honor the original caretakers of this land and recognize the histories of indigenous land theft, violence or erasure and oppression that have brought our institutions and ourselves here. It is particularly poignant to do this land acknowledgement here because Pennsylvania is one of 14 States without any recognized tribes and one of about eight States without a commission or office dedicated to Native American issues, despite the continued presence and resilience of indigenous people here. Today we are recording next to the Lenape garden at the Greenfield intercultural center. The garden opened in 2013 to establish and reinforce a sense of place for Penn's Native American community and to educate the public about the Lenape who first called the Delaware Valley home. The Association of Native Alumni and Natives at Penn student organization were partners in creating the space alongside the local Lenape community. The garden is shaped like a turtle representing the creation story of the Lenape people and a symbol of the local Lenape community. The garden is surrounded with native trees, shrubs, and perennials that had been used by the Lenape for millennia for their medicinal and culinary needs. And so we're very excited to be here today with Adam DePaul from the Lenape nation of Pennsylvania. Adam, do you want to introduce yourself?

Adam D.:

Sure. My name is Adam DePaul. I'm a council member with the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania. Right now, I'm an instructor at Temple where I'm also pursuing my PhD. In the nation, aside from being a council member, I'm also the story keeper. So I work a lot with our stories, and it is just an honor to be here, and especially being right next to the garden here that was collaborated with two of our clan mothers, my mother being one. It's just a perfect place to do it. So thank you.

Kareli L.:

Thank you for being here.

Jessica C.:

We were walking around the garden earlier and we were joined by Valerie DeCruz, who is the director of the Greenfield Intercultural Center. And she said that she had met you and worked

with your mother before. Do you want to say a little bit more about your mother's role in creating the space and, sort of, some of your relationships with the university of Pennsylvania?

Adam D.:

Sure. Now I, I regretfully say that when a lot of our most amazing and direct collaborations with U Penn were going on, I was away at Temple, getting my own bachelor's degree. So I wasn't involved as much as I could have been, but my mother and Ann Dapice, who until recently was some kind of head, I'm sorry, I don't remember her, her particular position, but some kind of leadership role in the native alumni association. They had headed up a wonderful exhibit that actually took a year or two to put together. It ended up being called "Fulfilling a Prophecy: The Past and Present of the Lenape in Pennsylvania." And it's actually, it ran at the Penn museum for a term and then got voted for an extra term, and now I curate it at our cultural center. So it still was an amazing project and the folks at Penn all over approached us in the most respectful way, which given some of the history between academia and indigenous communities was refreshing and wonderful, because we know it's not always the best relationship. But between working together with Penn on that exhibit, and there was a wonderful opening ceremony that I was able to be part of ceremoniously, it really helped spearhead the initiative to recognize the Lenape as the indigenous people in academia. And then many wonderful projects branched off of those relationships.

Jessica C.:

Wonderful. So you mentioned that your role with the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania, what was it again? Story keeper. Can you tell us a little bit more about what that, what that means?

Adam D.:

Sure. It's really very much like it sounds, that's how I began. Well, I began as just a member through blood, but when I finally had enough of a break in my, in my young academic life to get involved with the nation and the administration of the nation, that was my first role as story keeper. And my academic life and my passion revolves around mythologies and cultural narratives, and I had done a lot of research in... I, I use this word lightly, because there can be problems with it, but for sake of the podcast and putting air quotes around this, but "original Lenape mythology," you know, historical stories that were told either pre-, or if we couldn't get back that far, right at the era of colonialism. So having this knowledge of a lot of the history of our stories was really the inspiration for council to, to ask me if I would take on the role of story keeper. So I continued to do that. A very important aspect of story keeping and everything we do with the nation from the language to, to just our presence is to fight against people framing us and any indigenous people as artifacts. You know, we are not the people we were hundreds of years ago. Our stories are not the same, and things like that. So one of the big initiatives of being the storekeeper is not to just look through those records and keep them, you know, it's to keep engaging. How are we using the stories today? You know, at ceremony last October. How did our ceremonial chief tell the story? So it's just fascinating. Just fascinating.

Jessica C.:

I know that your, sort of your background has made a big difference in your sort of academic life as well. Can you tell us a little bit about that journey and how, how you've been able to bring your community into the academic spaces that you've been in?

Adam D.:

Oh, absolutely. And it's, it's likewise, it's been really fascinating. When I began my, my PhD program at temple, I had come in with the intention of being a mythologist and, you know, probably entailing going into the regular canon, Greek and Egyptian and all those wonderful things and finding a specialty. I had never, never thought about engaging in cultural studies or bringing my culture into my studies. Those were always two separate areas. Just, my culture was what I did at home, and my studies or what I did in academia. There were two professors who just put that the whole paradigm on its head who just tore the walls down and really convinced me that there was so much value in my cultural experiences that I could incorporate into my interests in mythology and in narrative theory. One of them was Dr. Eli Goldblatt, and I took a course on ethnology with him. So, of course while we were talking about, we were talking about literacy practices and how to do ethnology to, to find more research about literary practices. So I figured, "Well, I'll, I'll do mine on the nation, 'cause it's close to home and it's easy." Right. And as soon as I said that, he just, he said, "We have to talk. You need to come to my office hours," and really encouraged me and wanted to hear more and more about the nation. And by the end of that project I had, by the end of that class, I had to come up with a final project that really is now the foundation of my dissertation work, to go to all of our Lenape nations in the U S and Canada and do some ethnographic research about storytelling practices and language use. And then the, the other one, Dr. Paul Garrett in the anthropology department, this was one of those, those things that seems at the moment almost too surreal to be happening. But I had wanted to take his class because it was on indigenous languages. I was an English student. That's the anthropology department. So I, I went to his office to ask permission to see if it was okay with him. And we were just talking a little bit about the class. And he asked me about my own experiences. So I started to talk about my involvement in the Lenape language. And he, he just paused for a second. I brought up my mother, because she is just one of the amazing world authorities on the Lenape language. He said, "So you're the son of Shelley DePaul?" I said, yeah. He said, "Just literally this week I was teaching my students about your mother's work in my class," which really floored me as much as me being there floored him, because I know her work is amazing, but I had no idea it was being taught in classrooms, let alone at my own university. So that just began a huge conversation about language and the importance of it. And, and since then he's done everything from come to the River Journey to, to help us have some more campus initiatives. And that was the beginning of a wonderful relationship. And since then, we've been to campus two or three times for Indigenous People's Day. We did an art exhibit up there. So it's just one more real clear success story of, of a wonderful relationship.

Jessica C.:

That's awesome. And I remember you had mentioned, too, your involvement in the River Journey. Can you tell us a little bit about that initiative and its purpose and the impact that it's had?

Adam D.:

Oh, it's, it's amazing. Of all the wonderful initiatives we've had, it's probably the thing that has been most influential in really raising awareness about the Lenape in general and our also our nation's presence here now. The first River Journey took place in 2002, and I was not involved at that point. It was run by a small number of our council, and they had gotten the idea to come up

with a treaty, which at that point in time was called the Treaty of Renewed Brotherhood. And it's not a legally binding document or anything like that. You can actually read it on our website, but it's really a symbolic coming together of people who feel similarly regarding two things, one, in supporting and acknowledging, the Lenape as the indigenous people of this area and two, people who are willing to take some kind of caretaker role towards the environment, particularly the Delaware river. To facilitate and celebrate that treaty, they had decided to take a canoe and kayaking and journey down the length of the Delaware river. So they started up in Hancock, New York, and it took them about four weeks to get down to Cape May, New Jersey. And along the way, they would stop and hold treaty signings at different organizations and, and people who are willing to host them. So that was just a wonderful initiative that went so well and resulted in so many excellent initiatives throughout the years and partnerships that we had decided to do it every four years. My first trip on the river journey was in 2012. No, I'm sorry, 2010. I have to count backwards. 10, 14, 18. Yes. So 2010, I was involved just as a paddler. That was around the time where I was really just coming into my full involvement with the nation, and I love to kayak. So for me it was, it was great to see everybody but very much also just a kayaking trip. In 2016 I took a much more close role. I was part of the safety team and I, I was involved in some of the ceremonies. My mother had coordinated that year. Did I say 16? I meant 14, 2010, 2014. Last year, I finally took over the role as coordinator, and it's just, on that first treaty, don't quote me on this, but if I remember hearing, council right, that first treaty back in 2002, we may have had something like 13 signatures. In 2018, just last year, we had over 40 institutions and groups, organizations, and well over a hundred individual signatures. So it's, it's just been a pleasure and wonderful thing.

Jessica C.:

Well, you kind of mentioned that your own involvement has been a bit of a journey. It sounds like you've gotten progressively more and more involved. Can you tell us a little bit about, what brought you to this work and sort of your journey through, through doing this work?

Adam D.:

Absolutely. And I, my, I really have had an interesting journey. When I was younger, in my, in my teens going into college age, it's, it's really, it is still a bit uncomfortable to, to say this into the air right now, but it was definitely the case that I was really just not interested in, in this cultural organization. You know, I would go to some of the ceremonies because they were interesting and, and the people were great and supportive. They were like my family. But at that point, I really wasn't interested in dedicating a lot of my time or attention to celebrating my culture. So I was doing my own thing with college, and I went away to Philadelphia. I live in the Poconos. So I moved about two hours away to get my bachelor's and, and my real only involvement with the nation project was the exhibit at Penn. And even then I remember when there was, is a wonderful alumni now, Ahmed, who took the video, and Abigail Sullivan was the student who was putting the exhibit together. They would be over the house and I would be, like, hiding from the cameras. And I really, I actually actively didn't want to be very involved at that point even though, you know, when they would leave and it would come to collecting, collecting things for the exhibit, I would help with that.

Jessica C.:

Can I ask why, why you felt that way?

Adam D.:

Well, this is something I'm reflecting on now, years later and it really, it wasn't something that really hit me at the time, but I'm realizing it now and it's actually one of the subjects of something I'm going to be talking about in the, the Native American and Indigenous studies conference in Toronto next year. And there, there are many things. A lot of it is just regular teenage angst, right? You never want to do the stuff your parents want you to do, no matter how cool it is. I still regret, I, I fought hard enough to make my mom give up trying to give me piano lessons. So a lot of it is just that, that teenage stuff. But one element was definitely that I was uncomfortable with that cultural identification. And this is something that is particularly not unique. There are other Native American nations who go through this, but it's on the more or the less, less widespread side of, of Native American identity. The Lenape is a group whose diaspora has really defined the tribe, the Lenape are the indigenous people of, of this area, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Delaware. But through the long history of being pushed out and settling and pushed out and settling, through a number of historical things that, I won't go into detail here, but we ended up settling in the mid Midwest, Oklahoma, Wisconsin and Canada areas. And because of their relationship with the government, those were the Lenape Nations that thrived. While in order to remain in the homelands, our people had to hide. They had to marry into colonial families and give up their language, their culture, everything like that. So what this has resulted in, very long story short, is people believing the doctrine that is, at least has been for the longest time in the history books, that there are no Lenape left on the East coast, that the Lenape are an Oklahoma tribe or a Wisconsin tribe, a Canadian tribe, when there are four or five nations of us just in this tri-state area. Nevertheless, there's a, a, that this is the framework I think is important to emphasize. The legitimatization practices of the government have made things, have put all of us in a situation such that even our own families and our own relations find themselves competing for federal recognition, for state recognition. And again, very long story short, I could teach a whole class just on this, but to sum it up in a sentence, Native Americans in the US very, very many of them, if not all of them, are in the position of having to scramble for scraps from a government-funded table. And when you monetize a community that way, not through any ill will, but just through the desire to provide for your people and for your nation, every other nation who would like to become "recognized," and I'll put that in air quotes, is seen as a competitor rather than a relation. And this has been, the, the relationship with many people. I won't say nations as a whole, but people within different nations throughout the US. So on top of the issues we have with being recognized with the dominant culture and by dominant Americans, we also have some friction between tribes where federally recognized will disown or refuse to acknowledge people like us in Pennsylvania or the Nanticoke Lenape in New Jersey. So when you have that kind of thing, it is, it's very difficult. I think, you know, any, any kind of denial of your culture and legitimacy is difficult from anyone, but when it's coming from your own people, it really makes you, at least looking back, I can say it made me very hesitant to identify as Lenape. I decided, you know, I, I know what my family is. I know what my family does. I don't need to be public with this information. I didn't see any benefit from it, again, like my teen, early-twenties self. So I, I now know, although I never would've voiced it at the time, that that is a large part of why it took me so long to really embrace and be proud of my culture.

Kareli L.:

Thank you so much for sharing that. And I think that that is like a tension that a lot of students from minoritized communities have expressed. And certainly like you provide a really nuanced historical context for like how this impacted your experience. But how would you say that both you individually and, if you feel comfortable, like, the people in your nation and community at large, how have they handled this tension of, like, wanting to build relations and seek out solidarity with other tribes and other nations and having those, like, real obstacles that prevent that from happening?

Adam D.:

Absolutely. And first just let me reinforce and say very clearly, that no blanket statements can be made. You know, there's, there's no such thing as "Oklahoma doesn't like Pennsylvania" and et cetera. But it just takes, unfortunately, it just takes, you know, a couple of searches around YouTube videos or online forums involving the Lenape and you'll see comments, you know, "These people aren't real Lenape," "There are federally recognized tribes that you should be talking to," and that kind of disownment. So for the people who, who I truly feel are the minority, who feel that way, it has caused a lot, a lot of difficulty for a lot of people. And there's no one way that people react to this sort of thing. I can tell you, I know there are members of our nation who really don't care. They say, "What, why should I care if some person in Oklahoma thinks I'm Lenape or not? I know what I am. You know?" And that's, that's a wonderfully resilient response. There are other members of our nation who have pretty much made cognitive enemies of other tribes based on these voices. I know there are members of our tribe, I'm not saying, not of our council, but of our larger membership, who, if you bring up, one of the federally recognized tribes, they will immediately go on the, the defensive, which of course, always turns into the attack. And that is, the emotion there is incredibly justified. It's understandable. It's, it's painful. It really is. The problem is that, that one of the problems is that that snowballs into an us-versus-them mentality, where we do start taking sides, like it's, you know, insert sports metaphor here – I'm not good with it – but like our team versus theirs, you know, where it does turn for some people into Pennsylvania versus Wisconsin or New Jersey versus Oklahoma. Which is a) obviously just devastating for our people and b) inaccurate. It, it, when, when entire nations get identified by these, these few voices. So I know people who have reacted all over the scale. For me, it, it did cause me to suppress my cultural identification for the longest time. I also, after that, I did, I was angry for a number of years. I was very resentful. A lot of those comments were actually targeted directly at my mother, because she was incredibly active in things like the exhibit. So, and also our, our wonderful, Chief Emeritus, Bob Redhawks. So it wasn't just saying those things about my culture or vicariously me, but by people that I actually loved even more than in just that we are all relations, like people that I cared about. So it took a while. But eventually I was able to situate myself in this space where I really looked at these things and I wanted to look beneath the phenomenon to the foundation to where all this was coming from. And it is my strong opinion, like I, like I said before, that it's not the fault of this or that, that nation, regardless of recognition, the blame is to be laid on the government processes that conflate cultural legitimacy with monetary candidacy. And it's just something you, you can't do or you're going to have this anywhere. The, the one of the saddest things for me is when I think, and I see, I do see this in the nation, children like me, teenagers like me who, who are hesitant to embrace their culture because they go online and they see some person from Oklahoma saying that they're not Lenape. And it's especially intimidating as, as a younger person because who, who do you feel, you know, you don't feel like someone could be challenged that

impression. So different people have their different responses, but I'm kind of taking it as one of my initiatives to recognize this phenomenon, as what it is, which is a situation that has been put upon all of us and to try to, to let people recognize that framework rather than, friction with each other.

Kareli L.:

Thank you for sharing that. What advice would you give to those teenagers, those like younger people that you see your own story so reflected in them?

Adam D.:

It's, it is such an amazing thing to have pride in who you are and in your culture and particularly when you have a community of people who share your culture. And that's what I didn't realize at that age. Like I said, you know, the Lenape nation was like piano lessons. It was just something mom wanted me to do. They, you know, our youth need to really understand what a beautiful and fun and engaging and self-validating thing it is to take part in our ceremonies, to take part in our language. And they need to know that they have all the support in the world, not just from us, but from our other relations across the country. And when, you know, the, the youth get there faster than I do because I'm not very tech-savvy when they're surfing the web, when they're seeing an event, we do, if they happen upon a comment that says, "if you're not federally recognized, you're not real" or something like that, you really just do need to shrug it off the same way you need to shrug off bullies at school or anything like that. Everybody's going to have opinions that are founded on biases or historical inaccuracies and you can't take all from the heart. So, I would tell them just, if you haven't felt it already, which I hope, hope you have, but if you haven't, just trust me that your cultural community is, is one of the most amazing influences and, and validating and personally engaging experiences you'll ever have.

Jessica C.:

Something that I thought was really interesting that you were mentioning earlier is sort of these, this, like the sense of scarcity around government resources creates this, these tensions between communities. And you had kind of mentioned that the sort of the real source of tension shouldn't be between communities, it's between communities and the government. And you had sent a resource to me that I then actually shared with our class, called "We Are Still Here," a book published by the Nanticoke Lenape tribe of New Jersey, where they talked about some of fallacies, one of which was the fallacy of government recognition. Can you share a little bit more about, about sort of that fallacy and, and how you, how you see it affecting communities?

Adam D.:

Yeah, absolutely. And the fallacy is very simple. And that's John Norwood's book, and his, his phrasing of the problem is framing of the problem, which I think is, is simple and brilliant. Anyone who takes just a second to actually really think about the process of, of the federal or state or any kind of government recognition of Native American peoples. I mean, it, it only takes common sense to think about it and see how absurd the process is. For one reason, any time you have an agent of colonialism defining the identity of a subjugated people, you can really just stop right there and say something has gone wrong. But that's, that's what the process is. You know, we're in a situation where native Americans are appealing to the government that subjugated them for their own legitimacy. So like I said, that's, that's pretty much enough said. The problem

is, and again, my, my emphasis is that this is a situation created by, by the capitalistic competition of these government relationships. But the problem is people buy into it anyway. Hugely. So now there are some ways in which the actual legality of being recognized or not affects a nation. And for the record, I don't know if it came up, but the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania is not yet recognized. So for instance, the, the artifacts that our elders and our craft people make that we sell at our cultural center, we are not allowed to say that they are Native American made. We're not allowed to identify them as made by a Native American community, because as far as the government is concerned, we're not a Native American community. There are certain materials that we use in some of our important ceremonies that, for instance, the most popular one is Eagle feathers will very often be used for a process we do called smudging. The initiative behind limiting those kinds of materials in order to safeguard against poaching and hunting and things, that's very admirable. But taking part in our ceremonies in the most genuine way as something else we're limited by our not being federally recognized. So the, these, this idea has real consequences. It's not just a matter of pride, as if cultural pride wasn't enough, but it doesn't even stop there. So the fallacy, beyond the obvious colonialistic themes involved, is simply there are nations and some of our own, some of our Lenape nations who have had recognition and then at a point lost it due to some guideline change or some shift in authority, and then have struggled for years to regain it. And if you're not already aware that this process is just arbitrary, looking at a nation like that and saying, "Well, how has their identity changed? Were they any more or less Lenape when the government was recognizing them, then the next day when they took that recognition away, versus when they got it back?" And it again, it's so simple. It sounds silly to talk on, but I have to imagine, and we all have to imagine, it's not that we have to say, these, even some simple common sense things, because it is still a major part of strife in Native American communities. So that, I mean the, the fallacy that Norwood would put out is really simply just: think about it, realize how uncertain the claim is, but again, there are, there are really important repercussions that, that it has on our communities.

Jessica C.:

So I wanted to ask too, what are some of the current projects or goals or hopes either that you have or that the Lenape nation of Pennsylvania have? moving forward doing this work?

Adam D.:

Well, coming right off the subject of recognition, I will give you a pretty late breaking news tidbit you can put out there. We, we were going for recognition, I want to say, 11 or 12 years ago. Don't quote me on that, but it was some time ago. We were getting very close. It's a long process. It's not like you go there, they say, okay, you leave. It's six years of going through your rolls and doing this kind of thing. So we were doing very well. We had a good relationship with the government in Pennsylvania. Then there was an election. The government changed. We basically got reset to zero, and at that point many our members said, "You know what, this is too dehumanizing, and we don't need it. We're not going to start again." So this has been a subject for the last decade, at least, that comes up at council meetings. And some people say, "We really need to go get that recognition, you know, for our cultural identity and our ceremonies." And other people will say, "We don't want to deal with the government anymore, and we don't need them." So it's, it's gone back and forth for a long time. But just recently, I want to say three months ago, three council meetings ago, it might be a little more than that. We finally had the conversation and decided to re-visit it, to, to go back and try again. And our main inspiration for

doing that was that we are really in a different time now, and just things like this opportunity to, to come here and talk to you and knowing that you're going to spread this information to other people. Just things like that, signal the, the amount of awareness and initiative and acceptance that was not there 10 years ago. You know, at that point in time, it was definitely better than 20 years ago or 30 years ago, but at that point in time, we still really had nowhere to turn. You know, if our relationship with the government went through, we were back on our own. But now, for us, for all Native people, for all indigenous people, for all marginalized people, the world is, or the U S is such a different place than it was even just a decade ago. Not for a moment to say we're are perfect, we still have a lot of work to do, but the consciousness is so much more supportive than it was. That we thought this is, we call it the Time of the Fourth Crow. It's a time based on a prophecy we have. That was actually the center of that exhibit, the appendix of it, where after a period of of hiding and metaphorically dying and then coming back and being wary, we're finally ready to come back. And really live in harmony with the people around us again. So now there is a committee, I'm one of the members, and one of our hopes is to pursue that and have it turn out better this time.

Jessica C.:

I was just going to ask, are there things that people like us can do to support it?

Adam D.:

Spread awareness. That that's really, this is the kind of thing you're doing now is the best thing you could be doing. And you had asked also about my, my personal goals and nation goals. One of my strong initiatives, whenever someone takes over coordinating the River Journey, they usually bring something to the, that they're interested in to contribute to it. My contribution was really emphasizing our relationship with academia. We had had a wonderful relationship with the University of Pennsylvania. We were very often coming back here every year to have our treaty signing, which was amazing. These folks are so great. We had great relationships with Swarthmore, where my mother taught a language class, but I really felt the importance to reach out and engage other academic institutions, 'cause this is where the policy of tomorrow is made, right? Colleges are where the consciousness of tomorrow are made. In the nation, we always look ahead seven generations, and we, we think about how our actions are going to affect, you know, at least seven generations forward. And it's, it's the, the students and the folks in colleges today that are the most influential people of tomorrow. So that year I was able to have a tree signing event at Temple and engage them. And just in a year or so since that happened, we've had multiple wonderful events. So as part of that, what can anyone do? The key is really spreading awareness, spreading support, and especially in those academic spaces because those are the people, again, who were really shaping the future.

Jessica C.:

Is there anything that you think is really important for our class and our listeners, however many dozen listeners we end up having? Is there anything that you think that our class and our listeners should, should know that we haven't covered so far?

Adam D.:

In all our ceremonies, we, we always welcome everybody to come together in a good way. And at the end of the ceremony, we always tell everybody to leave in a good way and to carry the

story of the ceremony with them. And the same thing here. Everyone who's hearing this just carry this information, this awareness forward. And it's, it's amazing how much that matters, whether or not you're, you're indigenous, whether or not you're marginalized. Anyone who, who raises awareness is really helping.

Jessica C.:

Thank you.

Kareli L.:

Thank you so much.

Adam D.:

Absolutely. Thank you for having me.