

Decolonizing Mental Health and Supporting Indigenous Women – Tyra Wanatee-Flores, BSW  
Episode 48  
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Shimon Cohen:

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Shimon Cohen:

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Shimon Cohen:

In this episode, I talk with Tyra Wanatee-Flores, who is a descendant of the Sac and Fox Nation of the Mississippi in Iowa, and identifies as Two-Spirited. Tyra is an advanced standing MSW student at Washington University in St. Louis, a photographer and activist of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous People's Movement, an advocate for Indigenous women who have experienced violence, and a speaker about mental health in Indigenous Country. She talks about the work she is doing with the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation in Mayetta, Kansas, to address youth suicide and substance abuse.

Shimon Cohen:

We discuss how much of social work education and mental health interventions are Eurocentric, which makes it a challenge to find ways that will work for Indigenous communities, but how Tyra is addressing this in her work, using networking and approaches that honor community, tradition, and culture. Tyra talks about being part of the Buder Scholars Program, where she and others have access to an Indigenous curriculum and how it has helped her to learn decolonizing approaches to this work. She emphasizes the importance of community and healing and getting back to pre-colonial ways. Tyra also talks about her work with Meskwaki RISE, a program supporting and empowering Indigenous survivors of domestic violence or sexual assault. She discusses Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), specifically the disappearance of Rita Papakee, who is from her community, and what we can all do to end this violence. Tyra also shares why she does this work. I hope this conversation inspires you to action.

Shimon Cohen:

Before we get into the interview, I want to let you all know about our episode's sponsor, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville College of Social Work. First off, I want to thank them for sponsoring the podcast. UTK has a phenomenal social work program with the opportunity to do your bachelor's, master's and doctorate of social work online. Of course, they also have excellent classes in person in both Knoxville and Nashville. UTK is committed to preparing social workers who will support human potential and dignity and challenge racism in all forms of oppression. Scholarships are available. Go to [www.csw.utk.edu](http://www.csw.utk.edu) to learn more. And now, the interview.

Shimon Cohen:

Hey Tyra, thanks so much for coming on the podcast. I'm so excited to talk with you about all the different activities, activism, studies, interventions, community work you're doing. So just to start things off, could you share about what you're currently working on?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Yeah. So I'm currently a grad student here at Washington University in St. Louis. Right now I'm a practicum student with the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation in Kansas, Mayetta, Kansas. And I'm helping them build a culturally responsible mental health curriculum to combat youth suicide and substance abuse.

Shimon Cohen:

What does that look like in terms of the curriculum and that work that you're doing?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Yeah. So right now, my job as their practicum student is to kind of look for culturally adaptive ways to build a mental health curriculum for the youth at Prairie Band Nation, because right now they aren't able to provide any mental health curriculum for anyone under the age of 18, I believe. Everything that they have is 18 up. So the kids in the Nation are actually really struggling and kind of suffering right now because there's literally no mental health resources for them on their reservation. So that's my job is making sure that we are able to provide that, but also looking for ways to make it culturally inclusive. So not only will they be getting help like mental health resources, but I'm also finding ways to incorporate their culture into the mental health curriculum. So we're keeping the culture alive and we're also encouraging healing through cultural, traditional, spiritual practices.

Shimon Cohen:

That's amazing. I've looked at the work of Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart around historical trauma and healing. And it sounds like what you're doing is really in line with that. What kind of models are you seeing and where are you getting your inspiration and resources from?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Right. So it's a lot of using Google Scholar trying to find out what tribes used what through that. But it's also very, very limiting. Almost everything that I come across is not entirely something that we could use. So aside from using the few articles I can find, I'm also trying to remain in contact with other tribes who may have done the same thing and kind of trying to understand the steps that they took so I too can make sure that I'm taking the right steps to provide that. But it's definitely hard to do when there's so very few studies and resources out there. So yeah, definitely kind of how I'm coming by that is just networking without using the internet per se, just making sure that I can call certain tribes, ask them a few questions, making sure that I am doing it correctly, what steps did they take. And then I'm taking all this information and sharing it with my advisors over at Prairie Band.

Shimon Cohen:

I was planning at some point to ask you about social work education and how it is so Eurocentric and White and the contrast with what works in the Indigenous communities you're from and working with. And I was going to ask you maybe a little later, but I think I'm going to jump right into it now based on

what you're talking about, because what you're saying really hits on this point, that there's a lack of information, of resources that is culturally responsible, is culturally responsive. I mean, you should be able to be in your MSW program and getting these models, right? This shouldn't be that you're having to call all around. I mean, I understand obviously why you're doing that, right, because that's what you have to do. But is your social work education assisting you with this or is it just not helpful?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

So I feel that it's definitely a bit of a struggle. For sure, there are a lot of Indigenous researchers out there having all of this weight on their shoulders to make sure that they can collect all of this information so they can share it with future generations of social workers, doctors, mental health workers, whatever. And it's definitely hard to be in such classes, social work classes. They're not made to include minority communities, specifically Indigenous communities because there's just not a lot of information regarding Indigenous history and anything, right? A lot of our education from kindergarten to high school to college doesn't include accurate Indigenous history.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

So, there's just a lot of... A group of us here at WashU we are called the Buder Scholars. So we're all here. It's an Indigenous group of students. And we all here at WashU are blessed to have an Indigenous curriculum. So there are certain classes that we have access to that is required of us in the American Indian and Alaskan Native concentration to take that teach us these ways of decolonizing this certain curriculum and making sure that we can use it when we go out into our fields. But not a lot of colleges have access to what we have access to here.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

So, I honestly have learned so much compared to what I learned in undergrad. Undergrad was just the basic social work stuff. But when I came to WashU, it was kind of like, here's what you learned in undergrad, but we're going to completely take that apart and teach you the decolonized structure of everything that you learned. So it's definitely a process of taking what I learned in certain social work classes and then bringing it home or bringing it to another group of Indigenous people, having discussions, meeting with certain researchers who know so much about this topic and how to decolonize it. And so it's definitely putting in a lot of work. Not only are you going to school, but you have to come back and find ways to make sure that it can benefit you, your people, your entire community in a safe and respectful way.

Shimon Cohen:

So can you give an example of maybe something that's social work-y that you learned that then you got into this program and they're like, "Here's the decolonized way of doing this"?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Yeah. So I'm mostly in the mental health field, but I've also learned certain angles of social work kind of to, I feel that could benefit me with just knowing when I go work for my tribe or another tribe. One big thing that we mostly talk about is the child welfare system in Indigenous communities and the mental health system. So, child welfare, we have this certain organization called NICWA, N-I-C-W-A, which is the National Indian Child Welfare Act. So that protects our Indigenous children from being taken away from this colonized child welfare system.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

So, in class, like I said in just through K through 12 college curriculum, you don't learn the proper history of Indigenous people. A big part of our history was that we had our children taken from us, right? So, the phrase, these children were taken to boarding schools and were sexually assaulted. They were physically assaulted. They had their identities forcefully stripped from them. And I really shouldn't call it a boarding school. We call it more of an assimilation school, forced assimilation. The phrase was "Kill the Indian, save the child." And these children were beaten for speaking their language, for practicing their ways, for taking care of one another. That was our culture. And they would return to their families completely unrecognizable. Their hair was cut. Everything about them was so different. They didn't practice their ways anymore.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

So definitely the child welfare system of that started taking place when these assimilation schools were being shut down, that turned into the colonized child welfare system kind of nitpicking everything that these Indigenous parents were doing because we were still trying to stay intact with our cultural ways. An example of that would be religious groups. They would come to reservations and "missionary work" would be done, and they would see these mothers struggling to take care of these children and, well in their definition, struggling to take care of their own children. And these missionary workers would just literally come to these reservations and pick children just out of their front yards and then give them to non-Indigenous families to take care of. And a lot of these children weren't even documented when they were taken from their mothers.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

So that is how we lost a lot of our children. That was another way to kill our culture, to kill who we were. So, this was created. NICWA was created to ensure that our children can stay with our families, stay with Indigenous families. So they do not go into non-Indigenous households and forget who they are and forget where they came from. So if a child is in a position where they need to be removed from the household for whatever reason, that child will stay with an Indigenous family and they look at relatives first. Will Grandma take them? Does Dad want them? Does Auntie want them? Does Uncle want them? All while making sure that these are also safe households for the children to go so they're not in this repeated cycle of having to bounce from house to house. So when this happens, the child is staying with an Indigenous household, practicing their Indigenous ways, still going to ceremony or whatever the family's spiritual religious practices are. And so that is just one example of the certain social work that we are doing here. And it's a lot for sure.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. Thank you for going into that level of detail with that history and the present-day reality as well. It's so important and you're right, it's left out. It's not left out. It's deliberately excluded from a lot of education. And this Indigenous is curriculum that you are learning and part of, right, do students from other races and ethnicities learn this curriculum as well?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Yeah. So as far as I know, I've only ever seen the certain Buder students within these classes because it's required of us. However, I do think that the classes are available to everybody. And I talk with certain friends of mine who, oh, the occasional, "What classes do you have this semester?" And so we compare each other to see if, "Oh, I have you in my class." Right? And when I tell them, oh, like an example, "I'm

in community development for American Indian, Alaskan Native communities." And they tell me, "What's that? I've never heard of that. Can anybody take that?"

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

We have students who are interested in how to do this. They want to see how different Indigenous communities are and how things are done. So there is the interest. There are people who are non-Indigenous students who are interested and for sure there are non-Indigenous Buder students as well who are in these classes. So yeah, the classes are open to whoever wants to take them, obviously if you can grab a seat in time, but the classes are open to non-Indigenous students as well, if they're interested. But a lot of them just don't know that they're there.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. That's interesting to me. I just have a lot of thoughts about it in terms of, as there's this bigger push within social work to decolonize social work, right? It seems to be gaining. There's a movement growing, right?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

For sure.

Shimon Cohen:

Sometimes I wonder if non-Indigenous people are going to co-opt Indigenous ways like has been done historically in so many other areas. And then it's not really decolonizing then, if that makes sense. I don't know if I'm making sense with that. What do you think?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

I definitely think that there for sure is huge change coming in approaches to social work and possibly changes to other areas of education. But social work for sure is one of them because my mother is a social worker. I mean, she's been in social work since I could remember. And she's provided huge changes within our community. She's in the master's program as well, but just at a different school, but we've exchanged curriculum when she was able to pull out her old transcripts. And she would say, "Look at these classes I had to take." There was classes I've never heard of like Typewriting 1. And I'm like, "Oh my God, you have a class for typewriting?" And she's like, "Yeah, well, you don't need those anymore."

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

But we were comparing and she said that when she was in school, my age, when she was going to school for social work in undergrad, social work was just social work. It was from a colonized point of view. And she told me social work wasn't about advocacy. It wasn't about making a change. It wasn't about policy making. It wasn't about any of that. It was just, "Here's how to do your job."

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

And today there's a huge change in curriculum. We have diversity classes. We have community development classes. We have evaluation of program classes and all different kind of how to make the social work system better, not only from a colonized perspective, but as well as for Indigenous communities, other minority communities. We have the Hispanic social workers. We have the Black community who's going into social work. And there's all these spaces now that are making room for all

of these students' voices to be heard, to make a proper change in their communities, making sure that it's beneficial to them. And I definitely think that we have come a long way, but for sure, we have a longer way to go. Honestly, if so much has changed within 20 years, what's another 20 years going to look like? What classes are going to be available then? What movements? Who are the people that are going to be encouraged by what we're doing now and what are they going to change? So for sure, I definitely think that there's bigger things coming.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. You sound really hopeful about it.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. It's great to get that perspective. I see it too. I feel the movement that it's coming and it's growing and these changes are happening. I just always have that concern of White people co-opting things that have been created by Black, Brown, Indigenous folks.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

For sure.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, because that's what's always happened. That's what's always happened, right?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Yeah, definitely.

Shimon Cohen:

So I wanted to get back to the work you're doing right now at your practicum and then get into some of the other work you do. But around these suicide prevention and intervention approaches, what are you finding that will work with youth in the community?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

I definitely think community is going to help the youth. That is one thing I'm understanding because Indigenous communities, we always looked out for each other. In certain traditions and certain culture of Indigenous people, we're all different and that's something people need to understand is every single tribe is not the same. There may be similarities, but we are not the same. And in my tribe before colonization, we all looked out for one another and we have this practice that we still share today that... I have no children and my cousins, to you, they would be your cousins, your uncles, your aunts. In my culture, we do not call them that. Originally we would not call them that. So technically my female cousins are my sisters. My male cousins are my brothers. My aunts and uncle are just mothers and fathers. They're an extension of my mother. We don't do the, the in-laws, the step cousins, the whatever.

Shimon Cohen:

The once removed or whatever.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Yes, exactly. When I heard that, I'm like, "What does that mean?" But for sure, it's our relatives, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, that's it. And so when my sisters, aka cousins, have children, they're now my children. I'm also their mother. I'm an extension of their mother. When their mother is gone for whatever reason, like out doing something, I'm their mother. I take over the mother's job. And that is a practice that some people in my community have forgotten. I've had some people laugh in my face when I remind them that, "Technically that's your son." "No, it isn't." But yes it is. That was our original teachings.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

And today every single mental health method, intervention, prevention that I've come across regarding Indigenous communities regarding Indigenous youth ties back to community. We encourage the community to be there for their youth because their youth are their future. And the youth need people to look up to. And a lot of them don't have that because of the effects of colonization, historical trauma, generational trauma. There's a lot of that going on. So a lot of our youth need people to look up to.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

So, there's for sure people I've met in the community who want to do that for our youth who encourage our youth to sing, to dance our traditional dances, who want to be there for them. And that's... I believe community plays a big part in encouraging them to keep fighting, to keep going, to take care of themselves. And I think it's definitely something a lot of non-Indigenous communities don't have and/or may have forgotten. Maybe they do have it. And they just had forgotten that because of colonization. Every single minority group has been colonized some way. And I definitely think that we need to remember our roots and remember that community came together and we took care of each other. We never, in Indigenous communities, we never let the other struggle. If we saw someone struggling, we helped them. We were not selfish people. Selfishness was taught to us. So, for sure, a big, big factor in the mental health of youth is community coming together.

Shimon Cohen:

That's so powerful. As you were speaking, I wrote down "Colonization separates, individualizes, and erases."

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Yes, exactly.

Shimon Cohen:

Like you said, it's everywhere. Colonization is a global issue, right? And it's been done to so many groups of people, many of us who have lost our traditions along the way or had them really removed.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Yes.

Shimon Cohen:

From our cultures. Yeah. So let's talk about some of the other work you do. Could you talk about the work you're doing at Meskwaki RISE?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Yeah. So I was an intern there, but I've always helped do any kind of work that they've been doing because it's an extension of the program that my mother works for. And she's the director of Meskwaki Family Services and RISE is an extension of that. So from growing up, I've always helped. We have community awareness events. They do a yearly pumpkin patch where they invite Indigenous families in the community to bring their kids, to pick pumpkins for free. They make corn mazes. They have hay bales donated so the kids can climb around and whatever, have some fun, have some family fun. And I've always helped with that. I've always helped them set up. I've always helped them hand out t-shirts, take attendance, whatever. I always help them.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

And so whenever RISE, I owe a lot to RISE and, like I explained RISE stands for Resources for Indigenous Survivors and Empowerment. There was a point in my life where I was seeking services from RISE. And I feel like not that they require it of me, but I definitely feel like I owe a lot to them. And anytime they need help is when I come through. I drop everything, right? And so previously I was an intern there during summer of 2019 and I handled their transitional housing project, which provided... They were able to get a grant that was able to cover two or three years rent for domestic violence survivors seeking shelter, who are homeless, had children. So I was able to provide them with housing and help them get back on their feet.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

And a lot of what I do is revolving around domestic violence, sexual violence, and mental health. So they're all kind of combined into three. So that's mostly what I do if I ever get involved with RISE. And previously I spoke at a event for ICAD, Iowa Coalition Against Domestic Violence. And it was during their Dia de los Muertos event, which I thought was very, I felt very honored and almost taken aback that they wanted to create a space for Indigenous voices at an event that highlighted Hispanic heritage. And it's mostly because nobody does that. And I just remember being excited and because I've never been to a celebration for Dia de los Muertos. And so it was definitely beautiful. And they also made spaces for other movements to come in, the Black Lives Matter movement and it was great. And so I spoke on violence against women as well as MMIW which is Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. So highlighted those issues for RISE. So that was definitely an experience I'll always remember and be thankful for to them.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. That sounds like an amazing event to have those different groups all together also in one place. Just sounds really powerful.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

It definitely was.



Shimon Cohen:

Can you talk a little bit about Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Yeah. So Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, commonly known as MMIW, is an issue that is involved with Indigenous communities that's been happening since colonization. The story of Pocahontas, definitely heavily romanticized by Disney, but Pocahontas we consider the first missing and murdered Indigenous woman because she was 12 years old when she was taken. And it also is in regards of sexualizing Indigenous women. In the media, we're heavily sexualized in these movies. Halloween is coming up, and every single year, no matter how much you say not to do it, there's always that one person dressed as an Indigenous woman, colonized Indigenous woman, sexualized Indigenous woman. Spirit Halloween still carries these costumes. So it's definitely a movement that is trying to stop trying to bring awareness to all these issues.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

And Indigenous women go missing and are murdered at a rate 10 times higher than any other race. And occasionally when I bring that up, when I would bring it up in classes or wherever, there's always that one person, "Well, statistically, these people suffer at a rate, blah, blah, blah, blah." Right? And I just have to tell them, "I'm so glad that you are able to have your statistics. You're able to have your accurate statistics of this issue happening, but I can't give you that. I can't give you statistics right now because there's no statistics available for me. Nobody cares." Right? That is definitely how I felt and multiple other Indigenous people felt when it came to that.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

And a lot of the crimes, physical violence, sexual violence, murder, committed against Indigenous women are done by non-Indigenous men. And there's so much going into this movement. There's issues with jurisdiction. Did this violent act occur on the reservation or settlement or whatever Indigenous community you're from, or did it happen off of the Indigenous community that you're from? Because if it happened off, then that becomes state jurisdiction, right? If it happened on the reservation, that becomes a tribal jurisdiction and then it falls into the category of was the perpetrator a member of the Indigenous community? Are they a tribal member or are they from off the reservation or Indigenous community? If they're off of or not from the Indigenous community, it's basically become a matter of, sorry, we can't really do anything because we do not have that kind of jurisdiction or whatever.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

And so a lot of these acts go unreported or there are definitely some disturbing men out there who know that they can get away with this if it's an Indigenous woman because nobody cares. Nobody will care. Right now, there is, I want to say the Highway of Tears I think somewhere in Canada. I think that is where it is. I had done a project on it a few years ago. So I definitely think that is where it is.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

It's encouraged that no female hitchhikers go along the Highway of Tears because women were going missing and murdered there along that strip for years. And a lot of them have not been found. A majority of those women were Indigenous women who had been coming from the reservation or maybe trying to head to work in the next town over through that highway. And a lot of ways that they got around was hitchhiking because most, not all, but a majority of Indigenous communities are in poverty.

Some people can't afford cars or a car that can carry them that far. And so these women would hitchhike and be picked up and then just be murdered or go missing. And a lot of them were from Indigenous communities, just trying to get to town, maybe just trying to get groceries, trying to meet a friend. And so that's a big example.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Another example is this issue affects my community because we had a woman go missing in 2015. And nobody still knows what happened to her. All they have is security footage of her leaving an establishment, a public establishment, and that's it. She is a mother and she is a daughter. She's an aunt. She's a friend and she's a person. She's someone. And she matters. And her name is Rita Papakee. She is listed on Iowa Cold Cases, and nothing ever came of that. And nobody knows.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

And I remember attending community college and I spoke about this in my speech class. Nobody knew who I was talking about. And the college is 20 minutes away from my community. They were not that far. A lot of them didn't even know that we still existed. A lot of them didn't know that my community was 20 minutes away. So it's definitely something that hurts every single Indigenous person. If you look into the movement, you will see thousands of faces throughout the years of women who've been murdered or who have gone missing or suffered from violence. And it's just enough. That's enough. We're tired of it. So, MMIW was created to support these women to find answers and to remind everyone that most of these women are still out there or do not have justice. So that is why the movement was created.

Shimon Cohen:

Thank you for sharing all of that and sharing her name. You said Rita Papakee.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Yes. Rita Papakee.

Shimon Cohen:

And just sharing, I could hear the pain is palpable, right? This is incredibly painful.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Shimon Cohen:

How can people who are engaging with the podcast support this work or even get involved?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Yeah. So there are a lot of groups out there who share information on this topic. And there are a lot of Indigenous news outlets who dedicate articles the second they hear about any of these issues occurring. There are a lot of news outlets that I follow that are Indigenous-led that highlight Indigenous issues across the United States as well as Canada. So social media is your best friend when it comes to this, right? Because no major news outlet is going to share all of this information because, like I keep repeating, nobody cares. And so definitely look to social media for this, look up hashtags, the hashtag

MMIW, hashtag violence against Indigenous women. Any of those topics regarding MMIW or violence against Indigenous women, news outlets that are dedicated to this, groups that are dedicated to this, events that are dedicated to this will pop up. I would suggest heavily Facebook. There are a lot of groups dedicated to this issue to bringing light to this issue. And just keeping up, just trying to keep up with everything going on through Indigenous news outlets.

Shimon Cohen:

What are some of the Indigenous news outlets that you follow that people could check out?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Yes. So one of them is Decolonize Myself - A First Nation's Perspective. That's a big one that I follow as well as Urban Indian Health Institute, which is a nonprofit organization. Another is... Okay, the other one is specifically highlighting missing and murdered Indigenous women is a page on Facebook called Missing Flowers: Missing Murdered Indigenous Women and Men. And that's a news and media website. Those are the three main ones that I use to keep in touch with everything.

Shimon Cohen:

Thank you so much for sharing that. And I hope folks who are listening or reading the transcripts will check those out and stay up on that and do work around that.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Yes.

Shimon Cohen:

As we're kind of getting closer to wrapping things up, and again, I'm so grateful for you to come on here and share everything you've been sharing, I just have a couple more questions for you.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Sure.

Shimon Cohen:

You've kind of talked about this, but I wanted to just really explicitly ask this to you. Where do you pull your strength from?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

I feel that most of my strength comes from personal experience. At a young age, I was once in a situation with an abusive man and suffered all kinds of abuse. And it got to the point where I definitely could have lost my life. And I was still very young. I wasn't even 19 yet. And I was in just a very rough spot. I'm a three-time suicide attempt survivor. And I think what mostly was driving me to pursue this field was the fact that I wasn't getting the help that I feel I deserved at the time. Most of my help came from women in my community and I sought services outside of my community. And it wasn't great. It wasn't something I feel that mental health services definitely should be. And it was more of just, I guess, brushing over the idea that somebody was so low that they needed help. Especially for Indigenous organizations, we had non-Indigenous people kind of just brushing over, "Oh, this is just another

Tuesday." For me, it wasn't another Tuesday. For me, it was my life. I was fighting for my life and I wasn't being treated as so.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

So, definitely, I think I'm a very stubborn person. If I think I deserve the best, I'm going to make sure that I get the best. And I remember just sitting in this room waiting for these crisis counselors or whoever they were. I had waited four hours for them by the way to show up. And I was waiting for them. And I was just like, "You know what? I deserve better than this. This sucks."

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

So I was sitting in that chair and I was like, "You know what? I can do so much better." So I told my mom, while waiting in this room, "You know what? What can I do to be better than these people?" And my mom was like "Social work." So I was like... But I'm going to school for social work and I constantly had to argue my way through classes, had to fight my way through classes to make sure that I'm getting the best education so I can make sure that I'm providing help to someone like me who was in my situation, who is in my situation because getting out of domestic violence, intimate partner violence, sexual assault, that's hard work. Nobody tells you about that. Nobody tells you how hard it's going to be coming out. It's hard to leave, but it's even harder when you're coming out of it. And so I just wanted to be there for someone who needed me because I didn't have that.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

So I think that's mostly where the drive is coming from is I see someone who really needs help and is not getting it because nobody else knows how to give it to them. So I tell them there's been so many instances where I've been like, "Hey, let's go out for some coffee. Let's go have lunch. Let's go to the park." And I've listened to so many girls who've been in my situation, cry and hurt in a safe space. And that made them feel better. That's all anyone needs. That's all I asked for. And I wasn't given that. So I'm making sure that I'm able to give that to girls and making sure that they have something that I didn't have or that nobody gave me.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah. You've become the person you wish who was there for you.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Exactly.

Shimon Cohen:

And that's probably healing too, right?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

For sure. It is.

Shimon Cohen:

And just a final question is, what do you love about your culture?

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

I love that it just feels like something to come home to. It's welcoming. And I feel like my culture loves me back and it's healing and... It's for everyone who grew up in this culture, it wants you to come back. It wants you to come home. It wants to feed you, to nourish you, and to provide you with this safe space. And that is definitely something that I love about it because I go to school away from my community. I'm in Missouri. My community is back in Iowa. So I can't participate in a lot of things. So definitely that is what I love about my culture is that it's just always there regardless where I am.

Shimon Cohen:

That's really beautiful. Thank you again, Tyra, for coming on here and talking with me, sharing your experience, personal experience, work experience, educational experience, cultural experiences, and thanks for doing the work in the community.

Tyra Wanatee-Flores:

Thank you for having me. I'm very excited to have been given this opportunity for sure.

Shimon Cohen:

Thank you for listening to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change. I hope you enjoyed the podcast. Please follow on Twitter and leave positive reviews on iTunes. If you're interested in being a guest or know someone who's doing great work, please get in touch and thank you for doing real work to make this world a better place.