**The Tragedy of Indian Boarding Schools: Marnee Ryan Lehtonen**

John Caher: Welcome to Diversity Dialogues, a production of the New York State Unified Court System's Office of Diversity and Inclusion. I'm John Caher.

America's relationship with its indigenous communities is complicated and nuanced and far too complex to adequately explore in a short podcast.

Today, we are going to zero in on one and often forgotten tragedy; The prevalence in the 19th and early 20th centuries of Indian boarding schools throughout the United States and Canada, the aim of which was to assimilate indigenous children into the Euro-American culture. Ultimately, it was cultural genocide.

September 30 is orange shirt day, a day when people are encouraged to wear orange, to remember the children who were placed in boarding schools. We'll explore that a little later.

Today, we are fortunate to have as our guest, a woman who can shed some light on what went on in the Indian boarding schools and how it impacted current and future generations.

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen, who works in the Corning City Court, has Seneca roots. Her grandmother was shepherded into the Thomas Indian School, which was established by missionaries in 1855 to house Seneca children orphaned and kidnapped under the federal policy of forced assimilation. It was actually operated by New York State for 80 years until it was finally shut down in 1957.

Marnee's grandmother spent most of her childhood there and with some prodding, shared her memories with Marnee. And today, we'll ask Marnee to share what she has learned.

Marnee, thank you so much for joining us. First, let's set the scene and explore the Seneca people who occupied much of Western New York for thousands of years, long, long before the formation of the United States. So who are the Seneca and what is your connection to the Seneca Nation?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

Actually, there are two Seneca tribes in the State of New York. There's the Tonawanda Seneca Nation, which are my people, and then there's

the Seneca Nation of Indians. And we essentially are the same people. But in the late 1840s, we went our separate ways. The Seneca Nation adopted a council sort of representation for their people. And we kept the old ways for our tribe, using clan mothers and chieftains

John Caher: Are both part of the Iroquois Confederacy?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

We are. We are the keepers of the Western door, and as you said, we've been here many, many, many years. Currently, I think there are four reservations in New York. We have some reservation land in Canada, and some of our Seneca people found themselves among the Trail of Tears folks that are out in Oklahoma.

John Caher: Wow! Now the Revolutionary War, of course, divided the Six Nations of the Confederacy with some supporting the Americans, others supporting the British. The Senecas tried to remain neutral, but ultimately decided the odds were better with the British.

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

Yes.

John Caher: How did that alliance affect history?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

The Revolution was a period of time where alliances were strongly challenged. I think there was even a little flip flopping back and forth between the sides at particular points, and I would say there was a reluctance on the part of my people to join in that skirmish at all. It did a lot of damage to the Six Nations, and it definitely fractured those alliances as well.

John Caher: Now let's back up to your family. So what is your family connection to the Seneca?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

So my grandmother was as close to a full-blood Seneca as you can get in this part. We're kind of intermarried on the East Coast because of early occupation here versus out West. So my grandmother was born on the Seneca Reservation and she was one of 11 children. And in the male line

of our family, they were chieftains, and the females in our family line were clan mothers. So a big family, a pretty well-established family.

John Caher: Is that your maternal or your paternal grandmother?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

My maternal grandmother.

John Caher: And was it the Tonawanda Reservation that she grew up in?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

Yes, yes.

John Caher: Now as I recall, that's not in Tonawanda.

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

It is not. My grandmother always said Basom, New York. It's not really there either, but it's a very small plot of land in that general area near Pembroke, a lot of wetlands, woods, impoverished.

John Caher: So, for our listeners who are not familiar with Western New York as much as I am and you are the Tonawanda Nation area would be kind of between Rochester and Buffalo?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

Yes.

John Caher: Now, do you know how, why and when your grandmother ended up at the time of school?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

Yes.

When my grandmother was approximately eight, her mother was murdered and she was left without an adult guardian. And her and all of her siblings that were under the age of 14 were actually first taken to the Protestant Home for Unprotected Children. And that was in approximately 1925. Her mom was killed in November of '25. So this was December of '25.

John Caher: What were the circumstances of her murder? Do you know?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

It was a domestic situation, which is why the children couldn't remain where they were. And any of the children who were 14 and older, there were 11 of the children in total, and I don't remember the exact ages at this time, but the older children were able to go off and work and start other lives, but the younger children were determined to be too young to be placed with their teenage siblings. And so they were taken to this Protestant home until they could find room for them at the Thomas Indian School, which was their ultimate destination.

John Caher: What was her name by the way, your grandmother's name?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

My grandmother, well, she was born Pearl Marie Sundown. But my grandmother, because of all of this, went by many, many names in her lifetime, part of what I'll call the fallout from her time with all this displacement.

John Caher: What were some of those names, do you know?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

Yeah, she went by Patricia Marie. She went by about a dozen different last names. It was like she was always searching for her identity and depending on the circumstances, she may just pick up a new name and away she went. She was really fascinating in that regard. I remember her mailbox had six names when I lived with her for a while in college, and she had six names on her mailbox.

John Caher: So you lived with her for a while, so you had an opportunity to talk to her.

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

I did. I lived with her my first year of college, so yes.

John Caher: Did she readily open up about the Thomas School or did you have to pry it out of her?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

My grandma didn't like to talk about that period of her life, and it was usually when maybe there was a beer or two in sight and she would tell me stories about her past. She ended up at the Thomas Indian School when she was 12, and when she went at that age, the younger siblings that were with her in that Protestant home were sent to various foster homes and places to kind of buy time until they came. And within a couple of years of her being there, some of her siblings joined her.

John Caher: What was life like inside there? It sounds almost institutional, almost incarceratory.

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

Well, that's exactly what it was. These children that were housed there, they were on very, very tight schedules from the time they got up until the time they went to bed, they were told what to do, when to do it. They didn't play like other children. They worked. It was a working farm in part and they learned domestic skills. They did everything that needed to be done for their day-to-day survival. They did it themselves, canning, cooking, milking cows, whatever the case may be.

John Caher: But the goal, one of the goals was cultural assimilation and to suppress the indigenous predictions. Correct?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

It was, and my grandmother, I wrote down a quote that she said quite a bit, not to me, but to one of my siblings. She said to him quite often that the purpose of the school or the motto was “kill the Indian, save the child.” And that's really telling, I mean, my grandmother, until she had come to the Indian school, wasn't allowed to have her long hair. She had been able to dress more like she had growing up. They were poor, so it wasn't anything fancy, but when they got to the Thomas Indian School, they were told what to wear. They cut their hair, they deloused them and scrubbed them and bleach water because they said they were filthy even though she had come from another facility. And it was clear that there was nothing amiss with her. And she talked a lot about how harsh they were. There wasn't a lot of kindness or love or any of the things you would have in a family. It was rules, order, corporal punishment, those kinds of things.

John Caher: I want to go back to something you said and make sure I heard that correctly. “Kill the Indian, save the child.” Is that what you said?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

That's what my brother had said my grandma had said to her several times, that's what she took away from this place. And I think that's all he really ever heard from her about it, because as I said, she wasn't willing to really open up and have those long conversations. It was very sad for her, I think, and very painful. And when you grow up in an institutional setting, and keep in mind, she was in one facility for four years at the Protestant school, then she was in the Thomas Indian School for another four years.

And because she was a bit of a rebel by nature and quite a troublemaker, she didn't like to be told what to do and how to do it. And she fought every day to hold onto who she was, they sent her from there to another institution in Hudson, the Hudson School for Girls, because she was a troublemaker. So she spent another four years there. So, 12 years of her upbringing she was in institutional settings, which set the stage for her adult life, which was chaotic, riddled with abuse, alcohol abuse, domestic abuse, a lot of things that carried forward into the lives of my mother and her siblings, and somewhat into even my upbringing.

John Caher: Do you know any details of her rebellious troublemaking qualities?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

So, she would frequently try to speak her native language, which none of us can speak, but she would try to speak and she would be locked in closets for doing that or rapped with rulers. I know that she absolutely refused the religious education courses that they were required to take. And I don't know more than that as far as what they were teaching them. But she refused to participate and there were several times she went without meals for days and locked in, I don't know if it was just closets or basements or both. She didn't get to participate in a lot of things, any, “recreational things” that ever did come up, movie nights or whatever.

They did watch Westerns of all things in the gymnasium, and they weren't allowed to really have any kind of negative reaction to the, we'll call them the scenes where the “good guys” allegedly prevailed. They weren't allowed to react. They were supposed to cheer for those shootout scenes. And she never minded missing because she never really

wanted to be there, but they saw that as a punishment towards her as well.

John Caher: You mentioned generational trauma and how your grandmother's trauma was passed down to the next generation and maybe your generation. Can you explore that a little bit? What was that? What is generational trauma and how does it manifest?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

Generational trauma, that's where something happens in a generation, and maybe it is repeated in the next generation and maybe the generation after or the trauma that happened to that generation leads to alcohol abuse and that carries on through the family.

In my grandmother's case, when you grow up in an institutional world, you don't know love, you don't know anything but rules and demands. You don't always speak kindly. And when my mother and her brothers were growing up, their lives were I think pretty regimented. And my grandmother didn't show a lot of love and kindness toward them. And there was a lot of, like I said before, alcohol abuse. I think my grandmother numbed herself to the world, and that led to a lot of domestic relations issues, which of course affected the children. All of my uncles left home before they were 16, and my mom got married at 14, so they were escaping that world and that life.

And of course here I've got a mom married at 14, and my dad was much older. She didn't have me until she was 20, and I'm the oldest. But she didn't know how to be a mom. She didn't know how to raise children. She knew how to clean houses very well. She knew how to cook and clean, and I think we received more love and attention than she probably did. But my mom was still very removed from us and in our generation. I have two brothers. One is in treatment now for drug abuse, and I've got one brother who does drink too much. I don't drink. I don't do drugs. And two of us didn't have children. I adopted, and chose not to pass along any kind of negative genetics. And on top of that, lots and lots and lots of work on who I am because I did not want to pass on those generational defects.

John Caher: That's quite a challenge and quite a brave thing to do.

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

You have to look at the big picture. Abusers pass on abuse, alcoholics pass on alcoholism. You've got to stop it somewhere. And I know that doesn't help the native or the indigenous lines of the family, but I just thought it was better to help other kids in not fantastic situations and work through my own stuff at the same time. And that seemed to be a better route for us.

John Caher: My hat is off to you. That's very impressive.

Now, are there any Seneca traditions that you continue and you'd like to share with our listeners?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

I still dance. When I was in college, I ran for Miss Indian World and I was Miss Indian UNM. I went to the University of New Mexico and I was first a fancy shawl dancer and then a jingle dancer. For me, there were the little bits of what my grandmother took me to see. She always took me to powwows when my mom was occupied elsewhere. And despite my grandma not being warm with my mom, my grandmother was very warm and kind to us. So it was important to her that I learned to dance because it always made her smile. So I continue that. I still have a jingle dress.

John Caher: I'm glad to hear that. If there's one thing that you'd like non-native listeners to better understand about their indigenous cousins, what would it be?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

I think a lot of Native Americans have suffered for a very long time in silence. If there was one thing I'd just ask others to think about and maybe keep in mind about native folks, we're trying to do our thing and move forward with you all and are overcoming generations of atrocities that those of us today had nothing to do with, and we're doing our best to find our footing and walk with the rest of you.

John Caher: That's interesting because it goes back to what we talked about a moment ago about generational trauma. You could argue that the Wild West days and all that stuff is long, long gone, but as you noted, the trauma tends to be carried on from generation to generation.

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

Yes. And actually it's not even just an us vs. anyone else thing. There are a lot of issues between the tribes. I ran for Miss Indian UNM, I ran from Miss Indian World, and I had many, many, many people from much bigger Western tribes tell me that my tribe doesn't really exist. We're not really native, we're not native enough. There are lots of internal disagreements amongst our own people. So it's a very interesting socio-economic kind of thing that I think natives are trying to work their way through too just in our own world.

John Caher: Human beings seem to be tribal by nature and perhaps racist by nature. And you mentioned tribes, of course, which were at times fighting each other during the Revolution. And as I mentioned at the outset, it is a very, very complicated and nuanced history that's far, far beyond the scope of a short podcast.

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

I agree.

Everybody's got different experiences. Everybody has a different piece of the story. This is just from my perspective, what I've been able to see and gather.

John Caher: Well, that's a very, very valuable opinion, particularly because it comes from your perspective, and I appreciate that.

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

Thank you.

John Caher: And as I mentioned at the outset, we're coming up to Orange Shirt Day, which until the Court just put out a notice the other day, I never heard of Orange Shirt Day. What is it and why is it?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

So this is something that they had done in Canada for a long time, and I had to make some notes on this because I do more Red Shirt Day than Orange Shirt Day, which is a totally different thing. There's actually a Red Dress Day as well, but we'll go into the Orange Shirt Day. It's a day of remembrance and reconciliation for indigenous residential school survivors. And like I said, it started in Canada with a woman named

Phyllis Webstad, who had re-told the story of her first day at a residential school where she had been wearing a shirt and they had removed it from her. So many things were taken at residential schools. And it sounds silly to say it was just a shirt, but it was just one more thing taken from her. So I guess the United States has now joined in with these Canadians in their celebration on the 30th, a remembrance of those who went to these schools.

I know for a really long time, especially like Thomas Indian School, our survivors have been waiting to hear from our government or from our representatives, some sort of apology for what happened at that time. And I do know that in May of this year, our Governor, Gov. Hochul, she actually came to the Thomas Indian School and she did apologize on behalf of New York State for the atrocities that did take place at the Thomas Indian School. Forgiveness and trauma healing and all of those things start with something just so tiny. And we've been very, very, very blessed to have that from her. I don't know that it solves everything, but I think it's a good step forward. And it's an even brighter reason to wear the orange shirt here at the end of September because we're remembering a time and trying to go forward and heal.

John Caher: A nice step forward, but a hundred years or so late, or I guess better late than never.

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

It has to start somewhere. There's so much hostility in the world right now and any little bit of kindness, I think it goes a long way. And a lot of our survivors have since passed. They used to get together every year for a very long time, and my grandmother did for a while, and they kept those ties to one another. There are so few left, but those that are here to hear what she had to say, I think they're happy that somebody finally, somewhere in our government spoke on their behalf in some sort of way.

John Caher: You mentioned something else in passing, the Red Shirt Day or the Red Dress Day. What's that?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

Those are for the missing murdered indigenous women. So many native women have come up missing across the country. It's predominant, I think more in our Northwestern reservations, but it's happening all over. There have been a lot of issues with... Well, let me back up. So when somebody comes up missing and they're reported missing, usually tribal

authorities will investigate. Maybe local authorities will investigate, but tribal land is often difficult to navigate. And when the feds come in to assist with missing indigenous, murdered women and children, they were having trouble coordinating and getting onto the land and investigating. And I think that's kind of worked out a little bit over time. But they're under reported, they don't always spend a lot of resources looking for these people. And they find their remains many years later, many miles from where they were, and they don't seem to be resolved as quickly as other cases. And it's not a few. There are a vast number.

John Caher: That is very, very sad.

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

Yes.

John Caher: Now you're rather far removed from the Tonawanda Reservation.

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

I am.

John Caher: But it's very clear to me your heritage remains important to you. Why is that?

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

My grandmother in her older years found her way back to her family, to the reservation, and she's trying to teach us little bits of the language, and she said it was really important. It was a part of her that they didn't want her to possess. And thereby we should hold onto it with both hands. And even when I go back to the reservation, I am more everything other than native. I'm only a quarter, and I am not culturally native because I've never lived on the reservation. I've never been immersed in that culture.

So I too kind of float about, not quite the 50% white my father was, not quite the native my grandmother was. I'm only a quarter and I've got a whole lot of miscellaneous, and I don't fit in those cultures. So I kind of float about too. And it's very interesting. I don't think my grandmother foresaw this because, like I said, she was as full-blooded could be, and she had an identity and she wasn't allowed to have that. So she too floated about, and I think she figured by the time it got to her children and grandchildren, this would all be sorted. But it's really not.

John Caher: I think the operative phrase and a nice closing phrase is whatever your identity, hold on to it with both hands.

Marnee Ryan Lehtonen:

Agreed.