

Transcript of Interview with Richard Wright Jr. by Kit Heintzman

Interviewee: Richard Wright Jr.

Interviewer: Kit Heintzman

Date: 02/16/2022

Location (Interviewee): Norfolk, Nebraska [Ponca Tribe]

(Interviewer):

Transcribed by: Angelica S Ramos

Some of the things we discussed include:

Transitioning from in-person meetings to online meetings; the digital impact on prayer and introductions at meetings; bringing in more member participation; technology and social anxiety. Indian Country being hit particularly hard by the pandemic. Loss of elders and with them life, language, and wisdom during the pandemic. Grandfather, Theodore Wright Jr., died from COVID last year; he attended a Catholic school as a part of the forced-assimilation process; grandfather anti-vaxxer prior to contraction. Younger people stepping into roles earlier in life due to the loss of elders. Teaching in a high school during the pandemic; supporting students; online teaching; first hearing about the pandemic while teaching freshmen geography. Graduating from Teachers College during the pandemic; graduation ceremony canceled; substitute teaching; delays in teaching licensing due to the pandemic and being unable to find work as teacher. Working odd jobs. Getting hired by the Ponca Tribe as Director of Cultural Affairs Community outreach and education. Testifying in Lincoln that they open a Chief Standing Bear Museum and Cultural Center; the importance of preserving and digitizing Ponca artifacts; oral histories

The change in foot traffic with the museum and the educational trail walks (<https://www.poncatribene.org/culture/education-trail/>); increased visitation. Wife's pregnancy and buying a first home; excitement; early misinformation sparking fear about vaccination during pregnancy. Observing the poor care provided by the USA-government to his wife (non-Native); struggles of non-Native Americans in the pandemic; Nebraska's loose regulations and lack of enforcement. Tribal support for Ponca citizens; providing masks, groceries, job creation, community health workers to care for elders. Sovereignty; being a nation within a nation. Connections with ancestors. Spiritual health. Thinking positively. Catching COVID Dec 2020 being turned away from an emergency room; long term impact on food enjoyment; catching Omicron later, comparisons of symptoms. Choosing to get vaccinated to protect grandmother; easy and early access to vaccination from the Tribe. Human connection; the importance of physical touch in Native culture, expressions of love. Historical trauma's impact on decisions about vaccination; empathy. The politicization of the pandemic along Republic/Democrat party lines. Fewer people attending ceremonies in sweats and with the passing of a sacred pipe.

Kit Heintzman 00:02

Hello

Richard Wright Jr. 00:03

How's it going?

Kit Heintzman 00:04

Good yourself?

Richard Wright Jr. 00:05

Good

Kit Heintzman 00:07

Could I start by asking you to state your full name, the date, the time and your location?

Richard Wright Jr. 00:12

Sure. So my name is Richard George Wright, Jr. I am the Director of Cultural Affairs for the Ponca Tribe in Nebraska. Um, the date is 2-16-22 and I am in Norfolk, Nebraska.

Kit Heintzman 00:24

And do you consent to having this interview recorded, digitally uploaded and publicly released under a Creative Commons license attribution noncommercial sharealike?

Richard Wright Jr. 00:34

I do

Kit Heintzman 00:35

Would you please start by introducing yourself to anyone who might find themselves listening to this? What would you want them to know about you and the place you're speaking from?

00:43

So I currently work for the Ponca tribe in Nebraska, I am also a Ponca member, an enrolled member of the tribe. Basically, what I do is a lot I wear a lot of hats. overseeing our museum is one of the things that I focus on. But among many other things, our powwow annual powwow every year in August, just making sure that you know, everything goes smoothly and runs accordingly. And as far as focusing on the budget, and making sure the finances are all correct, and we're spending the money properly. I also oversee our Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, and soon to be our tribal historian, which we'll be adding to our staff. But yeah, I mean, I love what I do, and I'm here for my people. So

Kit Heintzman 01:31

would you tell me a story about what life has been like in a pandemic for you?

01:37

Yeah, so, I guess, during the pandemic, I think the biggest thing that's changed is a lot of our meetings have gone virtual. Whereas, you know, in the past, most of our meetings are held in person. And, you know, there's a certain way that we conduct our meetings, you know, we, we always open with a prayer, and then just everyone introducing themselves and, you know, typical roll call, but I oversee, you know, six committees, the language of culture committee, the power committee, the agency committee, and then there's, you know, Law and Order code. So quite quite a few committees, I'm also sit on the ECW Advisory Board, for our tribe. And I think that's been the biggest change so far with with the pandemic is just

everything being virtual and having to learn how to manage this and kind of run with this. But you know, so far, I think it's gone really well, I think in some aspects, it's, it's takes away from that person to person value that, you know, we cherish so much, but at the same time, it's also opened some other doors where, you know, some of our outside members are able to participate a little bit more. So I guess there's been a good and bad kind of a trade off with, with the pandemic and the virtual meeting. But I think, you know, as far as that goes, as far as you know, what I do. That's, that's been the biggest change so far.

Kit Heintzman 02:58

What's the word pandemic come to mean to you?

03:02

It's really difficult, um, you know, amongst Indian country, we've been hit particularly hard with the pandemic. And I think the biggest thing that, you know, I've come to associated with it is just loss, whether that's, you know, loss of language, loss of culture, wisdom, you know, all those aspects that truly make us who we are as Ponca people, and, you know, with our elders being hit so hard, you know, those are that wisdom, we can never get that back. And I think that's been the most difficult part, for us, as a tribe, and as a people is just that loss. So I think that's, that's what I've come to associate with the pandemic.

Kit Heintzman 03:46

Has there have been ways that you've been processing and addressing that experience of loss in your own life?

Richard Wright Jr. 03:54

Yeah, so my grandfather was, unfortunately passed away from COVID. Last year, and, you know, we depend so much as Native people, we rely on our elders for so much, and they're always, you know, at the top for us. You know, I always think of anytime we go to, you know, even if we have a big foreign meat meal or meeting or anything, you know, our elders are always served first. And, you know, when our little ones in our youth and we go to our Elders first for everything, and I think just not seeing them present at certain events, or, you know, that loss. Going back to that. I think that's been the biggest thing that's really, you know, changed our way of doing things and, you know, younger people having to step up in certain in certain roles, and that traditionally, they probably wouldn't have. But, yeah, so it's been tough. I mean, it really has.

Kit Heintzman 04:50

Would you share a little about who your grandfather was?

Richard Wright Jr. 04:53

Yeah, so my grandfather was Theodore Wright, Jr. He lived most of his life in Omaha, Nebraska. To he went, he attended Mardi mission Indian School in South Dakota, which was kind of it was a Catholic school, which was part of the assimilation process of basically kill the Indian save the man, that whole idea. And it was kind of towards the tail end of that as they were starting to kind of die out. But, you know, he, he went there, I mean, he was an elder, he worked hard his whole life. He didn't, you know, when a lot of our members of our tribe had to, we didn't have an active reservation. And so we have what we call our service

delivery areas. And, you know, so we've, we had to almost force we were basically forcibly assimilated, and pushed into, you know, urban society. And so I think, you know, with that taking place, we lost, you know, certain aspects of our culture, just because due to the fact that we were very spread out, and, you know, we didn't have that reservation based system that a lot of other tribes do have. But it's been beneficial in some ways, in some ways, not, like I said, it's a loss of the culture, but at the same time, you know, it's, it's really forced us to, to make it basically rough it you know, and make it. So when I think of my grandfather, that's, I think of perseverance, and just working hard and, you know, doing what you have to do for your family.

Kit Heintzman 06:23

Would you say a little bit about what your day to day was looking like pre pandemic?

Richard Wright Jr. 06:28

So, so pre pandemic, I actually wasn't in this position. I was a, I was a college student at Wayne State College, I was studying to be a teacher, actually. And I got my batch, my undergrad and social sciences education. And so I had no idea, I remember is, when the pandemic first started, I was actually student teaching at Madison High School. And it really kind of upward and everything I remember, we had to end the semester early, we moved to virtual everything. And this was, you know, before people were really using the virtual, you know, to me, and imagine holding a class virtually, you know, so I had noticed that our numbers were really low for kids, you know, attending classes, and we just didn't have that special connection that we had in the classroom. And so I guess that pre pandemic, it really did change a lot of things. I wasn't leaving the house very much, just, you know, not doing so I think it hurt that emotional connection that we have with, with humans as people and known. Just having that face to face interaction. And that, you know, that touch and you know, just those different aspects of, of what makes us human, you know, truly so I think that's the biggest things that have kind of changed.

Richard Wright Jr. 07:40

Did you graduate during the pandemic?

07:45

I did graduate during the pandemic.

Kit Heintzman 07:47

What was that, like?

Richard Wright Jr. 07:49

Terrible. So I never actually, I never got to walk across the stage to receive my diploma. So I really missed out on that aspect of it. And having my family president for the graduation ceremony, we didn't even have one Wayne State actually canceled, there's so I mean, it just, it was really an awkward experience, I'm receiving my cap and gown and in a box and being shipped to my, you know, my residence and never being able to even wear it. I think it's still sitting in that box, um, to this day. So I think I really, I lost some aspects of what if it didn't really feel like I graduated, if that makes sense. I kind of lost that experience that graduates have, where it's a big ceremony and a big, you know, event and everything. So graduated during the pandemic, that way kind of it was, it definitely wasn't the best experience.

Kit Heintzman 08:45

How did you how did you come to pivot from working toward a career and teaching to what you're doing now?

08:53

So, this opportunity came about. And I at first, I was really looking, you know, to go into teaching, I was substitute teaching for Norfolk public schools. And at the time, I was looking for a teaching job, it made it extremely difficult, because I was trying to get my teaching license. And there was just delay after delay after delay. And I understood, you know, they were also state workers working from home and probably flooded, you know, with different things going on. But it actually ended up hurting me. Because when I was, you know, applying for these different teaching positions throughout the state, most of them wanted you to have that teaching certificate on hand. So it really hurt me. I was an unable to find, you know, a position at that time and started getting stressful. Taking odd jobs. I was working in a factory actually here in Norfolk and, you know, really working hard, hard hours, you know, 12 hour days and, like, I went to school, I went to college. I didn't you know, this wasn't what I you know, had pictured and had planned, but that was directly due to the pandemic and this position came about and you know, I always kind of wanted to work for my people and help my people in a way, I just didn't think it would happen this soon or this this fast. But when it came about, I hopped on the opportunity, and I got I got an interview call. And I was like, okay, you know, so this is going forward. And I think it was probably two weeks later. And they're like, well, we want to offer you the position. So I took it, and here I am now six months later, so

Kit Heintzman 10:27

Congratulations.

Richard Wright Jr. 10:28

Thank you.

Kit Heintzman 10:29

I'd love to hear something about that. Falling to serve your people.

Richard Wright Jr. 10:36

Yeah, so I think, you know, with Native people, there's always that calling to, you know, and it's probably ancestral, you know, it probably goes back, you know, generations, but just to be in a place that to help our people is magnificent. And, you know, I couldn't ask for a better job or a better position to be in right now. And I think being the Director of Cultural Affairs is kind of a unique aspect. It's not like, you know, a healthcare worker, or, you know, it is all of these things, you know, in one. So, it's, it's really been a very neat experience.

Kit Heintzman 11:09

Would you give a sort of brief rundown about what you do?

Richard Wright Jr. 11:14

Yeah. So, essentially, I manage our budgetary funds, which I stated earlier. So we get, we get certain monies from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and those have to be allotted for certain things. And so I oversee a lot of that stuff, day to day, I'm working with a lot of meet and greet with different organizations, different people, different opportunities that I can set up for different things, a lot of schools, I do presentations, I provide tours. So I love that part of my job, because my teaching background allows me to, you know, I still get to use my degree in that way. So it's been terrific. As far as that goes. Again, I oversee those committees, we're looking at getting language classes up and running. So right now I'm overseeing all of that. Just last Friday, I went and spoke and testified at the Capitol here in Lincoln, over a legislative bill that we're hoping gets passed in that bill is like, you know, promoting a chief Standing Bear Museum, and pocket Cultural Center. So, that's been a big push of mine, as well as to properly preserve our artifacts that we have currently in our museum. The artifacts right now are in jewelry boxes, they weren't meant to, you know, obviously, for preservation, and then the building itself is stored in our community building and Nybro, the building was built in 1936, it was never intended to be a museum or, you know, archive storage place. So I think that's been a really big push of mine is, as I kind of came into this position was, let's, let's take care of our history, let's preserve our history. And I think a big push for that is just my background in history, and just knowing like, hey, we need to, we need to take proper care of these things. And we also need to get these things digitized. And that's when another big push of mine because God forbid, you know, a fire happens or a flood or, you know, any of those types of, you know, hazardous circumstances, you know, we lose our everything. And that's been a big concern of mine. So getting that going for us.

Kit Heintzman 13:16

Okay, curious, what's the process of petitioning for those legislative changes been like?

13:27

This was my first time ever doing that actually, I was extremely nervous at first, just because, you know, it's it's definitely a new experience. But I think it was a great learning experience as well. Just getting in front of the Appropriations Committee, and Lincoln and kind of learning the process and, you know, writing out my speech and learning what to say what not to say, those types of circumstances. And it was great, though, you know, at the end of it, I think that, you know, there's the I think we did really well, Stacy and I, I know you had done an interview with her before, as well. And she had also spoke at that. And I think hers was a little more personal being that she was a she's a direct descendant of Chief Standing Bear. But I think it's been it's been really well, it was a great learning experience. Typically, you know, this kind of maybe goes back to our elders, you know, a lot of times they would go and speak at, you know, these certain events and, you know, have a little bit more wisdom and experience with these types of things. But, you know, happenstance happened and we had to do it, and I think we did really well.

Kit Heintzman 14:29

What does getting this museum mean to you?

Richard Wright Jr. 14:32

Getting this museum means everything. To me, it's been one of the top of my priority lists. Just just the preservation of our culture, you know, and the biggest thing for me is I wanted to not only call it a museum, but I've had a strong push also call it a cultural center. And for that reason is to include you know, cultural

language classes, cultural workshops, different things, whether it's beadwork or drum circles. or, you know, use circles, talking circles, all those different types of things, I my vision is to see it as, you know, more than just the museum, with the museum, of course, being one aspect of it and preserving those artifacts and that history, but also just to make it a living a living place, you know, a place where, you know, punkers can come together and have feel that sense of community and that tribal feeling that I think is unique to us, and very important.

Kit Heintzman 15:28

You I'd mentioned earlier that a part of your new role is, involves sort of like doing teaching presentations and tours, what have those been like during the pandemic.

Richard Wright Jr. 15:39

So it's actually kind of ironic. This last summer, we joined a new program here in Nebraska called the backroads tour program. And it really promoted helps a lot of foot traffic for our museum in Nybro, as well as our educational trail. And, you know, we our numbers actually were the highest they've ever been. So it's, I think part of that, though, was just people were just tired of being stuck in home, you know, and just, they wanted to get out and do things, and especially outdoor activities. And so I think, you know, that educational trail and our Earth Lodge and our buffalo, you know, it just provided that unique opportunity for people to, to get out and experience things. And of course, the Nybro State Park, which is right across the road, pretty much from where where our agency grounds are in our trust land design. So a lot of those people who were camping over there would come over there, and come and just check things out. And they would come and get their stamp as part of that program. So we actually seen our highest numbers ever, this last summer. And so we're hoping to really keep that trend going moving forward.

Kit Heintzman 16:47

2020 was sort of notoriously large, and all of these ways that were bigger than the pandemic, as was 2021. I'm wondering, to the extent that you're comfortable sharing what have been some of the big issues on your mind over the last two years, that might not be just the pandemic in isolation?

17:07

Um, I think my biggest issue was my family, and just my career and, you know, in how's it how's, how's this gonna affect, is it, is it just the pandemic? Or is it me? You know, and so maybe having those, those self doubts, and I think everyone goes through that through those stages. But for me, personally, I think that's pretty much what it was. And the pandemic, I mean, it's really difficult, because it's hard to think of anything but the pandemic, you know, during the pandemic. And I think it's just changed, you know, all of our lives so much. And some people can say it hasn't, but I don't believe that, you know, I think it really has, and, I mean, look at us now, you know, we're meeting virtually. And so I think in a lot of ways, it really has. And I think some of those changes, you know, that are implemented now aren't going to go away anytime soon, as we've gotten more accustomed and to life during the pandemic, and after it. So

Kit Heintzman 18:07

What are some of those customs and changes that you think will stay with us?

18:11

I think the biggest one is, is going back to those virtual meetings. I think that's going to I think, I don't think that's going away anytime soon. I could see a lot more online schooling, different types of, you know, those types of meetings and even meeting with tutors one on one, just doing that virtually online. For me, that's the biggest things. I think another thing is like, even at our local Walmart here at Norfolk, you know, it's self checkout everything now, you know, there are no, you know, teller or, you know, people cashiers, you know, so I think that's another thing that's going to stay, you know, the DoorDash, the delivery of, of food, and different things like that those things are going to stay I think, whether that's for the better or for the worse. I think those are just things that are gonna are going to stay.

Kit Heintzman 19:02

Can I ask what your home situation has been like right now?

19:06

Yeah, so my home situation has been really well, actually. Ironically, yeah, another thing. So I have a baby on the way right now. We're in the process of purchasing our first home. So a lot of things have been going really well for me during the pandemic, minus the prices of the houses right now in the market. It's absolutely terrible right now. It's definitely a seller's market. But I think that, you know, it's also provided certain opportunities for us as well. And, you know, another thing just to add to that a little bit, you know, our tribe has really helped our people during the pandemic. And I know that's something that's been unique with, you know, across the country, with tribal organizations, but just taking care of our own. And I think, you know, that's one place where we really stood out as sovereign nations and independent and just, you know, being able to provide those opportune duties, whether it was housing, whether it was groceries, whether it was helping, you know, our members pay their bills or, you know, helping them with cleaning supplies, or, you know, just all different kinds of things, masks in 95 masks, just, you can name the list goes on and on, you know, social services, everything. So we've been lightyears, you know, beyond of, as far as helping our people and making sure that they've been okay, during the pandemic. You know, there's been jobs that have, you know, been created during this time just for, you know, our elders. This our, you know, we have community health workers CHWs, we call them and they've gone to our elders homes, personally delivered their groceries, swept, mopped their floors, I've heard stories of doing their dishes, you know, so I think, you know, we've we've provided really unique opportunities for our people with during the pandemic.

Kit Heintzman 20:50

Could you tell me what the word sovereignty means to you?

20:53

Sovereignty means, to me, it means, you know, something that's always been, if that makes sense, I guess it's just, we've always been here, you know, and in my mind, you know, just because another country has come here, and, you know, we are a nation within a nation now, technically, but, you know, we've always been here, our ancestors have, you know, anywhere you go, you know, you'll find our remains, you know, within the areas that we resided in, you know, going back hundreds and hundreds, even 1000s of years.

And so our ancestors are right beneath us, you know, and they're always with us. And that's definitely what sovereignty means to me, is just being in control of our own destiny.

Kit Heintzman 21:37

This is, this is a similar, like, what does something mean to you question. What does the word health mean to you?

Richard Wright Jr. 21:44

Health means health means spiritual, it means, you know, physical, emotional, mental, you know, there's different aspects of health. And something that's always unique to us, I think, is that spiritual health that we focus on quite a bit, especially coming from the culture department, you know, whether it's burning sage in our home, you know, or just different different types of things that we do different prayers, different medicines, and the uses of different things. Stacy's really great with a lot of that stuff. I know, she knows a lot about medicinal plants and natural things that our ancestors would do different herbal remedies that they would make, and that goes along with our elders as well. I know, my grandmother does a lot of that stuff, too. And she just say, you know, oh, I have this ailment, and, you know, do this or do that. And, sure, you know, sure enough, it really does help. And so I think, you know, those different types of ancient medicines that are people have used for, for millennia that, you know, still work to this day.

Kit Heintzman 22:43

How have you been, you've mentioned, how well your nation has been doing in terms of extending care. In terms of witnessing what happens in the colonial continental US, what have you been observing from that position?

Richard Wright Jr. 23:02

I've been observing a lot of. So for instance, my wife is not non native, she's German, Irish, and they just, they're not getting the help. And it's been unfortunate, you know, the, you know, the \$1,200 stimulus checks are, you know, however much, that's not enough. That's just not that's, you know, just feasibly, it's not enough to take care of a family of four, or however many, you know, so, I seen, you know, unfortunately, they're not receiving that same help, that they should be. You know, I mean, that's been a really hard part of witnessing that just, you know, family that are non native or friends that are, you know, non native, and just seeing their struggles and the different types of things that they've had to go through, I think has been really difficult. That's why I said, you know, we truly are blessed to, you know, be a members of the pocket tribe and within our nation that we do take care of our own, or we try the best that we can, at least whether it's through programs or direct funding, or, you know, how, however, we find a way to do that. And I haven't seen that same, that same thing happening with Americans.

Kit Heintzman 24:15

I would love to hear anything that you have to share about the experience of preparing to have a child during the pandemic.

24:24

Yeah, so it's, it's definitely been a different experience. Obviously, this is this is our first child. So, you know, there's always going to be that too, and we're all excited and, and everything else. And there's also you know, always with Native people, there's a, you know, your firstborn is always sacred and special and Hubei we say, you know, sacred and PANCA I think, you know, for the most part, it's just been me kind of going with the flow and you know, learning how these things work, which I don't know anything about yet. So it's just excitement. In a good way. I guess I you know, when when With the child coming along and things I haven't really thought about, how's the pandemic and affect my child, I just, you know, thinking of how can I be the best dad that I can be and you know, those types of things, I guess. So thinking positively, I guess it was is what really is helped with that.

Kit Heintzman 25:17

Is what the word safety means to you?

25:21

Safety, safety to me would be, you know, just being secure in your home and having it having, you know, a nice place to go to having a loving family. As far as safety goes, that's, that's what I think of just being positive, being happy and having support.

Kit Heintzman 25:42

Thinking about this, like, very tiny focus on safety of the COVID moment, how have you been thinking about that safety? And how have you been negotiating that with others around you?

Richard Wright Jr. 25:53

So essentially, you know, even though the town of norfork, were, you know, I decided now, they've kind of lifted a lot of their regulations and things like that. They've never really followed them too closely, ever since the entire pandemic. And I think a lot of that's just attributed to northeast Nebraska. And just that way of thinking, you know, and very conservative, you know, very, you know, this is Don't touch my freedoms type of thinking, you know. But as far as the tribe goes, we've we've taken extra steps to for safety, we still have a mask mandate inside of our locations, we're probably the only place in this entire town that still does that. My wife's work, even, she's a beautician, and they quit doing that, you know, a while months ago. But here, we still wear masks, we still make sure we're sanitizing everything down. So, again, that just goes back to what I talked about earlier that our nation and taking care of our people, and so we still have extra precautions in place, even right now.

Kit Heintzman 26:56

How are you feeling about the immediate future?

26:58

The immediate future, I'm very excited for it. I'm very excited for. Unfortunately, I caught COVID twice. So I got COVID, when it was kind of first, you know, getting real bad. And it was pretty bad. You know, I had some breathing issues, and I suffered with it for it seemed like forever. I had lost my sense of smell. But then I also had gotten this Omicron variant. And it did not for me anyways, you know, it didn't seem as bad. And I'd kind of heard that's kind of what's what's happening as it's kind of, you know, mutating and

changing, it's getting less lethal and more, you know, just wanting to spread, which happens, obviously, with, you know, all viruses. So for me, when going through that experience, again, I kind of felt like, maybe you know, there's a there's that thin horizon of, maybe we're kind of slowly getting towards back to normalcy. So I'm really, I'm really excited for the future. And as we buy our home and have a baby on the way and hopefully my baby, you know, takes this pandemic is 100 years till the next pandemic are, you know, it seems to be a trend like that in human history. So I'm really hoping that you know, that my child will never have to go through something like this.

Kit Heintzman 28:13

Do you remember when it was that you first COVID?

Richard Wright Jr. 28:17

Yeah, so it would have been December of 2020.

Kit Heintzman 28:23

How, remind us, us being me and whoever ends up listening to this, what it was like to, what it was like to be in that moment in December 2020, to have COVID to get diagnosed anything.

Richard Wright Jr. 28:41

Yeah, so I was doing really well. I was always very precocious and not leaving the house very much or, you know, ordering our groceries and having them picked up, you know, wearing my mask all the time, you know, and my wife was doing really well both of us were very careful. Always washing our hands, wiping things down, spraying Lysol in the house, like we were trying to, you know, take every single precaution avoiding large groups of people, small gatherings and staying six feet apart. We were doing pretty much everything. And I was like, Well, you know, I made it this far. Because I remember, you know, when I had gotten really bad and like, in May and around that time. And I you know, so I didn't think and I'd let my guard down one time. You know, and I might it was my uncle's birthday party. He was born on December 25th On Christmas, and it was his birthday party and we went we had went and we were all just kind of hanging out with family and everything and I didn't think anything of it and then I noticed my wife was burning a candle in the living room. And this is when I first knew I had something because I couldn't smell it at all and I was like That is so weird, you know and and then it started changing, changing the taste of my food. And then there's still you know, different types of foods like I still can't eat sour cream. I still can't eat cottage cheese and Those are all things that I loved, you know, before had COVID. And so it's really changed those things. And, and then I remember being, you know, kind of afraid, you know, because I had taken it seriously since the beginning. And I had known, you know, obviously, the way that it had, you know, affected our elders and different things that it was a serious situation, it wasn't something to just brush off and say, you know, oh, it's just a flu or something, or a common cold, you know, along those lines. So I've taken it very seriously. I remember being scared when I first had it. And I, you know, I went to the emergency room, because I was waking up and I couldn't breathe. And then the emergency room, they couldn't even take me in. Because they were like, no, like, we have to take our, you know, older, you know, elderly people in first. And we have only this many respirators and everything else. So I pretty much had to go home just because of my age, and go home and rough it out. And so, you know, I remember running high fever, and just Yeah, it was it sucked. It wasn't, you know, very good, it really bad. So I remember going

through that the first time, and it was just that feeling of being scared, you know, so, and then not wanting to give it to others. So the main reason why I was always precautious was because I'm very close to my grandmother, she actually raised me pretty much my whole life. And so I had known already, that the elderly people were, you know, being afflicted and affected by more. And so I just wanted to be extra cautious. So that way I could, you know, still be around her and different things that we would meet and be six feet apart and still, so that way, she, we still had that connection going together. And she's like my mother pretty much. And so I wanted to always be careful for her. And so that's when I would tell people, you know, when I got vaccinated and things, and I get a lot of, you know, why did you do that, or you don't know what's in what's in that or what you're putting in your body. And I was like, I'm doing it for my grandmother. And so when I would say that, then they would pretty much be quiet, you know. And so that was kind of my way of telling them like, hey, like, get off my back, you know about this. And this was my choice type of thing. And I know my wife, at first, she had a lot of reluctancy to get the vaccine because of she had heard rumors that started about pregnancies and complications with that, which ended up not being true at all. Obviously, so I mean, there was just a lot of things, a lot of, I think it was misinformation being spread by the news, by the media by, you know, a lot of different sources. And just nobody knew what to think. And I think a lot of that was just hysteria because of the pandemic, and, you know, just that spread of misinformation. But yeah, so it definitely affected me. It definitely was was a frightening experience. The first time I caught COVID.

Kit Heintzman 32:50

Actually, you decided to to get vaccinated, how easy was access to that?

Richard Wright Jr. 32:56

It was very easy, actually, um, the tribes actually were giving out vaccinations to our members, before, you know, the state was even doing it. And so, for me, it was pretty simple. But I'll never forget, though, when I had heard the opportunity to get vaccinated, I immediately hopped on it, you know, I was like, Yeah, I'm gonna go do it. I was probably one of I think it was one of two people that showed up from our tribe. So there's still a lot of that we'd like to see to be vaccinated in that mindset of the government, you know, anti government, and just from history and, you know, different things that have taken place historical trauma. But but, you know, I would if I had a chance, I have a choice, I would do it all over again. So, I mean, for me, it was a pretty simple choice.

Kit Heintzman 33:44

Can I ask what the decisions of others and hesitancy of others means to you?

Richard Wright Jr. 33:52

It just, personally, I felt kind of, it would make me upset because because it would just make me feel like, Oh, well, you don't care about other people, then, you know, you're you're being selfish, you know, that was just kind of the mindset that I was having with it. But then I had to take a step back and be like, well, at the same time, you know, it is their choice, it's, it's their freedom to, to make that choice if they choose to. So I just kind of seen, you know, always tried to look at it from a bird's eye view and take that, you know, 30 foot view and just really look at it from different angles. And that's kind of how I always look at things. I try to empathize, I guess and understand, well, why why is this person thinking this way? Or why are they

doing this? That's not to say to justify what they're what they're doing or thinking, but but just to try to come to terms of understanding why they're thinking that way.

Kit Heintzman 34:45

Have you had any boundaries or conversations even within sort of like the household about boundaries around social interaction?

Richard Wright Jr. 34:54

Yeah. So my, my grandfather is actually huge, like he was a huge anti Vaxxer and all of that in our household, and it would lead to lead to different, you know, very uncomfortable dinner conversations and things like that. And then his political choices in mind didn't always align. And so we would have serious arguments. And there was a rift. And I think with the entire pandemic being so politicized throughout the whole country, and I think that, that hurt everyone, you know, what, why politicize something like a pandemic? It shouldn't have ever happened. But it did. And so I think it led to a lot of arguments within, you know, fight amongst family, not just mine, but others I've seen too. And so and I think, you know, politics and the pandemic, and everything just kind of being rolled into one. And if you got the vaccine, you're you were obviously a Democrat, if you if you didn't, you know, you're a Republican, and just that thinking, but what one thing that I found very curious, was that after my grandfather had contracted COVID, his entire mindset changed. And then not not not politically, obviously, but his his mindset about the pandemic, you know, all of a sudden, he's like, Well, yeah, the vaccines aren't bad. You know, and just, you know, so I think sometimes it almost took that. And it's sad that it did, but it did sometimes.

Kit Heintzman 36:20

Do you remember when you first heard about the pandemic?

Richard Wright Jr. 36:23

Yeah, so I remember because I was I was teaching. And I remember I had a sociology class, or no, it wasn't, it was my geography class. And I had a group of freshmen, and there's probably 20 kids in the classroom. And we're seeing it across the news, and, you know, a pandemic in China and Wuhan, and we're seeing that it's spreading, and, you know, we're all we're all thinking, you know, oh, well, it's fine. You know, it's not going to come here, and it's not going to affect us here in United States. And that was kind of the mindset, I think of everyone. And as a teacher, it was my duty, I think, to not raise fears. And so I told them, you know, you know, because a bunch of the kids, they were, they were really concerned, and they were, you know, whether they were hearing things at home and whatnot. And, and I was just trying to reassure them and say, hey, you know, it's going to be okay, you know, we're gonna be fine. You're young, your immune systems are strong. And, you know, I would just say these types of things, just to kind of, you know, make them feel a little bit better about what was happening. But we kept a very close watch on it. And I remember in government class, we always did like current events, and things like that. And it was constantly coming up as a current event that, and you know, and I remember when the first case came in, they found it in Washington, you know, and then all of a sudden, there was 30 more people. And it was just, it just started spreading and blooming. And I think so we kept a very close eye on it. And then we were having discussions amongst amongst staff at the school, you know, and how, how serious is this? Oh, it's

not, it's nothing. And, you know, so there was there was even some debate going on, you know, amongst the staff and things like that at school. So

Kit Heintzman 37:53

Can you pinpoint the sort of tipping point when it moved from probably nothing to something?

Richard Wright Jr. 38:03

Yeah. So I remember the pin. The turning point for me was when there's a Tyson meatpacking plant in Madison, and it employs a large number of the population of the town. And I remember they started started there first. And they started getting a really bad and I don't know what, you know why, but it seemed like meatpacking plants were actually getting hit pretty hard with COVID. And I remember it, it's spreading there. And a lot of my students, that's their parents. And so then, so then all of a sudden, you know, my students aren't coming to class anymore, and seats are starting to empty out. And so that's when it really hit me. It's like, hey, you know, it's here now, like, this is something serious. And we didn't know how severe it was going to be. And I'm thankful that, you know, they did take extra precautions. And at first, you know, we were like, well, we'll just move seats six feet apart. And pretty soon that wasn't working, you know, it's, they're gonna go home, they're still going to be around people. And so then we moved to virtually finally. So that's when it really started to hit me though, was when I started seeing empty seats in the classroom.

Kit Heintzman 39:06

I'd love to hear more about the more recent case of COVID during Omicron.

Richard Wright Jr. 39:14

Yeah, so I got recently, I went to a pool tournament, and there was a gentleman there, and he came in with a mask. And at first we were all kind of, you know, looking at him like that, and because we weren't sure why he was doing that, you know, and he had said that he might have been exposed. And so I was like, Well, yeah, then keep that mask on, you know, and keep it up, you know, and, and then sure enough, I don't know what ended up happening, but towards the middle to the end of the night, but he didn't he wasn't wearing the mask anymore. So we're all kind of assuming that you know, that's probably where, you know, we were exposed to it. And then I remember my grandfather was pretty sick and he had come over and stayed the night with me to watch the the college I think it was a college national championship game. And He came over and we were hanging out. And we were sitting six feet apart from on the couches and everything. And the next day he gets, he goes to get tested, because he wasn't feeling well. And he gives me a call. And he says, I'm positive. And I was like, great, was like We hugged each other goodbye, like right before you left. And so I was like, there's probably a good probability that I'm going to catch it now, too. And so then I had called my boss immediately. And we have our COVID team here within the tribe, and I just let them know, like, Hey, I was exposed, you know, firsthand to somebody that was positive. And they were like, well, just monitoring and wait till you're showing, showing any symptoms. And so I started showing symptoms, I think it was that almost the next day, like, almost immediately, or a couple days later, I think it might have been. And so then I called him was like, Hey, I'm showing symptoms, we're like, well go get tests, or go home, leave the office right now. And then and then go get tested as soon as you can. And so I got tested, sure enough, I was positive. But but like I said, for me, it wasn't it was kind of like sore throat, like, you

know, headaches, minor headaches, but it wasn't nearly as bad as I didn't lose my taste and lose my smell any of that. So I got over a lot quicker to and I think a lot of that is just that vaccine, just being vaccinated helped a lot with that.

Kit Heintzman 41:21

Were maybe moving out of the Omicron wave, and I'd love to hear how you feel, hopefully, how you feel about like, this particular moment we're in with a pandemic.

Richard Wright Jr. 41:35

I feel like, you know, I hope that, you know, we're slowly we're getting there, you know, we're getting to where it's, you know, we're getting past that critical point, I guess. But I, like I said earlier, I see that sun on the horizon, I think, you know, we're, we're finally getting to a good spot, again, where things can start heading back towards normalcy. At least that's what I'm hoping

Kit Heintzman 42:00

You had mentioned earlier, social distancing with your grandmother, as well as the hug with the grandfather, I'd love to hear anything about how touch how your relationship to touch has changed.

Richard Wright Jr. 42:12

That's, that's been the hardest part. For me, because as Native people, we always hug kiss on the cheek. Anytime we're, you know, entering and we were reading each other, at same thing as anytime we're leaving each other, I don't leave my grandmother's home without giving, you know, both of them a hug and a kiss. And so that's been the hardest part is I think, as Native people were very, you know, we'd love that contact that physical, you know, contact and just just showing each other affection that we love each other and those types of things, which I've noticed is different with my wife's family. Whereas, you know, we say I love you even in person, you know, what we tell each other, we want you to know that, you know, just any anytime we're very affectionate people, but my wife's family, you know, her dad will say, you know, she always she always says that he says watch out for deer, you know, and that's his way of saying, I love you, though, you know, you know, and that's just a different culture, it's just a different thing. But I've never seen them, like really hug or kiss on the cheek, or, you know, it's just those very, you know, cultural differences. So for Native people, it's affected us a lot. And then for us, like we do, we do a sweat ceremony, a lot of times, and for a lot of us, that's, that's like our church. And in order to be in a sweat, you know, you're in a very enclosed, tight area. And so, you know, it's, you have to, you have to have that human contact that, you know, it's just part of it. And so I think that's been a very difficult part for for all of us.

Kit Heintzman 43:45

With deep caution and care and respect around the boundaries of discussing ceremony, is there something that you would say about the pandemic's effect on availability of access to ceremony?

Richard Wright Jr. 44:00

Absolutely, absolutely. Um, you know, so during COVID, I think my uncle who's one of our spiritual leaders here, norfolk, he's, he's still kind of kept the ceremonies going. But even he had said that, you know, his numbers have dropped for people that were attending, because we also pass Ron Nene by a pipe, you

know, and so we're all sharing that we're all going to, you know, everyone's going to, you know, touch that and, and feel that, and that pipe is sacred to us all. And so, you know, you could see the ways that the pandemic and the virus would definitely affect everything. You have a lot of people that are very traditional, that are still going to do those types of things, including our elders and different things. And, you know, I think that was part of why, you know, that virus really spread through, you know, our people so, so much, because, you know, we're still trying to keep those ceremonies alive. Because in those ceremonies, we're praying for the virus to go away. We're praying for our loved ones that are sick, you know, and so you know, it's definitely And, you know, a double whammy and Wilson getting hit that way too.

Kit Heintzman 45:05

What are some of your hopes for longer term future?

Richard Wright Jr. 45:09

Our hopes, my hopes for the future for our people is that we learn from this, and we grow from this and we get better from this. I think that, you know, certain things are going to stay and certain things have changed for good. And so, you know, I just, I just really, I see growth, I see positivity, I see, you know, a lot of those things stemming out of this, from our experiences directly related to the pandemic.

Kit Heintzman 45:37

What are some of the things you've learned?

Richard Wright Jr. 45:40

So some of the things I've learned, yes. So some of the things I've learned is just that, you know, how much how much we need human interaction. You know, for me personally, how much we need that face to face contact, how much as people you know, we lose so much emotionally and spiritually without those types of things. In and that's, I think, the biggest takeaway, I've learned how much how much I, you know, cherish my family, my friends, and in our times together, and those intimate, you know, conversations and contacts that that we have with, you know, our loved ones. And I think that's the biggest takeaway that I take away from everything, is just how important that is, you know, there's only so much you can do via cell phone, or, you know, virtually or anything, it's so much different to be in person with that person, you know, so

Kit Heintzman 46:32

What are some of the ways that you've been taking care of yourself over the course of the pandemic?

46:38

So, I've been reading a lot. I think a lot of people have my, you know, my book, my library has grown extensively with books, I love horror novels. So I've been trying to work my way through Stephen King, quite a few, quite a few of them, currently about over halfway through it. And so it's been, it's been a really good experience. And that's really helped me just kind of balance myself. And I think another thing that's really helped was sports. So at first, you know, from sports, where they weren't, you know, we weren't having anything going on. And that was very, you know, for me, it was, sports have been a big part of my life. And so it was really depressing, not to have you know, those sports to watch and, you know, different

things that are entertainment. And so I think, really, sports have really helped to, you know, just taking away you know, you're stuck at home and being able to do that and, and then spending more time with my wife and just being at home and watching movies and having those conversations and things like that. I think those are what has really helped me.

Kit Heintzman 47:41

This is a very funny cultural studies style question. Did you watch the Superbowl?

Richard Wright Jr. 47:45

I did watch the Superbowl.

47:47

It was great. I was rooting for the Rams. So I know a lot of people were watching for the Bengals. But I was happy.

Kit Heintzman 47:47

How was it?

Kit Heintzman 48:00

I'm coming sort of to my my last few questions. They're all a bit weird. One of them is what do you think we in the social sciences and the humanities can be doing right now to help us understand the last two years?

Richard Wright Jr. 48:19

I think, Well, I think what we're doing here is great. I think what we need to do is more of this, and I'm looking to create an oral history program for our elders. And I think just preserving their history, you know, their voices and their images. And that's the biggest thing I think we should be doing right now interviewing people. That way, you know, for future generations, I'm always thinking, you know, seven generations from now, you know, they're gonna, they want to have access to that, you know, and those types of things. So I think that's, that's the biggest thing we can do right now, from a social sciences and humanities viewpoint. And then writing, writing, you know, writing essays writing stories, you know, what was it like to write an essay during the pandemic? Well, you know, your thoughts will on paper will speak for themselves, you know, and people will go back and read those types of things. And, oh, well, you know, they might even start calling it those are pandemic essays, you know, or, or something along those lines, you know, so I think that's going to be the biggest thing, and it's definitely changed. You know, even my wife was talking about her TV shows and things. Now, they're even talking about, you know, they wearing masks on there, and they're doing different things, and it's pandemic. So, I think this time, we'll definitely be talked about, you know, for generations, you know, this is this is basically this is our Spanish flu. You know, we're living in it right now. And so I think the most documentation that we can do, as historians and you know, as writers as everything, researchers, I think that's that's the best thing we can do is just document.

Kit Heintzman 49:43

I'd like you to imagine a historian some time in the future someone far enough in the future that they have zero lived experience of this pandemic. What would you tell them can't be forgotten? What would you tell them? Like, with all the risks of losing things in history? In this thing, you have to hold on to?

50:03

Human connection, that would be the biggest thing for me. Just don't forget, that's, that's what makes us who we are. And just having that, that physical touch and you know, those different types of things that you know, you can only do in person. For me that that's that would be the biggest thing to tell them is never to forget that that's, that's what truly makes us human is those emotions and all those raw things that, you know, we value as humans. And for me, that's the biggest thing, and I've seen it change, you know, even through my life, just, you know, people, you know, a lot of times they don't like to have face to face conversations anymore. Or, you know, our speech, you know, people don't like to give speeches any more than they get terrified of getting in front of a roomful of people, or, you know, those social anxiety and those types of things. And I think a lot of that is due to technology, and just how it really has changed our life, you know, those those human to human interactions. So I think that's, that's the biggest thing I would tell them is to keep keep those things. Because I know that the the trend is there, they're going out, they're going away. And so to try to keep those as much as possible.

Kit Heintzman 51:11

I want to thank you so very much for your time and your answers. And at this point, I just want to open up some space, if there's anything that you would like to tell some imagined future historian, please use this space to do so.

51:25

So the biggest thing I would say is just, you know, document, you know, go back and look at, you know, how this pandemic really affected people. And you'll see it, it's affected all of us in some way. But there are certain, you know, groups that has affected more, you know, I look at minority groups I look at, you know, especially Native American groups. I one thing I want to I would love for somebody in the future to do is to see how is this affected our language, our culture, you know, what's it going to be like, you know, 100 years from now or, or however far Are we still going to have the Ponca language? Is it still going to be you know, around certain cultural traditions or practices and things like that. So I would encourage them to come back and look at the Ponca Tribe 100 years from now to see where we're at, and how the pandemic has affected us in the long run.

Kit Heintzman 52:16

Thank you so much.

Richard Wright Jr. 52:17

Thank you, we love them. Nice to meet you.