

**Interviewer:** The first question. I would just like you to introduce yourself, tell me a little bit about where you came from.

**Ernie:** Good. My name is Ernie Stensgar. I'm currently the vice-chairman for the Coeur d' Alene Tribe. I've been serving on the council for 35 years now and it'll be 36 next year and my term is up so I'll decide then whether I'm going to continue on or not. But it's been a good ride.

**Interviewer:** Which community Are you from?

**Ernie:** Coeur d' Alene Tribe.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me a little bit about growing up there your experiences from that community?

**Ernie:** I was born on the res, way back when before we had electricity. I'm serious, in our community, we didn't have electricity. We have water from a common well. I didn't see any white people except for nuns and maybe jesuit priests. That was my whole experience then as a young child growing up in that world, and I thought the whole world was Indian. I grew up in woods, in the creek bank, and fishing and chasing deer and critters. What do you know? I came from my elders, mostly, in the wild out there.

We woke up in the morning, we were out all day long until the sun went down. No electricity, we went to bed pretty early, we thought maybe it was late but it was probably pretty early thinking back.

**Interviewer:** Can you tell me a little bit about your professional background and what kind of work you've been involved with?

**Ernie:** Well, my professional background, I went into service as a young man and after my doing my duty to my country, got home and ran into this educator named John Wheaton. He was teaching at Eastern Washington University at education classes, some of the classes, and was also a counselor. He talked me into going to school at Cheney. So I went to work with them, went to school over there for a few years.

Then during the summer, I stopped at a Washington state employment office and got hired there as a coach. I was planning to go back to school, but never ever got back. I transferred to Seattle, and I picked the job as a minority coach but my tribe intervened and brought me home to work in planning offices. I've been there ever since. Worked with the tribe until the job went out, then I worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Forestry for 10 years.

That was 1974, I believe I ran for Council and was elected for a three-year term. And I thought it was just too much for a young man and I didn't seek re-election. In 1984, I ran again and been on the council since 1984.

**Interviewer:** And do you remember the first time that you met Lucy Covington?

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**Ernie:** Oh, distinctly. I remember her. Lucy walked into a room she commanded respect, that aura around her was there, what an extraordinary woman she was just so incredible. The way she spoke and the way she commanded the room. She directed people. My first meeting with her was her and Mel were on a tour of our reservation to be with the Colvilles that were living there.

To talk about voting against their termination. I didn't know what termination was, I was just a young fellow. But listening to her speak was incredible and it just inspired me to look at politics and look at tribal politics from a different perspective. When I was elected in later years and in the '80s-- I think, no it was the first time in the '70s I ran into her and some of the other Colville at a AT&I meeting in Spokane, Washington.

And she came and talked to me and she told me, she said, "You're young man," she said, "Your tribe elected you to serve them," she said, "Not to sit out there in audiences and say nothing." She said, "You get up and speak." She said, "You say your mind and tell people about your tribe, and then help them out, that's what you're there for." She said, "You're not here to have fun, you're here to work." She said, "We expect you to work," She said, "I know you and I know your family." Then I took that as an elder teaching me and that lady was an extraordinary woman, as I said, and I took those words to heart.

**Interviewer:** And what impact do you think she had on you as a leader?

**Ernie:** Well watching her from a tribal perspective as I grew older and knowing what that termination battle was about, and how she went about organizing and commanding her troops, if you will, and getting people to oppose it, and winning that fight, that was just incredible in those times. Those times were terrible, if you could imagine being on a reservation was a state then, and entities encroaching on your sovereignty. She knew what sovereignty was and she stood up for it.

**Interviewer:** What do you think sovereignty was to her?

**Ernie:** I probably could never speak for Lucy, but she grew up in an Indian way, her reservation was her world. That was her life, spiritually and physically. She knew her tribe, she knew where to gather, she knew how to speak the language. She knew the heart of her people, she knew the spirit of her people and that was sovereignty. That was her sovereignty. Her way of life, her way to get things done, was through the old ways, the chiefs, the council spoke and that was Lucy, that was sovereignty.

**Interviewer:** Can you think of any instances where she was talking specifically about termination, and why it was important not to advocate for termination?

**Ernie:** I had seen Lucy speak many, many times in many venues and probably again affiliated by-- My aunt was on the council and I worked for the tribe then and I was able to attend some of the meetings and listen to some of the elders speak and I heard her approach termination and talk about what would happen if we were terminated, being treated as are losing all our rights as native people hunting and fishing, gathering, paying taxes, just your Indian-ness. They're trying to take that away from you and your chief's

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fought for this country, fought for your country, not letting them take it away. She was very eloquent in her speaking ability.

**Interviewer:** Can you think of any stories about Lucy, things that she did specifically when she was faced with termination?

**Ernie:** No, I can't. The person that came out to us was Mel Tonasket that I think she directed to come work with Coeur d'Alenes, was good friends with our current chairman then was Skip Scannon. And they worked with Colville, Skip introduced Mel to the Colville people, so any direct relationship with Lucy other than both a few times I said, I didn't get to be around her that much.

**Interviewer:** Okay. Termination as an official policy has ended but we've heard some of the other speakers talk about the idea that termination still exists today in different forms, that there are always these different ways that people are trying to take status away from Native people trying to encroach upon their lands, their rights, and taxation, those kinds of things. Can you talk about some of the challenges that you've faced today as a tribal leader?

**Ernie:** Oh definitely. Tribal Sovereignty encroached on constantly by the state that I live in, Idaho. There are groups of Anti-Indian people, if you will. They're organized I think the North Idaho Alliance that their headquarters is around St. Mary's, Idaho. They oppose tribal sovereignty. They talk about the reservation being diminished because it's checkerboarded. I believe that they forced the state they have the ear of the state of Idaho to take down all the signs and win the Coeur d'Alene reservation.

There are just groups like that have, are constantly politicking state and local officials. State of Idaho itself some of the representatives out there, are just-- they oppose tribal sovereignty. They oppose any idea that a tribe can make laws and worse yet that they'd have to obey them. Even if it's a safety reason. Even if we're trying to protect all the people within the reservation. They can't see an Indian arresting a non-Indian or a tribe having any jurisdiction or making any laws that they would have to obey. That's continuous. If we ever rested, if we ever stopped fighting the fight they'd probably overwhelm us. If we didn't have tribal leaders that were strong in voicing their opinion and standing up I think we'd be overwhelmed by people like that.

**Interviewer:** Some of those spirit that Lucy had do you see people today that are fighting for your community in the same way that she did?

**Ernie:** I don't know if anybody can fight in the way that she did. I believe that we have many men and women in today's world that are extraordinary in their ability to take on the outside forces that are detrimental to their tribe and to their nation.

**Interviewer:** What kind of a legacy do you think that she left behind?

**Ernie:** Lucy was an elegant lady. I can close my eyes I can picture she had her bandana on, her shawl, her turquoise rings. She was a personified Indian woman head. She was

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a strong matriarch. She was our grandmother. She was everybody's grandmother. You can't honor a lady more than that than [unintelligible 00:12:59]

**Interviewer:** That will never get a chance to see her or listen to her speak. What kinds of things do you think are important for people to know about her?

**Ernie:** Well, I think if they look at the Colville nation it wouldn't be there without her leadership. There wouldn't be Omak stampede, there wouldn't be the tribal celebrations. There wouldn't be that salmon coming up the rivers again. They just wouldn't be there. They'd be communities that were there if it wasn't for Lucy Covington.

**Interviewer:** Anything you think about Lucy that you think is worth being recorded?

**Ernie:** I think she was just a elegant lady as strong in her spirituality. Her faith was dear to her and she practiced it. She knew that. She treated people with respect and she demanded that respect. She gave them what she got and everybody was a good person to her and she saw very little bad in them. She was an honest, honest lady.

**Interviewer 2:** One of the things that we think about at Eastern is our tribal students. And it's real hard being Indian even today's world when we have to travel back and forth for our reservation and a lot of things go on. What kind of message might you have for our tribal college students for Amani or in some of the Coeur d'Alene or tribal students going to school at Eastern?

**Ernie:** Remember who you are. Just remember who you are, remember where you came from, remember your heritage, remember your family.

**Interviewer 2:** And as a tribal leader, there's a lot of things that we need at home on the reservation. If we're thinking about degrees or scientists or future leaders, what kind of things do we want our children to think about or study to make themselves better at?

**Ernie:** Our elders passed on to us the message to get an education. In order to exist and to survive in the white man's world we needed to educate our ourselves. If we want to protect our nation, if we want to protect our people we needed to educate ourselves. We have to speak in the white man's way, we have to speak at the white man's world. And I think our children have to understand that. It's a message that's been handed down from generation to generation and I think we'll keep on handing that down.

**Interviewer 2:** One thing that I would take my tribal planning classes out to Coeur d'Alene tribe and nowhere have I seen a greater example of you guys encouraging your young people to go to college to get their education. Your daughter, Laura Stensgar, Frenchie Sie John, Matheson the team of people, Debbie Louie the ones that sit around the table and your tribal members that have gone to college. Then you guys support them as leaders, you support them to do their job. That Coeur d'Alene tribal philosophy, how do you encourage those young people to come back and work for the tribe?

**Ernie:** We pride ourselves and all our directors are Coeur d'Alene tribal members. We hope to have employment for all of them. We mandate to our departments into our businesses to hire tribal members first. It's part of our policy. We ask them to tell us why they can't hire a tribal member if they're applying for the same position and they hire a non-Indian.

**Interviewer 2:** Your chairman where did he go to school?

**Ernie:** My chairman Chief Allen attended Eastern Washington University.

**Interviewer 2:** Any last words that you'd like to share with us about tribal sovereignty and AT&I?

**Ernie:** I think the legacy that Lucy Covington passed on to a whole facet of tribal leaders is personified here at AT&I. If you see our meetings, if you hear people speak you can see that she lives on, she lives on. She'll be here forever.

**[00:17:52] [END OF AUDIO]**