

[off mic conversation]

Interviewer: Okay. We have a few questions here and we want to start off by asking you to just introduce yourself, talk about your role here today in this building and in this community, and then I'll continue on with some other questions.

Mel Tonasket: Okay. I am a Mel Tonasket. I'm on the Colville Tribal Council. I live in Omak and that's my district. This reservation is divided into four districts. We have four Councilman out of the 14 that live in Omak, and I'm one of them. This is I think my third time coming back to the Tribal Council.

Right now I'm Chairman of the Veteran's Committee. I'm also Vice-Chair of our Health and Human Services Committee. I do a lot of work with child welfare, human services, social services, then involved with wildfire issues and for the Colville Tribe in the state. Now, I'm also Chairman of the UCUT, Upper Columbia United Tribes Organization, dealing with the Columbia River Treaty and fisheries. That's my background right now.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about where you grew up, which band or which community.

Mel: I grew up here on the reservation. I was born in the Indian-- well, now it's an Indian Health Service facility, but when I was born in 1939, it was an army hospital right here on campus in Nespelem. I lived on the reservation from the time I was born. Until I was seven, was in the mountains, living in lumber camps. When I turned seven, I had to start school, so then we moved into Omak.

I started school there at Christ The King Catholic School and I was there for about three years. Then moved to Grand Coulee and then Omak, and then Grand Coulee and then Omak. All of my life has been here. I eventually joined the Navy and when I graduated from Grand Coulee, they sent me to school in Maryland. After I got out of the Navy, I moved to Grand Coulee just off reservation, but this is my home and I've never left.

Interviewer: Can you talk to us a little bit about your professional history, some of the places that you have maybe starting earlier and then through NCAI and then up to UCUT. Just talk a little bit about your role in those organizations.

Mel: I don't refer to them as professional history because I don't consider myself a professional, but I have a lot of experience in tribal politics, tribal government. I went to work for the Bureau of Indian affairs right out of the Navy and I worked in what's called Individual Indian Moneys IIM. We did all of the checks for leasing range, land sales, forestry, and that sort of thing.

That was in the days when the Colville Tribe was next in line to be terminated, to be done away with right after the Klamath Tribe. I got to work for that BIA team that was sent here to prep us for termination. That's what got me interested in Indian politics. I hadn't been until then. When I was 28, I moved back to Omak where the leadership of the termination movement was from.

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I started getting involved in just asking questions around, challenging the system, and eventually I was asked to run for Tribal Council by Lucy Covington, who we're here to talk about today. Asked me to run on her ticket opposing termination. I ran on her ticket, got elected, and then she sent me to Olympia. Remember, she sent me, she was the boss. She sent me to Olympia for a year to focus on how Olympia politics works. I needed to know the governor. I needed to know his staff. I needed to know key legislators.

I did that for a year. My second year on the Council, Lucy pretty much led the way to make me chairman of the Tribal Council. Then she started taking me to Washington, D.C. with her. Even though I was a Chairman, she wanted me to learn Washington, D.C. and so she had me keep notes for another year and observe who she was talking to, how she was talking to them, the different personalities I needed to understand and learn, whether they be it the politician or the administration.

She knew them from all different branches of government, from Interior, to HUD, to Labor. She knew everybody seem like. Then on evenings, she would have me debrief her from my notes of what I witnessed to make sure that I really understood what was going on and how she managed and talked to people.

That was really my education. That's, to me, is when I started being more of a pro at Indian politics. Just her working with me and reminding me how serious of a work we were in that could affect not only at that moment in history but maybe in the future history for our people and our land and our resources.

And then my--going onto my fifth year of the Tribal Council, I was at an NCAI conference in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Lucy always put me in the Resolutions Committee. She said that, "You learn about every tribe that has issues, that bring to the national forefront through the Resolutions Committee." For four years, I was in the Resolutions Committee. Never really got to see the convention itself.

Lucy and leader from the Cornell, Joe DeLaCruz, a leader of the Yakamas, and Lummi leader came to the committee and said, "We decided we're going to run you for president of NCAI." I didn't want it, but they pretty much challenged me there, "If your people want you to lead, lead or get out of the business." So I ran and I won. I was President of the National Congress of American Indians for four years. Then I couldn't run anymore due to the constitution of the organization, so they made me the first Vice President for another two years.

While I was with NCAI, I was working with the President of the National Indian Brotherhood of Canada, whose dream was to get us a non-governmental seat in United Nations, so that when we go through these cycles of good and bad, pro-Indian anti-Indian, whether it be in legislation or in courts, that we would have a voice somewhere we could get some help.

We were really interested in being close to third world and what we considered fourth world countries, where the United States government and Canada have treaties and agreements with other third world and fourth world countries, whether they be for military

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bases or for natural resources like molybdenum, or chromium, or something that would go into big industry that the United States needed. That we could go to them when we were getting pushed really hard, anti-Indian movements to get their support.

We were lucky enough, we got a non-governmental seat in the United Nations called the World Council of Indigenous People. That was originally between US and Canada tribes. Then we expanded it to tribes from Central and South America, Aborigines from Australia and New Zealand, and Laplanders from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. The goal was to get Aboriginal people who were minorities in their own Homeland, and we all had something in common. As far as I know, that organization is still in existence today. We did that in the middle '70s, so that's been a long time ago. I was also asked to sit on the American Indian Policy Review Commission by at that time, Senator Abourezk from South Dakota, who was Chairman of the Senate Select Committee for Indian Affairs. I worked on that for about a year along with a lot of other tribal leaders and educators and attorneys, the work group that I was assigned to had to study the history and relationship between the federal state and tribes. What is the legal history? What is the legislative history? What is the current history, and come up with recommendations on how to improve those relationships. That was eventually completed and approved by the Senate and the House.

Then, I burned out. After a number of years of traveling back and forth across the country, I just physically burned out. There was a time in my life for about six years, maybe I'd be home four days a month, all the rest was on the road. I never got to see my kids grow up. I never got to be a dad or a husband very well, and I just burned out. I resigned from the tribal council in '89, went to work for the Indian Health Service in Portland as Public Affairs Specialist for the Area Director.

I was there for about a year. My job was to develop relationships with tribes, improve relationships with the tribes in the Portland area, which is Washington, Oregon, and Idaho at that time. Then the Department of Social and Health Services and the State of Washington Secretary, was looking for somebody to do the same kind of work in the state for DSHS as I was doing in Portland.

They worked out, they meaning DSHS worked out with the Portland area an inter-governmental contract for me to go to Olympia and set up a little division called Indian Policy and Support Services that I developed. We were really involved in that because I had been involved when I was with NCAI in getting the *Indian Child Welfare Act* passed through Congress that recognizes tribal court jurisdiction over our children.

That's where there was a lot of conflict between tribes and the state was over child welfare issues, even though we had a federal law. So my job was to improve relationships and communication, develop some working relationships with tribes. So I was loaned to DSHS for two years. When that contract was done, my wife didn't want to move back to Portland, the position of running the Indian Health Service Clinic here in Nespelem right across the campus from where we're sitting today, that was vacant.

My wife had me put in for that position and I got it. I ran the Indian Health Clinic here in the same building that I was born in in 1939. Now in '93, I think it was, I was running that facility, which seems strange to me. I ran that for about eight years until I retired. I've been around a long time. I think I got to be on the very first Washington State Governor's Indian Advisory Committee in 1970, when I was going to Olympia.

I got to be involved when we were setting up probably the first state tribal working agreement called the Centennial Accord today with Joe Dela Cruz from the Quinault Nation, and Ron Allen from Jamestown S'Klallam over on the coast, and me, developed a document, was really based on government to government relationships, how to improve them with how to fight without jeopardizing the positives that we're doing between the tribes and the state.

Booth Gardner was the Governor then and Dick Thompson was his Chief of Staff. We presented this document to them and that's what was accepted by the state, which they eventually called a Centennial Accord. That was 27 years ago. I think this year we're going to be celebrating the 27th year of that. It just happened to be that Dick Thompson, who was the Chief of Staff at that time was the Secretary of DSHS that I went to work for when I was loaned to DSHS.

I've been involved really deeply into Indian issues, child welfare, law and justice, courts, water, cross-deputization. I mean I guess if there's a--I don't know even the word to describe it because it's not a professional thing to me, it's a life. It was just life. Things needed to be changed.

Those of us that have been in leadership, we find that it's difficult to find people who are willing to sacrifice their families, their time, all of the bad words, the bad press when you're challenging systems and laws and trying to make change. I was lucky enough in my career to be around good leaders and to have somebody like Lucy prep me for that. Teach me how to think about that and program me that you don't give up on your people's rights. That's a long answer to a short question, wasn't it?

Interviewer: I think it's very good because it leads into the next series of questions I want to ask you. Do you remember the first time that you met Lucy?

Mel: I don't remember the first time. I was working in IIM and she would come in because she was on the tribal council then, but I'd really never talked to her. It was only because she had cattle and she had lease payments and things. I was the check writer at the time in IIM. So I knew who she was but I really never talked to her until she came to my house, asking me to run for tribal council.

That's when we really started talking and developed that bond that we had. She came into my house at the end of '69, just in time to run for Council when I got elected in 1970. Then we were like, mother, son almost, always together. When I was traveling to DC, I'd stop here in Nespelem and pick her up and drive her to the airport, and then drive her home. We were close for all the time she survived on the council

Interviewer: That first time she came to your house, do you think she primarily saw you as somebody who served in a capacity here, but there was maybe more, maybe you see something she wanted to bring out of you?

Mel: Lucy never did talk to me about what she saw in me or didn't see in me. I'd have to just guess that she saw me going to chambers of commerce asking, "How come there's no Indians working in your town, any of your stores?" She heard of me going to school boards asking, "How come we have 90+% dropout from freshman year to senior year?"

She'd seen me go into County Commissioners or heard of me going to County Commissioners, challenging them, "How come 90% of the people in your jail are my people and we only make up to 10% of the population. Are we that bad?" She heard of me going around and doing that. I think that's why she came to me. If I was willing to go out and challenge what was going on in the community, maybe she could direct then into, "What's the next step?" Rather than just asking the question and challenging. That's what I think happened.

Interviewer: At that time, do you know what she was doing? You mentioned that she had cattle or livestock. At that point, was she just working on her own homestead or was she already involved with trying to make the kinds of changes that we associate with her?

Mel: When I met Lucy, she was already on the tribal council, the Nespelem District, I said earlier that the reservation is divided up into four districts. Nespelem District is part of where we're at right now. That was the only district that was, all four council were anti-termination. The other three districts were pro-terminationists councils. When the pro-terminationist councils would go to Washington, D.C. to testify on behalf of a termination bill, they wouldn't bring Lucy, of course. She would sell one of her cows to pay her own airfare to Washington, D.C. in her own expenses to lobby against termination. She knew how to lobby. She was already up to our elbows in the fight against termination, and that's where she really built her reputation nationally. Tribes all over the country knew of Lucy, and Lucy almost a single woman fight in Washington, D.C. from the Colville opposing termination. That's what I had heard about her.

That was the kind of campaign that I wanted to be involved with. She was the spokesman, but I thought if I could be with her, with my arms folded shaking my head. Yeah, I agree as a Councilman that would even give her a little bit more than just one person over there, lobbying and testifying and working behind the scenes. That's how I knew of her. She had, I don't want to leave out, another friend Shirley Palmer from here in Nespelem.

She was Lucy's team mate here on the tribal council in those days. Shirley would stay home and deal with the day-to-day business at home keeping track of what was going on so Lucy could go do the things and in Washington, D.C. that she needed to do. Shirley Palmer was a big part of the action too, and I really don't want to leave her out. I hope that answered your question.

Mel: It did. Very good. I'm a little bit younger and I don't remember, I didn't know Lucy, I know some of her family, and I know when I've talked to people with that last name that

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come from that family, I had remembered some interviews I heard with Lucy talking about termination and I asked them, "Is this your relative and what you remember about it?" The younger people in her family remembered even people that didn't know her knew that she was one of the first leaders of her kind.

She was a woman at the time. There weren't a lot of women in prominent leadership positions, even in their own community, and here she was doing these things on a national and also I think having an impact, maybe even a little bit larger than the national scope. Can you--if someone were to ask you, where do you see some of the fruits of her leadership and some of the changes that she was able to start, what would be some examples of them?

Interviewer: Well, keep in mind that when Lucy was doing this, saving our res, in my opinion, she never held a national office. She was a member of the National Congress of American Indians, and she was a member of the Northwest affiliated tribes, but she never held the presidency or vice presidency of those two organizations. It was her voice and her presence in meetings that people noticed, the strength that she had when she'd get up and talk about termination in our tribe and the importance of it.

Because she got to witness what happened on the Menominee, she got to witness what happened on the Klamath. She got to see from her time on the Hill lobbying for us how other lobbyists working Washington, D.C.--non-Indian lobbyists working Washington, D.C., supporting termination, and how they were doing that. She would talk about that in the convention right on the floor. Then she'd get invited up to the head table to give a presentation on it. It was her presentations that I think people saw.

She influenced not only me, but she influenced other young leaders that were coming up at the time. She'd actually pulled them to the side. She seen something in them. She'd pull them off to the side and start preaching to them about how to act, what their responsibilities were like, how you never give up your principles of sovereignty, how you can't give up principles of self-governance without the approval of your people at home.

Because that was being done in some parts of the country where the feds would call it a little meeting, and maybe 30 people would show up and something would happen. Then the feds would take an action saying the people of that particular reservation supported this, which really wasn't the case. She knew a lot of what was going on around Indian country. I think she not only nurtured a lot of us young men that were coming into the business, but a lot of young ladies who today, really look up to her, even though Lucy has been gone a long time.

I think an example of that is what's happening on at Eastern, putting together this center in her name. There's women who eventually wound up being President of The National Congress of American Indians or President of affiliated tribes, who learned their craft, learned that commitment and how to fight for it from Lucy and they'd be the first to say, "Lucy influenced me."

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the first time you heard about termination policy?

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Mel: I heard about termination when I was in the Navy during election time. There'd be candidate running for termination. I never really paid attention to it. I was only 18, 19 years old. I never really paid attention to it and I didn't until I came home and I went to work for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the same year I got out of the Navy and I got to see what was happening firsthand.

Then I started really paying attention to what is termination. Because it used to be sold that if we approved termination, we're each going to get \$40,000 to \$43,000 a piece. If you got a family of five, six, eight, that's a lot of money. It was a lot of money in the '60s and even into the '70s. It was all money really. I really started looking at, "What next?"

Say we terminate and our reservation is not trust land anymore and it's going to be feeling like a corporate owned property. What's that going to do? What is it going to do to law and justice? What's it going to do to our game? What's it going to do to our people because we wanted more people to go to college. We wanted professional people to come home. Even before I was on the council, we used to say that because Bureau of Indian Affairs is mostly non-Indians. It was brought here from outside to get us ready for termination. That's who I knew.

That's when I really started studying about termination, but I didn't know the guts of it until I started working with Lucy. She was just a pro at it. How she stopped termination was a simple thing, really. She made a friend. A Chairman of a Committee from another state that the bills had to go through to get to the next committee level. She made that friend and he wouldn't let the bills go through. They never did get to the full Senate or the full house.

The termination side never knew how to lobby and never knew how to track, whereas the bill dying. That's how she really stopped it. Developing that friendship. The people that were co-sponsors of the bill, Henry Jackson was a co-sponsor of the bill. Magnuson was a co-sponsor, Tom Foley was a co-sponsor of a number of bills. We had six bills in Congress when I was elected. Those were all co-sponsors of the bills to do way with this. She turned them around. I'd go sit in meetings. I seen Magnuson stop a hearing when me and Lucy walked into the room, so he could welcome Lucy into his hearing chambers. So she went from--she had the ability to get people who are trying to terminate us to educate them, make friends with them so that they wind up being our advocates and I got to see that. Not a lot of people get to see stuff like that.

What I was saying is that, after we got the Secretary of Interiors' opinion and we started negotiations based on our ownership, I could always imagine that Lucy then could see the faces of those chiefs that was sitting or standing there at the bottom of the dam with a sad look, being switched to maybe a grin, because we've proved that we still own property, that we didn't lose at all.

That they might be thinking, we got more steps to take now and we're taking those now. We're taking those now by getting the Columbia River Treaty negotiation to include our input, the upper Columbia tribes, our input of protecting the environment. Things like Teck

Cominco we're dealing with and fish passage. When we get the fish passage done, then Lucy and those chiefs are all going to be smiling up there.

Interviewer: What do you think Lucy would say to students today?

Mel: [chuckles] Go to school. Go to school. I don't know if she'd say come home, she'd say we need educated people at home but we also need educated people in that system out there too whether it be state or federal or County, we need to be involved out there. It will help us to keep from getting into battles if we have educated people that are leaders in that other world out there that we have to work with.

I know she thought of stuff like that because we had talked about getting attorneys, getting hydrologists, getting agronomists, getting people educated that could go work in the interior or USGS or somewhere that EPA that we every once in a while have problems with, that we would have people that knew how to work that system knew how to help influence and help at home.

I hope that we're doing that today, but that was part of our discussions when we first started to develop and starting to get people to go to college. We knew that if we could get a lot of our people to college, we wouldn't have worked for them all, but boy, we sure could use them in other places that have an effect on what happens at home.

Interviewer: I think from my perspective and my list, that's the question that I had. I wanted to, again, just check the room and see if there's anything else.

Mel: I see it. [crosstalk]

Interviewer: This was that last question.

Mel: Okay.

Interviewer: Then maybe just, if you could take a minute and give us maybe just a couple of closing thoughts on Lucy, her legacy, the kinds of message that you think she might want to carry on today about her work.

Mel: Oh, I have all kinds of thoughts about Lucy. I think about it every day, especially now that I'm back in the business. In my travels, even today when I go nationally or to the coast, people will remember her. They remember me by being with her. They looked at me like I was her boy. Same with Joe DeLaCruz who was president of the Quinault nation, eventually President of NCAI and President of the National Indian Tribal Chairman's Association. That was kind of her boy.

It's rewarding to me to know that somebody that touched my life, who sacrificed what she sacrificed. She never had a family. She never had kids. She lost her husband when she was pretty young, John. She never remarried. Her whole life was working for this tribe. Then when she saved this tribe, she was working for all the other tribes.

It's surprising, even after all these years, that when you travel around the country, people remember her and people remember that battle, how she influenced-- When she'd walk into a room, people would notice her. She wasn't the president, she wasn't the vice president none of it, but she just had that presence.

Even today, I was at an NCI meeting in San Diego and some of the people from California come up to me saying, "They remember Lucy Covington." How many people that've, they're not actors are not movie stars, they're not musicians, they're not Senators and Congressmen, they're not presidents are recognized and honored like that nationally? Very, very few. I'm honored to be a part of that. Hope I learned something.

[00:36:56] [END OF AUDIO]