

Paulette Jordan: When Eva mentioned the opportunity to speak about my grandmother Lucy I thought it was the perfect time to do it.

Jeff Ferguson: So you're a direct descendant of Lucy?

Paulette: Yes.

Jeff: That's awesome. Just seeing a lot of the work, when we first started this project like two and a half years ago, we found out that there was a documentary film made about her by PBS back in 1973. We went down outside of Portland and interviewed the filmmaker, and he gave us an original copy of that film.

Paulette: Wow, I have to see that film, didn't know it was out there.

Jeff: Eastern Washington University has that and then they gave us, I don't know, probably 40 big pictures like 11 by 14's of all the different things that she had done throughout her career. It seems weird to call it a career because it was much more than a career I think. It was really, perhaps I don't even know. Legacy, building a little legacy.

Paulette: It's a legacy.

Jeff: That's pretty cool.

Paulette: That's what I tell folks because they think this is a career for me and I say this is not a career. When you're raised this way, it's all you know. You don't really walk any other path. It's hard. You try to get off of it sometimes and you always end up being pulled back on the path, that is your purpose.

Jeff: Do you remember your first recollection of your grandma?

Paulette: A lot of it is through my family, my dad and my uncles and a lot of the people that I met along my own trail, my pathway to my own design and I remember meeting a lot of leaders like Wilma Mankiller and prominent individuals who we know of today who would reach out to me and say I knew your grandmother and this is the piece of advice that she had given me and I would like to pass it along to you because it belongs to you. It was all great advice from these very prominent leaders that I met throughout Indian country and even outside of Indian country, I'd meet people in congressional halls and they would say, "Oh I knew your grandmother."

She was that type of leader where if she entered the room everyone stood kind of tall and they would always give her that right-of-way and be like, "Lucy Covington is here and we just did whatever she demanded because she wouldn't go there to ask for anything she gave there to give guidance." I really took that as a real powerful peace of mind for me because to go somewhere and to offer leadership is such a powerful way to be.

She wasn't ever asking for anything and she didn't really have to be bully-ish. She just had a way about her which was respectful but still strong and prominent, and very

File name: Paulette Jordan interview with Jeff Ferguson

commanding. I think it was because she came from such a long line of people. Many powerful chiefs before her time, her ancestors who were also great leaders, great orators and had carried great visions during their time as well. And so she as another avatar in that line, who was able to just carry on that way of life. She was walking this path, this legacy.

When I'd hear from people a lot about her and how she managed, whether it was decisions, or her travel, or finances and how she was fighting against termination, defending sovereignty, I would think, ultimately, her pathway was leading up to protecting and defending not only the rights of tribal people but the rights of children and the environment, but really she was promoting a legacy of education for our youth because she was seeing how our people were being attacked and she was seeing how this would impact not only her children and grandchildren but those who are yet to come.

While I was not able to be with her physically, in spirit she has always been with me, so, in spirit, I feel everything that she has done and every time I meet someone who reminds me of her, I can feel that. I can feel that she's guiding me through them and to this day, I still feel that. I come across a lot of people who will approach me and say, "I knew your grandmother." In fact, I met one of her attorneys that she worked with and he was a photographer, and he approached me while I was in Seattle and he asked if he could just photograph me.

He said, "You remind me of this woman." I said, "That is actually my grandmother. Lucy Covington." He says, "You're kidding. I used to be her pilot. She used to charter this plane and I would fly her back and forth and we would go to Olympia, we'd fly to DC," and that he had all these written works of all their meetings that they had and so these proceedings that took place. He would talk about just how prominent she was standing before Congress or standing before all these authoritative decision-makers, and how she was, and he would say she was very elegant with her braids and her moccasins and in her regalia and speaking her language. Then she would translate back to English and she was always upholding just the aspect of being tribal, being indigenous which is, ultimately, the way our people should be because she would say if we don't practice it, we lose it.

So she was walking her talk every step of the way. As many people know, they know about her practice, her legacy, where she traveled. We know about those stories where she would sell family cattle-- a head of cattle and translate that into a trip to lobby or to have these meetings with individuals to ensure the protections of our people and our inherent rights. All that took work and she was so dedicated and so committed. I would just hear that commitment through these stories.

For me as a part of that legacy as a granddaughter, a descendant, it's always been more so inspiring because I can take pieces of that and ultimately the entirety of everything that she's done and use that in my path and my purpose, but she does speak through me and she does-- like my grandparents, they all speak through me and I think that's really what's most beautiful because they were setting all of us up in a good way like that. And that's ultimately what I want to do is set our children up in a similar light, but that's what I

understand about her from all of the people that I've met and their experiences, our shared experiences, all of these stories correlate and they all come to a similar conclusion that she was a woman of the people.

She led this path of leadership not for herself but to ultimately pave the way for the future generations and it was for education and it was for sovereignty. It was for the independence of our people, to establish a place within this world to ensure that we can continue to be a voice. Whether that's a voice for nature or a voice for humanity.

Jeff: That's, I think, a really traditional way of looking at things, perspective that I think has been shaped over the years for you. It's neat to hear it from your perspective of how-- When I talk with Mel and I talk to these other people, to be able to think of it from the perspective of the bloodline is different than somebody that she mentored, somebody that she chose or somebody that was brought to her or somebody that-- When it's in the blood, though, it's something very different.

It took me a long time to understand and really realize what they would tell me when I was growing up. They would say, "You've come from a strong bloodline. Your ancestors are strong people," and it never occurred to me when you look at the genocide, millions of people died, but your ancestors did not. Your ancestors survived, and they thrived and they came through. To me, when I started realizing that, it helped me appreciate where I came from. A lot of times I always felt-- because I always grew up around non-natives, so there was a lot of shame that I experienced because they would make fun of my long hair or I was the only brown kid or whatever. That kind of thing.

But when you have that kind of leadership that's been passed down and passed through and it's really, it's like a way of life. There's no question. Now, when I look at people, especially non-natives, they have this motivation. What motivates them it's usually capitalistic or whatever self-serving that kind of thing, but Indian people traditionally aren't like that. There's a lot of things that she could have done that would have been considered more self-serving than the things that she chose to do and spend her time, and she didn't do that. I think that's really an admirable trait. Do you ever feel like there's a bar that's set that you need to live up to?

Paulette: Absolutely, but it's good. It's a good standard to have. I think it really drives you to continue to excel and do more. I do the same with my own children. I'm a mother of two sons. I have pushed the similar teachings onto them that was presented to me, the teachings, as I grew up, as a young child, my uncles and my father, and my grandparents would always promote the idea of leadership and being very selfless in kind of your everyday action and thought and having integrity in your walk.

An everyday step is what you do, even when people are not watching, how you react to your own thoughts. I really pay attention to that because of the way my grandparents were presented to me. It would always be put upon me that, "This is the way your grandmother was, so this is the standard." She was very independent. She didn't rely on tribal resources to get things done.

When she came across a barrier here, she just went around the barrier. She always found a way, and they would present other grandparents like that. When we went through battles, they would always point out that it was through collaboration and through the strength in our ability to communicate that really helped us survive with the people. We won wars and major battles that many people don't always talk about in history books, but we know about those battles, and we know how we overcame those challenges, whether it was a hundred of our people against thousands in the US military.

We won because we had a better strategy. We worked with the land. We work with each other and just being able to build those alignments. And you see how those alignments worked for us back then, and they continue to work for us today. My grandparents who include not only Lucy Covington but Emily Peone, Louis Friedlander, George Friedlander, they're all founders of ATNI. They were all part of the great legacy that we all can benefit from today.

And because of that, they showed us, as a people, that continued collaboration is what saves our future. It's what saves our sovereignty. It's what continues to allow us to thrive as a people connected to Mother Earth and connected to our spiritual ways. Otherwise, we're lost to colonization. We're lost to capitalism. Instead, they've chosen a better way for us out of that selflessness. So they tell me about these standards, and I think that's what really helps me because if you don't hear about it in your history books because I went to Gonzaga prep, too, and that certainly wasn't taught in any of my school books.

They rarely are presented any books about tribal people or our history and culture, but I was learning it through my relatives, all the experiences that they had through their parents and grandparents because Lucy and my grandmother, Emily, they all-- they raised my parents and my relatives who taught me. Through that extension, they were my teachers. So that's why I really adhere to everything that they have done because while they set this very high standard to be well-educated, to be very knowledgeable about our history so that we don't repeat the same cycles and helped me understand that communication is key.

Collaboration is critical. And they also taught me a lot about how defending even nature, the rights of our people, is vastly critical to our survival as a people. Being independent, I was taught that through a lot of my grandparents who were that way. So I definitely think there's a standard set and that it's good to continue teaching our children about these ways. If we don't pass along your stories, then of course, they're going to lose that aspect because it's definitely not taught in schools. It needs to be taught in home, at the dinner table, or in the car rides to and from, which is where I tend to apply the same teaching so that my kids understand where we come from.

I'm thankful for some of those folks who were able to capture some of these teachings, these stories in the books. There's a few books in our family that I like to read. There's some books about my grandfather, Chief Moses. There's some books about my grandfather, Chief Kamiakin, and there's others that my grandmother, Emily Friedlander-Peone and both grandma Lucy Covington and others were able to contribute to, which

captures a lot of our history and names and places we were and what happened when and where. All of that's really helpful because that helps me get us that much further because they did their part in this part of history, and then I'm able to build off of that legacy.

That's why I think that's important. I think we've come a long ways because we went from- - I oftentimes think about this too because I know that they're always with me everywhere I go. And I think I wonder if they're proud of me. I hope that they are because every day, I make decisions based upon how I'm going to honor them, how can I honor them even more so, how can I make them proud so that they know that their legacy is continued in the best way possible, in the best light.

I'm setting up their continued great-grandchildren, great-great-greats, and making sure I'm doing my part, but I know that thinking back to what they've done, accomplishing wars and being successful in that regard, and then fighting against termination, and then being successful in that regard, and into my time to where we're now crossing over and looking at how we can be leaders of this country and how can we be leaders of the world. That's where I'm at.

And I think that would not happen if it were not for all of their hard work. We're still building. I'm part of that line. I'd like to say that we have come this far. We were almost governor of a state. And we're crossing over to present our form of leadership for everybody. We're not just holding it within now that we've survived acculturation. We've survived colonization. We've survived the mass forms of genocide, and now we're here. We're educated. We're exploring. We're able to express our ways of life, and share that with others. And we want the world to be able to be a part of what we're doing, but to do so, they have to accept our leadership.

And I think that is a lot to offer. And so I'm just thankful that I get to be here, and say that my legacy, that line, is here for everyone. I think my grandmother, Lucy, my grandmother, Emily, and my grandfathers, I think they would all be very proud because they know that they suffered, and they sacrificed, and that was all for a worthy cause. When it's my time, I want to be able to say the same thing when I'm watching my grandchildren and my great-greats, and I want to be able to say the same that everything continues to pass on so that we all know that this doesn't end here, that it will continue to generate something good for the world.

Jeff: What do you think Lucy would say if she were hearing now about Indian people, the political climate? How do you think she would feel? Where do you think she would fall as far as-- Yeah, there's a lot of great things going on, but some people think it's worse now than it's been in a 100 years. Where do you think she would fall in that? What do you think she would say? How do you think she would feel about it all?

Paulette: I remember talking to Jewell James of the Lummi Nation. One time, he mentioned my grandmother, and said that in her time, she was fighting the same issues. We know that the issues, the battles that we have they're always going to be going on.

They're cyclical. It's important for us, as a people, to continue learning the history and learning solutions and continuing to find new solutions to address all of these problems, whether it's continuing to fight for the rights to our land, or water rights and having a seat at the table so that we can always defend our sovereignty or independence, separate sovereign nations.

That is always going to be an issue for us. And he was saying to me that my grandmother had mentioned this that while that's the case, it is imperative that we continue to educate our youth. This is why she was so big on education because of as long as our youth continue to educate themselves and understand the history and everything that we're going through now, which is why it is imperative that tribal councils or tribal leaders bring their next generation with them to these meetings so that there's no disconnect, so that there isn't a gap in leadership, then we'll always be all right because it is always a matter of educating every single rotating cycle of elected officials on every front whether it's the local, the state, or the national, or even in the international. It is a requirement for us to educate people about our concerns and issues on the homefront and how their decisions correlate to our lives. So if we're constantly telling our story, that will help the people who don't have that voice. And so she was just saying that 20 years from now, she was telling Jewell James, "You're going to be dealing with this. I'm the leader on the frontline today. 20 years, it's going to be upon you to have to lead this conversation because I will no longer be here."

He told me the same thing. He says, "I'm glad you're in this room. We're talking about United Nations' declaration of the rights of indigenous peoples." As I was sitting there with these elder leaders in the room in this longhouse in Lummi Nation. He said, "This reminds me of saying, as your grandmother told me," he said that, "20 years from now, it will be on you to do this and I'm glad you're here to listen and learn because each generation has a responsibility and that in an inherent right of us as a people, but it is upon us to make sure that our youth are connected so they understand because, soon, when it's their time, it is just my hope and prayer that they will be ready."

That was some wise words from my grandmother, Lucy.

Jeff: To go backtrack a little bit, what would you like people to know about Lucy Covington? What is something you think maybe people might not know about Lucy?

Paulette: What they don't know? I always hear from some of her friends that she was a really fun person, very loving and I often, sort of, in my own mind, attribute her to be like a Mother Teresa type individual, but then you'd hear from some people she'd love to have fun and let her hair down. I always think that that is so important for people to understand as a leader because I will often tell other young people who want to get into leadership roles or get into public office that you have to find that space for yourself where you're able to relax and find comfort and just be able to be yourself.

And she found that solace amongst her peers who were other tribal leaders. She made so many friends at the national level that she was able to be very comfortable just being

casual. I think that's something that's important for me to express because we're often put in a box and held up to higher standards. And when you just want to go and relax and be casual with someone, it's almost frowned upon, like you can't do that. I think people don't often see her as being just a casual human, being able to do that, enjoying herself, but also being a woman back in those days, being around men because there are a lot of men in the room, men leaders.

And if you can imagine, in the early '70s or '60s, what that looked like for a very proud, strong, prominent woman to walk into a room full of men and speaking her mind. Not only just speaking her mind, but doing it unapologetically, how that would be perceived. There would be a lot of men who aren't culturally receptive to that, who would take offense, or would want to suppress her, but she did it in a way that wasn't offensive and she did it because it was just naturally who she is. Instead of offending them, she gained their respect. Not only gained their respect but then gained their loyalty.

Once she had their loyalty, she was really able to do much more good for the people and she did it on her own. She didn't do it by bribing. She didn't have to use anyone else's resources. She used her own. All of this was just done on her own time, her own money, her own dime and she did out of the love for her people. That's a very genuine fact and I think that's such a beautiful thing to have and be part of. We have such a loving woman who was a female leader in a time that was far beyond and above what people expected in that generation because women were not seen as CEOs and leaders or chiefs.

She was a chief of her people but when people outside of our structure, culturally, don't understand why she's that way. She was able to overcome all of those barriers, culturally, being able to surpass that at the national level, even. It's mind blowing to try to put yourself in that space and what that would have been like. I can't imagine a lot of people would understand that, but she was doing it and you can only try to put yourself in that space and think how did she do that and how did she become so powerful, so inspirational. I think that's something we definitely can learn from because I think it's a lot easier now for women to run and do these things but back then, not so much.

She was still seen to this day as being a very beautiful woman who's truly admired and respected. I go to those same halls now and they recall upon her in very favorable memory, and so I think she really left strong positive ripples. That's something that people should know about her.

Jeff: I can't even imagine that. I heard stories about her when she would go to Congress. I heard them just everybody stopping what they were doing. I can't imagine people doing that now for anybody that walks in a room, much less an Indian woman in the '50s or the '60s. I try to imagine what that might have been like and what keeps going through my head is in the '70s, they didn't even like Billy Jack. For her to go in there and gain, like you said, gain their respect and then still, these generations later, they still have that respect and they still have those types of memories about her is really powerful.

Paulette: Unless you were the president of the United States, you don't ever hear those kinds of stories.

Jeff: Yeah. She wasn't even president of the Colvilles. Have you heard any stories from when she did back then? Did you hear any humorous ones that might have been--

Paulette: Humorous ones. I don't know if I want to tell it on film. Oh there's probably some stuff I should not say. I don't hear funny stuff. I guess just like all of us, when we're hanging with our friends, it's, in a casual sense. I think it's just nice to see that she was human. It was nice to hear that because my whole life, I just saw her as a superhero. You see someone in a different light and then you meet their friends. I mean I see the same thing, I think. My sons look at me as just being mom. Like, "That's just my mom." Then other people will look at me as a hero or someone super then. Then there will be those who are my close friends who are like, "Oh yeah, she was my friend," because they know me very casually.

It's just who you really talk to and how they see you. I met some of her personal friends and they would say that she was definitely very fun. She was fun, very charismatic and always the life of the room. She was the light. Everyone always spoke very well of her. That's what we all want. We all want everyone to speak well of us as well leave the room. [chuckles]

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