

**Interviewer:** Introduce yourself, just say and spell of your first and last name, so when I'm going through the credits, that kind of thing, then I'll be able to have it all.

**Rachel Joseph:** Okay, I'm Rachel, R-A-C-H-E-L. Joseph, J-O-S-E-P-H. And I'm Shoshone-Paiute, from Lone Pine. Lone Pine Reservation in California, on the eastern side of the beautiful Sierra's.

**Interviewer:** So, tell me a little bit about your experience with Lucy.

**Rachel:** Well, my experience with Lucy probably goes back into the 1970s. I first met Lucy at a National Congress of American Indians meeting. So you know, sometime mid-'70s, I was an officer, a regional. They call them regional now. They were area vice presidents in 1975. So I knew Mel Tonasket actually before I met Lucy. I served on the executive committee with Mel, who'd been on the tribal council with Lucy.

And I was an officer and an elected treasurer in 1977, and again in 1979, by acclamation then subsequent to that, after my kids grew up, I was area vice president, then recording secretary, and then the Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians. I believe that Lucy had picked a couple of us women. We were definitely younger in those days to mentor. She never articulated it that way, but I believe that that was her goal.

She would take me and my best friend, I call her my sister, my best friend-sister. And she would meet us at the beginning of a conference and say, "When is a good time for you girls to get together?" And then we pick a time, and it happened, whether it was a breakfast meeting or lunch. We never change it. It just happened. Every once in a while, she would pick a third person, a third woman, but it was always me and Veronica Homer.

And we visit, and we catch up what are our families and our communities doing. Then she would get down to business. I think that she somehow or another decided, you know, that we could carry out some of the agenda that she thought was important. I remember she would sit down and say you know, "This is going on here at the convention. This is what needs to happen." I remember she did that to us.

For whatever reason, I can remember her sitting down at the Albuquerque Convention in 1979. I remember. I can visualize where we met for lunch. It was in a public restaurant where it seemed like we're right in the middle of the restaurant. But she said, "This needs to happen. Now, you girls, go take care of it." And for the life of me, I wished I had kept notes or a journal and could go back and remember what it was that she thought we should take care of.

It must have been sufficiently important and a little bit scary, because Veronica and I went around the corner, and we started laughing. I said, "I can't do that." Veronica said, "I can't do that." We said, "We can't do that." We decided it was too scary. Whatever she thought we should do is probably something that required us to go to the microphone and address an issue. But we decided that we couldn't do it.

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Then we looked at each other, and we said, "You know what, if Lucy thinks that we can do it, we can do it." And you know, that's how we proceeded. Whatever it was she talked us into, that needed to be done, we followed through. So NCAI met annually for sure at the Annual Convention. And it wasn't till after the Policy Review Commission completed its work, because then we had a Mid Year Conference.

And so it was the time when the tribes would have the last opportunity to comment on this American Indian Policy Review Commission report that they would be submitting, you know, to Congress. And we wanted to make sure that tribes had the last. So we had a Mid Year in Albuquerque to do that. And we had a purpose for Mid Year. Now, they continue to have Mid Years just to have Mid Years. Sometimes, you know, work manages to fill the vacuum of.

Anyway, we had a purpose for having a Mid Year, but that's how we had a relationship with Lucy. She was also fun. We would hang out. We would go places together. And in those days, the leadership of the National Congress or the national leadership, when we would be at a meeting, we would gather together. And we would go eat together. We would, you know, go dance together.

I remember one time we were at-- NCAI used to have fundraising dances. And we were sitting at the same table. Veronica and I were sitting at the table with Lucy. And we could see her, she would just tapping her feet. I thought-- I leaned over, and I said, "I think Lucy would really love to dance." And I think she really enjoyed socializing with all of us, but tapping her feet. I said, "I wonder if one of these days, we'll be like Lucy sitting around the table, tapping our feet. I am really wishing we could dance." You know I'm there and have been there for a while, tapping my feet and wishing I could dance. [laughs] But I had a chance, and I didn't go. It was the combination of a lot of things, you know, professional responsibilities and family responsibilities. But after the convention in Alaska, Lucy and Joy Sundberg-- We were going to Hawaii, just for fun. That's for girl time, and for whatever reason, I didn't go, and Joy went with Lucy. My good friend Joy. She had been the tribal chairwoman of her tribe for, you know, 26 years or something like that. She'd been involved in around the Indian country for a number of years. So they went. And I always I'm sad that I missed that opportunity to have that one great fun trip with Lucy. I think they did. You know, they went and did the outrigger canoes. They just had a great time.

But Lucy was inspiring. She cared. And she cared enough to mentor me and Veronica. And for whatever reason, I'm not sure why she picked us, and maybe she had a number of these little sessions, I don't know, but I know that she had sessions with us at every single meeting. She was a true leader, but there are leaders that are gifted. And she was one of those gifted leaders because it was her aura.

When she walked into the room, you knew she walked into the room, a grand lady. You know she stood tall. She had this beautiful braid. Sometimes she would have a beaded handbag that she carried. That's how she entered a room, and that's how she walked. She always stood tall. And you could tell that she was just proud of who she was. And

that's how she entered a room. And that's when you knew that she was there. And so she carried her message in a lot of ways. And one of those, just her presence.

Of course, her nephew, Mel, I think she was exceptionally proud of him. She had a mission. No doubt that she probably mentored him in maybe a little different way than she did us girls. But she definitely played a role in ensuring that we paid attention to what was going on. And you know being officer, sometimes you're going from meeting to meeting, and things seem to be moving fast.

And maybe we didn't always see and hear the things that were going on, but she definitely captured that and made sure, you know, we're aware of what was being said and what was going on, in case we missed it. Always appreciated that guidance and that caring on her behalf to make sure that we had that information that she thought was important, and we had the directions that she thought that we should carry out.

And looking back, you know, we did. I believe that we were responsible. And she knew that we were, and I think maybe that's one of the reasons, I don't want to sound like a braggart, that's one of the reasons that she picked us to mentor, and that's what she did. A true mentor. And I always appreciated that. Of course, the experiences we had during those years were invaluable.

And I feel good that we had an opportunity to participate during those critical years. And we had the opportunity to serve the Indian country in those trying times. You know, those were the years that we worked on and passed incredibly fantastic federal Indian legislation. We were battling abrogation of treaty rights, which somehow or another seemed to be coming out of the state of Washington. There were times that we were probably a little frightened that we were going to lose some of those battles because the responsibility was tremendous, and the losses would have been gut-wrenching, and maybe we would never have been able to recover from those big, huge losses, but we stayed together, we fought together, we had good guidance, and we survived those years, but those were some tough times.

And the beauty of that, and maybe it was solidified during working together, but we had good colleagues that we worked with, and we were-- at the time I remember we formed a separate organization to fight the abrogation of treaty legislation. Obviously, was going to be very much a lobbying, a political effort, and we formed an organization called the United Effort Trust. It was the officers of the National Congress of American Indians, and the officers of the National Tribal Chairman Association. Actually, it was three officers from each of the organization. Veronica Homer from NCI, who was in our president, Mel Tonasket, who was serving as a vice president at that time, and me, I was the treasurer of NCI but served as the secretary of the United Effort Trust. There was chairman Joe de la Cruz from the Quinault nation, and governor Paul Tafoya from the Santa Clara Pueblo, and Isaac, darn I'm drawing a blank on his last name, but he was from Mississippi Choctaw, and Calvin Isaac was his name, and those were the officers.

We did a fundraising effort throughout Indian country because we had to raise money for this fight of our life. And I remember sitting in a meeting or tribal chairs, and this was way before ending gaming. \$10,000 was like lots of money, where those chairmen just went up to the microphone, and I remember this, you know the first person that stepped up was the chairman of Cheyenne River Sioux, Wayne Ducheneaux, and committed \$10,000 to this United Effort Trust and then tribe after tribe after tribe, after tribe.

But Lucy was all a part of that. We were all in this together, and worked together and fought together and strategized together. I remember sometime we were in a room way high up in the Sheraton in Spokane Washington, where Mel Tonasket, Joe de la Cruz and Veronica, and me, and we were there deciding what we were going to do as things seem to be hopeless. We were that concerned and trying to prepare for what would be around the corner. You know we'd lost a few battles in the Supreme court during those years, and we came through okay. We were a good team, and Lucy was a part of that team, always there to encourage us. Some of us had the elected position on the national organization, but we had our leaders that stood with us and behind us and by us and in front of us, and Lucy was one of those leaders that was consistently there.

I don't know what else to say, you know.

**Interviewer:** Well, yes, it was an incredible amount of information. You covered a lot. That was great.

I do have a question that came up for me, as you were speaking. You talked about how she had talked to you guys about doing certain things. Now, most people, and myself included, when I looked up to somebody and I thought, "Oh, this person has a lot of integrity or honesty or all of these qualities that leaders have." They have a point where they're like, "I think I could follow this person. I think that this is somebody that I can stand behind." Do you remember when that time might've been for you?

**Rachel:** Well, we had been meeting with her through a period of years. It wasn't like 10 years. I don't know if it was like four years or something in that neighborhood. I wish I could remember exactly, but I remember this one time in Albuquerque, it had to be at 1979 because for whatever reason, I remember that particular convention, and I think with Lucy, sometimes it's not so much necessarily following her, but that she believed in us and thought we could do something. So basically, it was her belief in us I think that caused us to move forward because she believed we could do it. So maybe it's possible we can do it, and I think that was kind of part of it. I think she probably put some thought and preparation into what she was going to share with us at these meetings, these luncheons, there was usually a meal function, either lunch or breakfast when we would get together, but that's how she did it.

And I think we have a women's organization that was founded a number of years ago, basically, we were all probably tribal chairs of our tribes at that time. Although Cecilia Fire Thunder had not yet been elected president of her tribe. In part of our purpose for being and why we gather annually to do a training, is because we believe that we

benefited from somebody sharing their knowledge and mentoring with us, and so we try to do that each year. I don't know if we necessarily, you know, do the mentoring, but we're there to share our caring and our love, and we bring in individuals to do training and sessions to women. They're getting to be a lot of young women, but then everybody is getting to be young to me nowadays. Everybody is a young woman. And we kind of do mentoring in a different way, in a more formal setting, because we think it's important.

Every year, we do-- at least Homer comes in. She's a seasoned gaming attorney, but she comes in and does an ethics session for us, which is well-received, and she does a top-notch job that we think is important, you know, that young leaders or leaders understand the importance of being strong ethical leaders because we've seen good leaders fall by the wayside because of inappropriate conduct in the way they do business. We think it's strong that we don't lose good leaders because they don't have a clear understanding of ethics and how important it is to be credible.

**Interviewer:** I guess probably this one last question's a little bit different topic. So I've heard all sorts of stories about Lucy and how she was. One of the stories I remember was that they would hold airplanes for her.

**Rachel:** Well, yes. But do you know why? It's what I talked about early, it's just who she was. She commanded respect, not because she demanded it, but because that was her aura. It was just, "Wow, that's a strong lady." Just by the way she walked into the room, as I said, and they knew that she had done important and powerful things, you know, I think when she fought the termination of her tribe, that's an important person that would stand up and do that for your nation, and she had a lot of help, you know. She had a lot of help, but I know she was out in the front lines. Is that right, Mel?

**Mel:** Yes.

**Rachel:** She had you out there too, but she was-

**Mel:** I was right behind her. I was her soldier. She had the ideas, she had the vision.

**Rachel:** Same thing she probably did to you that she did to us.

**Mel:** Yes. I think so. Sounds like it, yeah.

**Rachel:** That was her. That was probably her style. She had a style of leadership her own, but that was I think one part of it. I think she felt the responsibility that why should she do this all alone and there are other people that could help carry out the important agenda. She probably just drafted us like soldiers, you know.

**Mel:** Well, she had a tendency to lighten fires under people. She could get people motivated to do things, but I think one of the funniest things I thought was always that she would sell her cows, she was so motivated to get something done, she would reach that bar and through your pocket, head out, she just would get on a mission and would

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rally the troops and off she'd go, you know. How many people would do that on their own dime, on their own time, just because they know it's the right thing to do, and it needs to be done? Being able to recognize what needs to be done, and why it's so relevant.

That's, you know, to me, it was one of her most valuable traits. Was being able to see how that was-- because a lot of people don't, you know, they dismissed the whole-- I'll take the money now and who knows what land rights or whatever we might've had, but she is fixing all that. She knew all that. Then she could see leadership in young people, she could see who has good potential and who didn't, and she still picked them out [unintelligible 00:21:35]

**Rachel:** Well. Yeah, you know. Fortunately, we had, maybe of a different caliber, but we had a lot of strong leaders like that that just did what they had to do, and so many of our tribes really didn't have any money. And we had to do what we had to do, and in those days, we didn't have probably per capita, and we didn't have gaming revenue. I remember there were times that we just had to share rooms, you know, four and five to a room sometimes when we go to a meeting, some of us, because that's how we had to survive and to get to meet to what needed to be done. We didn't have per diem, and we didn't have all those things. Some did, but many of us didn't, and those of us did reached out and kind of helped the rest of us along, and that's just how we did it.

**Interviewer:** So, one quick question. It sounds [unintelligible 00:22:46] might have one for you. Mel is getting an award tonight.

**Rachel:** I know

**Interviewer:** So what do you think about that?

**Rachel:** Do I have to say? [laughs] Well, first of all, I think it's deserved, and I think it's good. Let me tell you why I think it's good, because I've been around Indian country long enough to know, you know, who some of the veterans are, and those that have been in the trenches during some of these tough times. And I think so many of our leaders, that put in that time, don't get the recognition they deserve. I think some people don't even know who Mel Tonasket is. You know, obviously, he's one of the heroes in my book, as Joe de la Cruz and Lucy Covington. The first time I ran for NCI office, Roger, Jim, and Bill Yallup of the Yakama Nation nominated me. The next time I ran, I got elected by acclamation. So the next time I ran, I figured the Yakamas were good luck. They nominated me. I was fortunate to be able to see some of the leaders that people don't really-- Sometimes we hear the same names of the same leaders, but there were so many out there, the [unintelligible 00:24:27] from Northern Cheyenne.

I'm glad to see that somebody is doing this center in recognition of Lucy. Sometimes I wish they would have started doing that when she was still alive and could see that, but that's okay, better that the younger people know that and learn from the history. We have some pretty outstanding leaders throughout the Indian country that have done a lot.

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Anyway, Mel is one of those old leaders that was around a long time, but you know the thing is, he still continues to serve in the community. And you know, that says a lot. Some of us have really become lazy and really try to duck whatever job that might be winking at us or something like that. Anyway, so I think that's pretty good. I'm planning to go.

**Female Interviewer:** So when they talked about Lucy Covington at the convention, maybe she didn't hold official leadership status or something, but they would call her up and she would explain what was happening in the halls of Congress, right. And she would tell tribal leaders what strategies. Are there times that you remember her getting up and speaking or going to the mic? Is there something that you can remember about the termination era, and some of those things that she was doing?

**Rachel:** No, I can't remember specifically what she might have been articulating, but I remember her going to the mic, and when she went to the mic, it's like-- people listened. Sometimes at these meetings-- you know sometimes it's a little different now than it used to be in those days. We had a different way of conducting business, and we had a different way of I think respecting each other and what we had to say. So there was a certain way that we conducted ourselves. So we were not rude to other people, to who other people might be speaking, and we differed from time to time. But we did it there on the convention floor, and we did it respectfully, and that's how we did business. Sometimes I don't see that kind of discussion and dialogue that we used to have, but I remember her going to the microphone and when she went there, you know she was listened to. Again, part of it was people knew she knew what she was talking about, but I think it's just the fact that she had this persona about her that exuded strength and knowledge and beauty. She was a beautiful woman. She was a beautiful woman, and proud. And that's nice to see.

**Female Interviewer:** Anything else that you would like to share about Lucy or fighting in the Indian country all these years, or?

**Rachel:** You know, I think my sister-friend, Veronica, used to keep journals. We've gone through some of those journals, and, oh, golly, it's fun because I didn't remember that. I'm sure if we could go back through some of our journals and our notes, there'll be some things, you know, that we can dig out, and even the repository of historical things. You know what, Mel, I have original minutes of United Effort Trust. I find I'm at that phase in my life where I'm going to things because I think when I walk over, I could see my kids or something just coming in, just tossing all this paperwork out because it's like, "Why she keep all this stuff for." I don't want people tossing my things that I haven't gone through, but I found the original minutes of United Effort trust when we met to fight abrogation of treaty rights, and they were in longhand. This is way before cell phones and computers. I think people had those electric typewriters really uptown. I didn't have one of those.

I had the list of tribes that stepped up and committed their money to fight the abrogation of treaties, and I have a letter, it's not original, but **[unintelligible 00:29:50]**, you

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remember **[unintelligible 00:29:51]**? Joe de la Cruz wrote that letter for the national tribal chairmen, and we said, "Who's Chuck Hughes?" We thought he was talking about a man, but it was, I guess, a French word. **[unintelligible 00:30:02]** of how they were conducting business.

**[unintelligible 00:30:07]** had to do that in the organization, but that was something we all knew. It was all part of a strategy, because we couldn't have the BIA working for one organization against the other. There were so many things that we talked about, strategized that were so important, but Lucy was there. I don't know how old she was. Seems like she ageless, but I know she was older, but she hung in there.

I could remember one time we were there in January or February, is probably one of the coldest winters in the world in Washington, DC, and we were walking down the street, going somewhere, probably headed to the Hill, and she was there. The trooper that she was, she was there. You know, if you figured you could have someone older than you, that can hang in there, then me, miss California with my California blood, I could hang in there too. She was a little example of a stick to it, you know. Do what has to be done.

I'd love to hear what Mel had to say about her because I know he had so many experiences, and you probably had some good notes or something. No, no notes. You know what I tell Ernie Stephens now? I'm a need to ask him, keep a journal--keep a journal. You don't have to, not a diary, not something you write into every single day, but something you might jot a note in maybe once a week or something like that because I've started a journal any number of times, and I found a couple of them and I thought, "Wow, that was pretty profound." That one day I got inspired to start a journal and have found it, and I said, "I should have kept a journal. We should have kept a journal."

**Mel:** Yes. I kick myself for that. I think senior should have.

**Rachel:** That's what I told Paul Lim, and they're doing a book about him, and they call me because I-

**Mel:** He can't talk.

**Rachel:** No, he can't. I know.

**Mel:** He has all of that in his head and he can't get it out.

**Rachel:** I talked to them, you know, because he had asked me to do economic development. When the last things he did, I actually worked for him. I don't know if you knew that. When I was in Washington DC, when I worked in treasury, that was one of my scenes. "You have an officer in Washington DC, I'm here in Washington." Blah, blah, blah. I was working for Ernie then, the American Indian consultants, and I had worked for-- no, I started right after that because I worked for the department of labor, and then when I got elected, I said, "I can't be working for the feds and be an officer of NCAI." I felt it was a conflict of interest. Ernie offered me a job, and I worked for him.



**Mel:** [unintelligible 00:33:05]

**Rachel:** Yes, but back to the thing, that's why I told Ernie, I said, "You need to keep a journal-- you need to keep a journal. And we should have kept the journal because we could just give you all these." I could have told you what she told us to do at that meeting that we went around the quarter and laughed and said, "Oh, we can do that. Oh, yes, we can because Lucy said we can." Off we went, man, we went to do whatever she told us needed to be done because she believed we could do it, but that was why not because we didn't think we could do it because we thought, "I can't do that. You do it. Not me, you do it."

**Interviewer:** [unintelligible 00:33:40]

**?Speaker:** Right.

**Mel:** Some people ask more specific questions about Lucy. But if there's anything that's specific about Lucy was her commitment to tribes or her commitment to principle, to protect sovereignty. That was her. That was her whole life. She wasn't an expert in child welfare. She wasn't an expert in law and order. She was an expert with cows, right? My God, she knew politics and she knew government. How I've seen her once you'd look at somebody like you and Veronica. I was watching. What she was teaching you or what she was getting you to do is not to, I don't think take a specific stand on technical parts of the things that we were dealing with, but it's how you look at that. How do you look at it and how do you make it happen? What's the political process to make that happen? How do we mobilize the troops and focus to protect the treaty right there, to protect fishing rights or hunting rights in those days, that's when spear an Indian save a salmon, those things are going on. That's how I remember her more talking to us all about how you stay focused and you don't give up your principle of sovereignty. That's her strength.

**Rachel:** You don't get watered down by willing to be willing to compromise yourself away before you even started the fight. And you know what, we didn't, and I think that was part of her guidance, was these issues or this hot topic was basically how do you move that to the convention so that becomes the organizational position. That was the goal. And it was like, "Hell no, we won't go." It was, "Don't negotiate amongst yourself. Don't give it away among each other." This was the position, and this is what we fought for.

**Mel:** So you're seeing the same thing that I saw then. I mean, she preached to me about sticking to your principles of sovereignty more than I can even count.

**Rachel:** And stand up.

**Mel:** Yes. How do you influence other people the same way and fight the same way? That's what I think she saw in you and Veronica, particularly you two. Then it's evident that it worked, that she was right because look how many times both of you have been elected into the offices of NCAI, let alone your own tribes, right? Successful women,

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successful leaders, and that don't happen to people over and over and over in the national level. So she saw that in you two. I know that. She said, "Go hang around those two women, make them dance."

**Rachel:** [laughs] Well, I know she believed that we could do whatever she sent us off to do. I really believe that, or else she wouldn't have guided us that way, but there were a couple of times that "Oh, I can't do that." We rolled our eyeball says, "Oh, you do it. No, you do it." Then we just kind of said, "No, if Lucy thinks we can do it, we can do it." That's what we said one time. That's why I remember that Albuquerque convention, now I wish I knew what she sent us off to do, but it was like, "If Lucy thinks we can do it, we can do it." Whatever's going on in 1979, Mel, '78, but you know '77, '78 was about the big fight of the abrogation. It was like, "Hell no, we won't go." And that's how we survived those years. We all stood together with that attitude. And I think sometimes, well that was a different time, and I'm glad I grew up in those times.

**Mel:** Well, we all associated with one another, just in the room of the conference. We associated at the dances. We got to know each other's leaders, right? When you're friends wind up fighting together instead of fighting separately. Our Northwest fights were supported by the Plains Indians, and the Plain fights are supported by the Northwest Indians, and that's from making those friendships. I don't know how that goes today.

**Rachel:** I don't see it.

**Interviewer:** When it gets over and everybody splits. There's not that.

**Rachel:** Well one thing their lobbyists have set them up with some high-power dinner or someplace like that, so they take them off. We hung together, you know what, and then Mel reminded me that we were fortunate that we had brothers that really did look out for us, and we never really probably realized that. I remember one time we would gather in Washington DC in different places at different times, but this particular time we had this place called Bronco Billy's, a raunchy dive above a topless dancer on the first floor. But on the second floor, was a country-western, they had a jukebox, so all the Indians would go upstairs. We were all sitting there, but it was still a raunchy area. We were sitting there around the table one night, Veronica, who was then the President of NCI, she got up to go to the bathroom. And Joe De la Cruz, President De la Cruz, she looked at me and he said, "Well, aren't you going with Veronica?" [chuckles] I said, "What for? She's perfectly capable of going by herself." He looked at me and he said, "Rachel, she's the highest elected official in Indian country, and we don't need anything to happen to her." I said, "You're right," and so away I go.

I'm sitting in the next stall and all of a sudden I started laughing. And Veronica said, "Is that you Rache?" And I said, "Yes," and she said, "What's so funny?" I told her, I says, "Joe told me I should come back here, because you're-- I said it just occurred to me that if somebody tried to accost us, I'd probably knock you over trying to get out of the door first." [laughs] But that's the way it was.

**Mel:** Yeah, we traveled in herds, didn't we?

**Rachel:** Look out for each other. We were all there when people lost their children in different ways or their spouses. Loved and respected each other.

**Mel:** Still do.

**Rachel:** That's why I'm going to his thing tonight. I think it's deserved and some people say, "Who in the hell is Mel Tonasket?" But I remember him. [chuckles] Doesn't happen enough, doesn't happen enough.

**Female Interviewer:** Maybe if you collect some of your papers and Veronica finds some of her stuff, we can come visit you guys. **[inaudible 00:42:09]** jump in the car.

**Rachel:** Because Veronica said she'd do whatever to help. She said she'd write something, maybe we should tell her, she should start on writing something because then she'll start thinking and then you can tape her. So she'd be better. Then pick me up on your way through. That'd be fun.

**[00:42:31] [END OF AUDIO]**