Minnesota Unraveled

EP106 - Enduring Connections: Native Community and Basketball

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Chantel Rodríguez:

Walk up to the third floor at the Minnesota History Center and you'll find an exhibit called Girlhood (It's Complicated). The exhibit sprawls across nearly 7,000 square feet and offers insights on how the concept of girlhood in the United States has changed over time. But there was one particular gallery within the larger exhibit that drew me in. It was called Minnesota (where girls shoot hoops). Tucked in the far corner of that area were a few canals outlining the long relationship between native girls and basketball. They noted that basketball was introduced to the native community through federal boarding schools and that native people have developed their own style of play, rez ball, short for reservation ball.

I'm Dr. Chantel Rodríguez, and this is Enduring Connections: Native Community and Basketball. If you've ever played a sport, been part of a team on the court or on the field, you know the sense of pride and accomplishment a game well played can bring. Whether it's a long shot field goal or a buzzer beating win, sports have and give meaning to countless people. But what these exhibit panels made clear is that basketball has an altogether deeper meaning to the native community.

Why is that, and how did it come to be? To answer these questions, I spoke to three different community members, each with a different piece of the story to share. A historian, a lifelong ball player and community advocate, and a filmmaker. First I spoke with Syd Beane. He's a historian, documentarian, and ball player.

Syd Beane:

Yeah, haŋ mitakuyepi. Hello all my relatives. That's the way we always start our introduction. My English name is Syd or Sydney Dixon Beane, but my Dakota name is Snaya Mani, which means "walks with distinction". I was born on the Flandreau Santee Sioux Reservation in South Dakota.

Chantel Rodríguez:

First things first, I wanted to know just what rez ball is.

Syd Beane:

So rez ball is a fast moving, spiritual, very much identity and connection to everything within the sport and within the gym.

Chantel Rodríguez:

But what you're saying then is when you watch a rez ball game versus conventional basketball, you know you're looking at rez ball, right? It's so distinctive in its fast-paced and its aggression and that spiritual connection that you're talking about.

Syd Beane:

Yeah. And it's so connected that it's not just connected to the ball, it's connected to everybody also around cheering and yelling and connecting to it as well. It goes through the gym out into the community, and it comes from the community through the gym into the gym. So they just aren't playing in the gym, they're playing in the whole community and the whole community is there with them. It's through the wall.

Chantel Rodríguez:

As for how Syd got involved with rez ball himself...

Syd Beane:

My parents and grandparents both were involved in mission schools and Indian boarding schools for pretty much their whole lives. First as students and then as employees. So I grew up literally within the boarding school system and that's where I learned how to do everything.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The boarding school system that Syd is talking about is one that has a complicated history. In the 1800s, the US government was intent on getting Indigenous communities to assimilate into Anglo-American culture and adopt Christianity. By leaving their native culture and traditional ways behind Native people would, in the eyes of the United States, become "civilized". Boarding schools were a part of this effort. Native children were required to attend these schools at risk of penalties to their families. Once there, they were not allowed to speak their own languages, let alone continue any of their own cultural practices. This was part of an effort to, in the words of the founder of one of these schools, "Kill the Indian, save the man." Counterintuitively, white policy makers believed that the eradication of Indigenous culture was the way to ensure the survival of Indigenous people. The thinking was

that assimilation through education would ensure native people had a place within mainstream white culture and society.

How they went about this, though, varied by school. Some boarding schools were run by the federal government, others by Christian missionaries. In the state of Minnesota alone, there were somewhere around 20 of these schools between the 1870s and 1920s. Some focused on trades, preparing students for jobs in an economy that was becoming increasingly industrialized, but most adhered to similar daily routines. Students took rigorous coursework, completed manual labor, and did military drills. Most were required to wear uniforms, cut their hair and take on new anglicized names. Students' experiences in the boarding school system were of course varied, but for many, this forced assimilation was a difficult and painful time in their lives.

Syd Beane:

My parents had been growing up within the whole boarding school system and then later going back to work there were not very verbal. They didn't talk about themselves. They were hesitant to pass on to us the trauma that their families went through, and so they really didn't talk much about themselves. We had to later, our family go back and research them to understand what they went through. And as a filmmaker who also went out and filmed elders, this was common. They didn't want to pass on their trauma, so they didn't pass on things that they thought were related to their trauma. And the boarding schools also emphasize that no language, no native stories, you can't talk about your culture, you can't wear your cultural clothes. And so that reinforced that going back within themselves. And then it was hard to function outside that world. So I had a hard time functioning outside the native community. When I went to public school, I didn't talk. I didn't talk.

Chantel Rodríguez:

But for Syd, there is one thing that helped, that made life feel somewhat normal: athletics. Native people have played sports and games since time immemorial. These traditions differ from group to group. Sports and games could serve as outlets for artistic expression, a means to facilitate trade between communities or a spiritual communion, just to name a few. Administrators of boarding schools try to take advantage of native people's cultural connection to sport, integrating athletic programs as part of their assimilationist tactics. These administrators believed in the idea of muscular Christianity, a growing school of thought that connected athletics to Christian moral goodness.

Syd Beane:

And you had the concept of what was called muscular Christianity. And muscular Christianity movements started within the international YMCA. So the boarding

schools then also ended up with YMCA chapters. And the concept was that it was about assimilation. It was about assimilation, wanting Indian people to be Christians and to be farmers or be different trades, but it also wanted them to be physically fit. So that's where sports had an emphasis, the concept of being physically fit. International YMCA was about physical education. Physical education in the United States also came out of the international YMCA. That whole movement, that's where it came from.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The young Men's Christian Association, or YMCA, was founded in London in 1844. By the 1890s, the organization had more than 300 gyms across the United States. Muscular Christianity had an essential place in each of them. The idea was that athleticism has more than just physical value. It has religious and moral value too, that an active lifestyle could encourage the development of Christian character. Around this time, a Canadian educator named James Naismith invented a new game he called basketball. Naismith was himself a believer in muscular Christianity. He hoped this new game of basketball would be a way for players to develop and strengthen their Christian moral fiber. Having the ideas of muscular Christianity as an integral part of the gameplay made basketball a compelling sport to school administrators. The game spread quickly through the boarding school system, and according to Syd, native sporting traditions had a large influence on the rules of the game.

Syd Beane:

Naismith was a Presbyterian minister and then became a medical doctor. And much of what Naismith used in basketball related back to native culture and native sports. He combined concepts of sports, across running and jumping and throwing. And natives had many of those same kind of sports in their ceremonies and their rituals and in their particular sports.

Chantel Rodríguez:

So when basketball arrived on the boarding school scene, it wasn't unfamiliar to native students. Basketball has a lot of similarities to native sports. It emphasizes teamwork, throwing, running, physical endurance and quick thought. The most obvious similarity? It involves putting a ball through a hoop. Many native sports and games require throwing objects into a goal. So when native youth were introduced to basketball in boarding school, it wasn't entirely new to them. They had played games like basketball in their native communities. One of those games, one that Naismith drew inspiration from, is called Stickball.

Syd Beane:

Stickball would've been kind of the major one. It's called lacrosse today. And it was played here in Minnesota on a field of it could be many, many miles long and many miles wide. So you had hundreds of people playing at one time, villages playing your villages, and it was very rugged sports. It was like life was for them. It represented how difficult life was in those early days. And so it was hard played in the middle of winter, it was played on the frozen lake, running at each other, trying to get the ball across the line that could be miles away. It's hard to conceptualize that because our sports today are taken out of context. They're put in the gym, which is only so many feet wide and length.

And in the early days, sports represented everything. They connected you to everything and every place. It was this holistic concept of community. The whole community could participate and play. And the area would be as wide as the community. So now you're asked to be put into these small spaces and function within a smaller environment separate from each other. So that early Indigenous view was more holistic and more broad. And then you add competition to it, it was a different concept of competition. Winning was still a concept, but winning was not a concept of beating. So it was more a competition of becoming brothers and sisters than of losing, winning and losing.

Chantel Rodríguez:

This is different from mainstream western ideas of what sports are all about. And in some ways, native ideas around sports parallel the thinking behind muscular Christianity. Athletics is a way for native communities to maintain not only their physical wellbeing, but spiritual as well. Muscular Christianity maintains that athletics can strengthen Christian character and morals. You can see how administrators could have thought it would be a successful assimilation strategy. But did it work?

Syd Beane:

So it fit well then with the native relationship to nature and being physically fit and spiritually sound. And so again, those elements of culture were inherently there and maintained the boarding school. Even though they couldn't speak their language, they could understand each other non-verbally though. And they had the first opportunities to work together and to come together across tribes. So by creating a system that tried to separate them from their tribe, they created the Inner Tribal movement in this country. And so that Inner Tribal movement was able to withstand assimilation. And so their purpose and their strategy in effect did not work. And native people found a way through their own relationships and understanding across tribes and relationships to nature to form a stronger bond to withstand assimilation.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Administrators' hopes that the game would be a tool of a assimilation were misplaced. Basketball was too similar to Native games. Students had their own existing deep cultural ties to athletics as a spiritual practice and a source of well-being. On top of that, the athletic programs weren't necessarily the top priority for school administrators. As a result, the staff members in charge of these programs tended to turn over often, so administrators often turned to hiring former native students. That meant that current students had the space to make the sport their own.

Syd Beane:

It gave me an identity. It gave me identity.

Chantel Rodríguez:

And you started telling me and painting such a great story of your childhood and how you were playing basketball even at a young age and your father being a coach. And I'm curious, what is your first memory of basketball?

Syd Beane:

My first memory, I guess, is being in the gym. And at the time that I was old enough to remember, they were all wearing knee guards and not like the uniforms today. They were all wool and short tops and shorts. And now it's very much different when it was in those days. But like I said, the medicine ball, they always started with throwing this heavier, bigger ball around and just the whistle of my dad's whistle and the nod of his head and how they responded to him more non-verbally than verbally. And it was always just fast moving from one end of the court to the other. Constant running, constant passing. And to the point where they understood each other.

And the other thing is, and this one of the only places you could do it, they spoke their native language and they learned how to speak even and understand other languages because it's phonetic. The Sioux or Dakota language is phonetic, so you can understand it over time. And so it was one of the places where the culture was retained. The whole idea of the way that certainly the men, that's where they found their courage, that's where they found their strength, that's how they build their strength, that's how they maintain their strength amongst trauma and crisis and the other aspects of a boarding school. It is what saved them. It's what saved them from that trauma.

Chantel Rodríguez:

In the face of assimilation, native students integrated their culture into basketball. They used their native language on the court. They began incorporating elements of their community sporting traditions, like fast-paced play and accuracy throwing, into basketball. In boarding school gyms across the country, this new style of play came to be known as reservation ball or rez ball.

Syd Beane:

And it just got more and more about running, running, running, getting the ball off the boards as quick as possible, passing, passing, non-verbally and just up and down and wear people out just like they would run their prey down literally when they were living off the land. It was just constant motion and understanding each other from a cultural connection and knowing that through Mitakuye Owas'iŋ, everything is related. If you can put those all together, and that's what I eventually learned how to do, you get into a zone. And that's what our ceremonies helped us do, to learn how to get into that higher level of consciousness in which you can connect to things and get locked into them. And that's what the best players do today. They get locked into the connection between the ball and the floor and the hoop and everything, and you can watch. They can shoot without thinking. They can shoot around obstructions. The best players today, you understand that they're shooting because they're in a zone. They've got to that higher level of understanding. So it's a spiritual thing.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Talking with Syd gave me a deeper understanding of the origins of rez ball. It started out as more than just a style of play. It was a statement of identity and a form of resistance against oppression and erasure. But how do native communities think of the sport today? Is rez ball still around? For that, I talk to Brook LaFloe.

Brook LaFloe:

My name is Brook LaFloe. My family comes from the Turtle Mountains in North Dakota. I come from the Eagle Clan and yeah, I've grown up on the east side of St. Paul most of my life. Basketball is a big piece of my heart and it's a big piece of my life still, even to this day. It kept me growing up, it kept me out of trouble. And it was something I could go to even when I was growing in my social-emotional intelligence and just trying to, as teenagers, we all go through the hormone phases. It was something I could turn to when I had nothing else to turn to. So in many ways I say that basketball saved my life and it saved me from a lot of heartache and bad decisions. I have a tattoo here on the back of my arm. It's the shape of a heart and there's a basketball crack in the cracks of it and it's a bear paw for my mom because she's bear clan.

So those are all the pieces of my heart is what that tattoo represents. And basketball's definitely been a big piece of my heart. It's something as I've gotten older, I've been able to share with my little brothers. My little brother is 13 years younger than me, and so I took on coaching the older he got, and that was a different role in basketball for me as going from a full-time player stepping into a coach role and into more of a giving back role. It's still just as important to me today as a coach, as it was for me as a player because I know the lived experience of what basketball has done for me, and so I try to share that with others and let them find their own gifts in the game.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Brook's a lifelong basketball player. She got her start as a kid in a co-ed league, then played all through high school and into college in CAA division one at Tulane. Even today, she's a coach at her local league. For Brook, the sport holds a wealth of meaning, not just personally, but for her community at large. So when it comes to basketball, was that really a big thing in your family or your community more broadly? Why that sport?

Brook LaFloe:

I would say in my family, sort of. There's athletes on both sides of my family, but basketball was maybe the choice for most of us. But in general as a native community, a lot of people play basketball on all of the different reservations. It was introduced during the boarding school era. So we've had basketball in our native communities for quite a while now, and I think a lot of people bond over that, connect over that, meet people from other reservations and other communities over basketball. So it's definitely something that a lot of communities utilize as a healthy option and healthy outlet on the reservations.

Chantel Rodríguez:

According to Brook, to see the difference between rez ball and conventional basketball, you just have to look at the offense. I was wondering if you could to walk me and the listeners through what an offensive play might look like in rez ball versus conventional basketball just so that people can make sense of really what it might look like.

Brook LaFloe:

Yeah, okay. So a rez ball play would be, let's say the other team just scored and so it's our possession now. We got to take the ball out, you're going to run to the baseline, you're going to take the ball out and maybe they're celebrating their score, they're clapping, the other team is cheering on the guy who scored in that split second. You're taking the ball out and you're running it down court before they have a

chance to turn around and stop celebrating. That's what rez ball is, right? It's like the fastest paced version of the game. It's like we're going to get this out and we're going to try and score and transition. So we are going to score before they set up. We don't need to set up a play. We're going to score on a fast break. That would be rez ball, right?

It is like you're going to go give it to them as soon as you can, as quickly as you can, and then make it to the next play. And the traditional game without a shot clock, which we used to have in high school rules, it wouldn't be so fast. If the other team scored, you're going to maybe not run to take the ball out and score in transition, but you're going to let your one teammate take the ball out. Your point guard gets the ball and then your other three teammates are already going down to set up a play. So that's what organized feels like. It's a little bit more geared towards plays, which means then you have to have practice towards them. rez ball, you can go without practicing. You just once you know everybody can run and everybody can shoot and a little bit of your teammate strengths, you can just run and go with it.

So it requires a different IQ of the game than just peer skill alone. So that would be a little bit of what the difference would look like. In rez ball, you're kind of leaning on our own, not individual talents and IQ, but we're leaning on ourselves a little bit more than a coach. I guess that's a good way to put it. And then an organized like a coach will be like, "This is a scenario. This is the play drawn up to hit us at three in the last three seconds and we're down by three." But in rez ball you kind of just, I know my shooter is open, I'm going to give them the ball and they're going to shoot. Or I know my big man's open, I'm going to give them the ball and I know they can turn around and play it up. It's less coached and more self-driven for a lot of rez ball players.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Like Brook was saying, in rez ball gameplay, the coach can take a bit of a backseat. But for native communities, rez ball is more than what happens between the buzzers and coaching goes beyond the court.

Brook LaFloe:

In rez ball, the coach could be unnecessary, right? It's between you and your teammates and just the IQs you've had throughout life. But when you think of reservations, I honestly think for the coach's role in rez ball is definitely giving the game of basketball, but it could be a lot more when you know you're working with American Indian youth and their life outside of basketball could be not easy. So I think a coach's role in rez ball is to coach life as much as basketball, right? Is to coach kids to make good decisions. And you're talking about respecting referees, respecting others. You can see a lot of attitudes come out during basketball just because it can be a very emotional engaging sport when you love it and when you're playing and when you're competitive. But how do we act when we love something and when we're upset, how do we act?

And so I think coaching rez ball is a lot more life coaching when you're doing it for the right reasons anyways, as opposed to the wins and losses because at the end of the day, you want your kids to make it through high school. And that's kind of just when you know the socioeconomic status and all the things that happen in a reservation community. I think rez ball holds a different place in our communities than just high school basketball in the cities where it could be for fun and it could just be as a social academic thing, but rez ball can really get kids through high school. And so a coach's role is more of a life teacher and you're sharing the game at the same time, but you're also coaching kids up to be your community members and the people you want to see around you in the reservation and to do well after they leave you.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Syd's newest project is an effort to share that heart and soul with the broader audience. Syd, a documentarian himself. Has partnered up with documentary filmmaker Leya Hale to produce a film that explores the past and present of native communities' relationship with basketball in Minnesota.

Leya Hale:

Haŋ mitakuyepi, c̣aŋte waṡtenape ciyuzapi ye. In my Dakota language I said hello, my relatives, I greet you all with a warm handshake. My name is Leya Hale and I come from the Dakota and Diné Nations. I am a documentary filmmaker and I've been producing with Twin Cities PBS for the last decade.

Chantel Rodríguez:

For many in the native community, the overarching story of the boarding schools is one of hardship, assimilation and deprivation, but just as each school has its own story, so too does each student. For some, the boarding schools are a source of native resilience and joy. Their story is not simple or one size fits all. That nuance and complexity is something that Leya strives to center in her work.

Leya Hale:

I felt that when I'm telling native history, I always try to find ways, especially when it comes to events that were detrimental to our people, I really try to find ways to tell it through uplifting and empowering stories. So when I heard Syd Beane talk about the resiliency and the way that young people took this game and used it as a tool in a way to help them still maintain a sense of community while being away from their families and their communities, I really just thought it was a new way and a new approach to looking at boarding schools where we don't always have to feel this heavy pressure when we're having to talk about these stories.

Chantel Rodríguez:

So, why film rather than a book or any other medium? What does film afford you in the storytelling capacity?

Leya Hale:

I think film speaks to your spirit in a way that transcends written information. Meaning, when you're hearing someone's story and you can connect to them through anything that relates you to them and you go on a journey, a personal journey of them, and you witness their achievements and their challenges and the barriers they had to overcome to get to where they are, it's very empowering on a level that I feel like reading texts can't achieve. Maybe for some people it can be that way, but for me, I just really believe in the power of film and its ability to speak to your spirit.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The history of rez ball is one that winds its way through to the present. There are plenty of native athletes today, like Brook, still forging new ways of playing and coaching res ball. That's a key thing Leya and Syd hope to highlight.

Leya Hale:

So I'm kind of just casting a wide net on different stories, checking outlets like Indiansports.com and just trying to figure out who some of the current native basketball players out there. And because I think as a filmmaker when it comes to talking about history and covering history, I really try to draw my audiences in by having contemporary voices tell the story. So you're learning the history through their lenses and their experiences and their emotions.

Chantel Rodríguez:

In that same vein, there are people alive today with personal memories of these boarding schools. Syd Beane is one of them. For Syd, it goes beyond the personal. His own experience in the boarding school system inspires him to tell this story and to help people better understand the interconnectedness of the past and present. Can you tell me why you think it's so important to tell that story in film? What you hope audiences will take away from that?

Syd Beane:

Well, for me, it's my story and it's the story of everybody I grew up with. It's the story of our families and our struggles and how some of us survived and how some didn't.

And it is also the story of moving through the same process of through war, prison. Then on to reservations, which were just another aspect of a prison. And then on to boarding schools that in one sense you were held hostage, as I said earlier, where my dad couldn't go anywhere else. They wouldn't let him to play basketball because he was good enough to produce money for the school. So it's that process that all of our children and grandchildren inherit. And the way to get to that is through stories and getting deeper into those stories and understanding the depth and width of them to the point that they become your story. A lot of people look at that and say, "That's not my story," but I say everybody's story is your story. Your story is everybody's story. Because everything is connected to everything else. Once you move away from that thinking, you are lost.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Leya is hopeful that in bringing these stories to the fore, younger generations will have a greater understanding, not only of themselves, but of the generations that came before them.

Leya Hale:

Me, I'm in my forties now and it was my grandparents that went through boarding schools. So now that I'm looking back at younger generations, I'm just wondering myself, what does that mean to them maybe being like a generation removed from having direct grandparents going through that experience. Maybe some of these generations have great-grandparents, so maybe they didn't hear directly these stories. So I just wanted to explore that idea, what does it mean to these newer generations of young people that having to deal with the history being uncovered.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Brook is doing her own part to keep the history and present of rez ball alive. And when you returned to Minnesota, you helped to found a social enterprise for Indigenous children. Can you tell our listeners what that organization is called and what it's all about?

Brook LaFloe:

Yeah, Niniijanis One of Ones is a social enterprise for Indigenous children, and we work along the intersections of public health. So we do the basketball and then we do Indigenous people's weekend, early childhood education. So by education, I'm a trained Montessorian, so I was in the classroom in a Montessori classroom. I still work at a Montessori, the only native Montessori in Minnesota called the Montessori American Indian Child Care Center. So some of our materials and things that we sell online are Indigenous Montessori materials, and that was to create access to learning, more access to culturally relevant learning in early childhood.

And then the last one is just the art piece and our artist economy, growing our artist economy. So I mentioned I'm a beadwork artist and I have lots of artists in my family, lots of my friends who are artists. And so that piece is called One of Ones. And all of those art pieces, they fundraise for our programs. They either fundraise for our boys basketball team to send them to tournaments, or we do children's giveaways with our Montessori materials. Those are the three areas of which we work is the intersections of art culture, public health, I guess you could say in early childhood education.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The basketball team that Brook helped to get off the ground honors the legacy of rez ball, but it honors something else too. The team is called MMIW, an acronym short for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

Brook LaFloe:

That was the third program that came out of Niniijanis One of Ones, and it came because my nephew, he knows I'm the basketball player in the family. He's like, "Auntie, will you take us to this basketball tournament? We want to go play and we could bring Dakota." So he just started naming some of his friends and family that could be on the team. And so he took a lot of initiative. His name's Harvey Peltier. He took a lot of initiative around starting that team, and I was like, "Yeah, let's do it. We're going to do this. We're going to do this for our family. We'll do this for your mom." So my cousin, Becky Dubois was ran over on her reservation almost nine years ago now, and this was her son, her oldest son who started the team. So she is an MMIW. We don't know what happened to her to this day.

So when me and Harvey started the team and was coming up with our roster of players, I was like, "We're going to do this for your mom. We're going to be called MMIW." And so, one tournament turned into two tournaments into three tournaments into a second summer, into a third summer, into a fourth summer. And this last summer, I just graduated them. That was my first group of freshmen that went all four summers and graduated. So that's really because of Harvey and my family. So again, my community brought me back to the game again and again, it's just the ways that basketball brings native communities together is really beautiful. And we were able to advocate for his mother. We were able to play for our own healing within our family. We did, again, a lot of coaching outside of basketball and how we act and behave and how to have social emotional intelligence. And so that's where our team started.

Chantel Rodríguez:

And that Girlhood exhibit, the one that set off my curiosity in the first place, Brook is part of it herself. She shared three of her medallions with the history center.

Brook LaFloe:

So those two medallions are sitting up in the Girlhood exhibit, and I feel very honored to share those pieces with you guys. When we say medallion, it's a necklace, it's a beaded necklace, pretty decent size. So there's the beaded medallion part, which is the actual hanging piece. And then the chain piece is made out of pipe bone, which would've been another traditional material that we had in our pre colonization and that we adorned again. There's some materials, dentalium, pipe bone, shells, all of these things that were part of our art that are still a part of our living art today. And so the chain has some pipe bone, it's got some contemporary crystal beads, and it's got some leather that ties it at the end. It's backed with leather. So that's one thing. Another material that we had with leather, obviously we used every part of every animal, and a lot of those things became tools, but then some of them became clothing. Some of them became things we've adorned ourselves with. And so in this case, the medallion uses the beads, the leather, the pipe bone, and yeah, and thread.

Chantel Rodríguez:

Two of them medallions were gifts from her family, a sign of recognition of her accomplishments, both on and off the court.

Brook LaFloe:

I was given medallions in this purpose, and I got one for graduating from basketball because I finished my four years in the NCAA, and then my parents also got one made for me when I finished my undergrad. And that was one of my parents' ways of just honoring what it was I had done in my life with that sport. It's almost like earning eagle feathers in a way, but it's a little more contemporary, right? Because again, beadwork is a little bit more contemporary. But it was definitely a way that they wanted to honor what I was able to do with my life with basketball, and then with the graduation, what I was able to do with my life in academics. And then the one that I made is also sitting next to those two medallions, and that was my contribution to my basketball team. And so it's got the MMIW on there, which stands for Missing and Murdered Indigenous women. That's the name of our youth basketball team.

Chantel Rodríguez:

The sport of basketball is interwoven into the fabric of native communities. The game and the teams it brings to life are a source of connection, joy and pride. The sport came about in a time of harmful policies intended to erase native culture, but in the face of that erasure native students were able to not only persevere, but create an altogether new version of the sport. Basketball became and remains a way to keep native athletic traditions and connection alive, whether it's conventional play or in the style of rez ball. It was and is a means not just of connection, but resilience and

joy. A means of celebrating community spirituality and culture, of processing and overcoming trauma. Of healing. If you peel back the layers, even something that seems so simple, a game with just a ball into hoop can have a history and a depth of meaning all its own.

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