

**Transcript: Thirty Brave Minutes, Episode 51**  
**Upon Her Shoulders: Centering Stories of Native Women**

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Dr. Gay

Welcome to 30 Brave Minutes, a podcast of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. In 30 Brave Minutes, we'll give you something interesting to think about. I'm Richard Gay, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and with me is Dr. Joanna Hersey, our Associate Dean. Joining us is Dr. Mary Ann Jacobs, Professor and Chair in our Department of American Indian Studies. We are looking forward to discussing her new book *Upon Her Shoulders: Southeastern Native Women Share their Stories of Justice, Spirit, and Community*. Now get ready for 30 Brave Minutes.

Dr. Hersey

Mary Ann, thank you so much for being with us today. Let's start with your telling our listeners a little bit about yourself.

Dr. Jacobs

I'm Mary Ann Jacobs, I Chair American Indian Studies as you know. I'm from the community. Part of my growing up was here in North Carolina, part in Chicago, where my parents moved, from this community, in 1952, so I feel very much like this is home for me. Most of my siblings live here, all but one. My sister, who now lives in Baltimore is down visiting this week, so we've been having a lot of get togethers because she's here. Coming home to teach at UNCP was really a good thing for my family, because both my husband and I are from the community.

Dr. Gay

That's wonderful. Mary Ann. Could you tell us a little bit about your educational background? I believe you're trained as a sociologist. Is that right? Social work?

Dr. Jacobs

Social worker, yeah. I started out, doing my undergraduate at U.N.C. Chapel Hill, and I got a Master's Degree for School Counseling. And then my husband and I got married and we moved to California and then I started working as an instructor at Cal State, Long Beach, and eventually my position was moved into directing the American Indian studies program there. And that's where I decided to earn a Master's Degree in Social Work, and then go on and got a PhD in social work at the University of Chicago. So, I've just traipsed around the country as most academics do, that is, you know, the way academia is, you kind of go from one thing to the next, and that's pretty much how my career has happened.

Dr. Gay

Excellent, well, you know, you've made some really valuable contributions here, so I'm really looking forward to learning more about your book. So I know this book comes out of your

previous research. So, could you tell us a little bit about that? And maybe a little bit about your Co-editors of this compilation.

Dr. Jacobs

Yeah, Dr. Ulrike Weithaus, Cherry Beasley, and I, we all served on the American Indian Women of Proud Nations Organization's organizing committee, and at different times, we were helping to coordinate their annual conferences. That's how all three of us met, and we decided that it would be great to have books coming out of the conference. And the first book, we had, we really conceptualized a book that would have both story and academic portions together, but it turned out that we had more pieces because we had the speakers for the conference write their own work. And that one is *American Indian Women of Proud Nations* (the name of the organization) *Essays on History, Language and Education*. So we had keynote speakers writing their own sections, and that worked out really well for us.

So Upon her Shoulders, we did this follow-up book, this is more story and storytelling. Some of the people who are in the collection did not want to write their own piece. So we went out, Cherry did a lot of this herself, and Ulrike did too, went out and interviewed the women who are part of this volume. And then we wrote up those interviews, into a readable form, so taking out on the ommms and uhhhs 'I just can't remember' and that sort of thing. Some of these sections are written by some of our authors, like Christine Hewlin wrote, she has a much longer book, and she allowed us to take excerpts from that, but most of these are collected interviews with women in the community.

Dr. Gay

And could you define community for us there, are we talking in the Robeson County or...?

Dr. Jacobs

Well, they were actually not necessarily in Robeson County. Many of them were somehow related to the American Indian Women of Proud Nations. Either they were presenters, or they were elders in residence, or they were important to putting on the conferences, a lot of them have connections to that organization. And the proceeds from this book, and the first book have gone to the American Indian Women of Proud Nations Organization.

Dr. Gay

So we encourage everyone to go out and buy a copy today!

Dr. Jacobs

Yeah! Go out and buy a copy and they will get the check directly from the publisher. So that's very nice.

Dr. Gay

Excellent. Well, I know that storytelling is, has a really long and rich tradition among native populations and, particularly indigenous women. So, could you talk a little bit about that for us?

Dr. Jacobs

Well, there's at least one story teller who goes around to different communities and that's what she does for a living and she's interviewed in here. There's another one who wrote poetry for the book. Storytelling is, for many many tribes, there are origin stories. There are stories about, different plants and how they were to be used, there were stories about how different formations in the land came to be, there are all sorts of stories, and some tribes have specific roles for women in that tradition and others, it's more of a male dominated pastime. Women are the main characters in a lot of that storytelling. So, for instance, in a lot of the origin stories, the progenitor is a woman, not a man. Like, in the Bible, the man is the main character, but for many native origin stories, it's a woman who's the first person, the first human. That's a really important difference, in the way that Native people look at themselves and look at, you know, their origins.

Dr. Gay

I find that really fascinating and it makes me think of, matrilineal societies, right? Matrilineal cultures, or patriarchal cultures. Does there seem to be a connection between the origin stories, and the either matriarchal or patriarchal form of the tribe?

Dr. Jacobs

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, it is. Because matrilineal means that you trace all of your family tree, your clan system back through your mother's family's tree. For many of those tribal systems originally, the woman would determine, she was basically the land owner, she was the owner, quote unquote, of her children, if the marriage dissolved. All of those things go back to defining who you are as a human, who you are within your group, through your mother's line.

Dr. Hersey

Mary Ann your book centers these indigenous women stories across three broad themes or areas, how did you decide to organize the material that way? And can you share what each area is, and what it represents to you, why you felt it was important to include.

Dr. Jacobs

Okay, so we could have chosen a lot of different ways to slice and dice these stories, okay, and what we did for the first section, we tried to put together those sorts of stories that clung to the idea, what we called, 'make yourself useful child.' And that section actually comes from Mary Ann Elliot's story, that's part of the book. And you all know Mary Ann Elliot just donated a large sum of money to the Mackenzie Elliot School of Nursing, and that theme from her story basically became the first section of the book.

We looked for other stories that would fit into that broadly. We wanted to cover sections within, that were related back to the American Indian Women of Proud Nations. There are themes for the American Indian Women of Proud Nation's conference, were about family. They were about health, community, entrepreneurship and spirituality. So we were looking for things that were not covered in the first book. That was another way of thinking about it too. So that spirit one really comes through there, definitely wasn't covered in the first book and we really wanted it to be part of the second book.

The second theme is about spirituality, spirit medicine is what we call that second theme, and there we have a lot more of different ones. Like, Christine's section is about, basically her faith, as a through line through all of some very rough and bitter relationships that she had. Then another one, from Daphne Strickland, about being a foster mom to a little boy, and then Kim Pevia's story is a much, much more spiritually centered one that talks about, not so much the Christian faith, but more of looking for guidance from ancestors, looking for, looking from within. So the spirituality one, again, it's broad, but it comes back to that theme.

And then the last theme, the one that I was looking forward to, was on justice, and we called it, 'getting justice when there was none.' We wanted to really think about justice in a different way, because in in that section, we wanted to think about more indigenous forms of responsibility, reciprocity, the sorts of things that we don't really get in our justice system unless, you know, they're intentionally looking at something that they call circle justice or restorative justice systems. So, that's what we were trying to stretch all of those themes to envelop these stories in the poetry.

Dr. Gay

Would you mind elaborating a little bit on some of those forms of justice like the restorative justice? Could you give us just a little bit of info on that?

Dr. Jacobs

Okay, let me see if I can find something from that section, I talk about it in the introduction. [reading aloud]

*"Traditional Native American justice is rooted in notions of relationship and dialogue, rather than adversarial dispute. Harmony and balance rather than proof and guilt. And renewal rather than punishment. Colonization, and the resulting historical trauma still haunt our communities, the clash of native and non-native cultures continues. That clash is acutely visible in the American and indigenous views of justice. The American justice system promotes values and practices such as individualism, self actualization, and state sponsored revenge, and punishment, usually in the form of fines or incarceration. The systems focus on the verification of the offender.*

*In contrast, indigenous, restorative justice, views both the offender, and the victim as respected members of the community, who have valued roles in the, within the group.*

*Part one of this volume describes in detail how those values or roles are taught, from childhood onward. In indigenous restorative justice, both the offender and the victim have equal value. The negative behavior of the offender is viewed separately from the perpetrators core identity, which is not vilified or seen as evil.*

*To restore a violation of communal ethics, both parties, and their extended families are brought together with a peace keeper, who works to seek a mutual will be mutually agreeable outcome. As some scholars have noted, ideally, the goal of the peacekeeper intervention is for all parties to leave feeling that a satisfactory solution has been reached."*

So, yeah, you can see how different, they are, in terms of restorative justice as a whole different, a whole different way of viewing things, right? Our American justice system is based on the idea that you are the one bad thing that you did, and that's what you're labeled. And you're not really a full person in the American justice system. And so we really wanted to talk about that.

Dr. Gay

It seems like a much more, holistic approach of thinking of the individual and the complexity that we all share. Right?

Dr. Jacobs  
Right. Exactly.

Dr. Gay

So, I'm glad we took time for you to, to share that with us. Now, you mentioned there a second ago that the book contains some poetry.

Dr. Jacobs  
Yeah.

Dr. Gay

And I was wondering if you could maybe share with us an excerpt of a favorite passage that you have from the book.

Dr. Jacobs

Okay, so, Gail Simmons Cushing, who is Sipone, wrote a poem, and it was featured in one of the American Indian Women of Proud Nations booklets from one of our conferences. So we went out to the family, Gail has passed on, and we went to the family members and asked them for permission to republish in the book. So the title of the book is taken from this poem, and I just wanted to read a little bit of it.

[reading aloud]

*"Camay soap. Sweat.*

*Jergens lotion on Sunday morning.*

*These are the scents of our women.*

*These images can be heard, felt, seen,*

*smelled, or tasted in the communities where our Indian women live.*

*She is a farmer, a teacher, a mother.*

*A factory worker, a secretary, a professional.*

*Her hair is tinted, it's gray, short, long,*

*she wears housecoats or britches.*

*Sunday dresses, power suits.*

*Her face is made more beautiful with cosmetics.*

*Her face is bare. Her skin is soft.*

*Her skin is leathered and weathered by years of struggle,*

*and tiny, tiny character lines frame her eyes.*

*She smells like French perfume.*

*She smells like mother earth.*

*The responsibility of being native woman was placed upon her shoulders at her birth.*

*Blanketed like a patchwork quilt around her body.*

*The last generation and the one before that.*

*Hover around her, protecting her from bad spirits.*

*The next generation, and the one after that.  
Wait eagerly for her to share the woman's secret of creation."*

So, that's just a section of that poem and it's a much longer. It's called Patchwork Images.

Dr. Gay

It's really beautiful. I think I experienced some of those smells and the imagery was so vivid. It was really beautiful. Thanks for sharing that.

Chancellor Cummings

This is Chancellor Robin Cummings and I want to thank you for listening to 30 Brave Minutes. Our faculty and students provide expertise, energy and passion, driving our region forward. Our commitment to Southeastern North Carolina has never been stronger through our teaching, our research, and our community outreach. I want to encourage you to consider making a tax-deductible contribution to the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, with your help, we will continue our impact for generations to come. You can donate online at [uncp.edu/give](http://uncp.edu/give). Thanks again for listening, now back to more 30 Brave Minutes.

Dr. Hersey

Now, Mary Ann, how many years have you taught at UNC Pembroke?

Dr. Jacobs

This is my 15th year, I came in 2007.

Dr. Hersey

Excellent. So you do so much work with our students. Can you share how you incorporate some of these lessons that this book is telling with these poems and the stories, how do you work on these ideas of storytelling and archiving, with the students that you're teaching here at UNCP?

Dr. Jacobs

I've done it in several different ways. First, when I taught Lumbee History and Culture, I used to have a requirement that they go to a family member and do an interview. Well, that's getting a little bit harder to do, because a lot of my students are not members of the Native American community. So I've always had to find people in the community that would be willing to be interviewed. So that's one way that I've been able to do it, so they go and they do an interview and, you know, in the before times you could go and ask, either call up, or you could actually go visit with, which is what I strongly encourage them, to go into a native person's home and actually do the interview that way.

I set up a series of questions that they had to ask. So, they would go into the person's home and many of them, that would be the first time they'd ever stepped foot in a Native American

person's home. They would come back and report 'Oh, we had such a good time' or, 'They tried to feed me the whole time. I was there,' something like that. That was that was always fun. Even for the native students, that's usually a first time they actually talk to them about this elder person in their lives, their growing up during segregation. That was a really important assignment for them. Now I do that much more through them having to go through archival material, and I do that either through a video or through archives of oral interviews that have actually transcripts where they read. They either put together a bunch of transcripts and do their paper on that, or they can actually watch several videos that are also transcribed and do their paper on that. They're learning about different experiences within the community in that way, and that's a much easier way to do an online course, and have everybody have access to the same materials through archival interviews with Lumbee people.

I've also worked with Dr. Jamie Mize who heads the REACH program, they did interviews, or they were advertising for interviews with people in the community. And I think they were collecting all races of people who grew up during segregation and trying to hear from them about their experiences going through, living in, you know, basically segregated communities, and going to segregated schools. That was another thing. I think that's a really important time, especially for our college students to hear about because they don't have the opportunity to always know that that was something that's pretty recent in American history, and that people are still walking around, you know, in their everyday lives, and they've experienced that history directly. So I think it's really important for our college students, all of our students to know about that period in our history and how it made people feel, especially about each other. That's really important.

Dr. Gay

And that we're still living with it today.

Dr. Jacobs

And that we're still living with the effects of that. Absolutely. Yeah.

Dr. Gay

And to me, it seems, in some ways that your book is a model of that, right? Because you did, collected oral histories and shared those as well.

Dr. Jacobs

Yeah.

Dr. Gay

So you're not just talking to talk, you're walking the walk, right? You're doing it.

Dr. Jacobs

Yeah, and what you just said, Richard, reminded me another portion of the book with Rosa Winfrey, it's her interview portion that was collected by Ulrike Weithaus, and I want to read a little section of it because it's so powerful. She says [reading aloud]

*"I've traveled a long path, and on that path, I learned how to overcome prejudices."*

She's talking about her own prejudices. [reading aloud]

*"People who would say that they don't have any prejudices, I just think they're wrong. I had prejudices and I learned how to work through them. Good people from the Caucasian race helped me do that. Education does not mean that you get it all within the space of four walls. Living in a white community was so strange to me. I learned how to interact with people who were not from my own tribe. People, other than relatives, living in my home community.*

*The only real contact that I had growing up was the fact that I worked in the local general store run by Mr. Russell W. Livermore. I worked four years in the dress shop. I learned a lot there, because almost all of my customers were Indian. I worked with two white ladies at the store, and I guess I also learned my prejudices in that setting. I was often hurt by my coworkers remarks. They laughed at Indian people, especially Indian people who were not educated. It was just so hard to listen to those things, but I knew I had to work. So I just listened and tried to be as loving and as kind as I could to the people I served.*

*That said, they were mostly Indian people. I also learned from our elders in the different communities around where I lived, one mile north of Pembroke. Until my time at Livermores, I had not interacted with too many people except my relatives from other communities in Robeson County. So I learned a lot about our people just by working in that store.*

*I was humbled. The elders talked a lot about their struggles as Indian people. They would say to me very open and honestly. I learned to love them. I held them in high esteem. Many of them would come to the store to bring items from home and trade them for food or clothing. The Livermores allowed them to do that. I thought that was very good and an honorable thing that they permitted people to bring items and exchange them for the food they did not have."*

And she goes on and it's just a really, really sweet story about growing up, but about also becoming a professional, and how she learned from working in white schools, working in African American schools, and the professional people that she worked with in those settings. So they're all really wonderful stories, personal stories about growing up, most of them, and then going to work.

Dr. Gay

And just from the excerpts that you've shared with us, I think it's really clear that they're very personal, but there's some universal themes in there.

Dr. Jacobs

Exactly.

Dr. Gay

And also it shows that learning is a process that takes place over time. It's not just the few years that you're at a university. It's a lifetime of experience, and I think it's clear from the excerpts that there's stuff in your book for all of us to learn from. Right? So we're all gonna benefit from the wisdom in these stories, and take away from them what we perhaps need to hear at this time in our lives. So I'm really glad that you shared that excerpt with us. That was a great choice. And your role as an educator, you know, has informed your book in many ways, and at the end of the book, you have suggested reflection questions for the reader, and I was wondering if you could talk about the importance of that in your book, and your thought process of sharing this information with your audience.

Dr. Jacobs

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The way we imagined the book was a little different from the way it actually turned out. We actually imagined a book that you could actually write in, and write answers to your reflection questions. And the publishers came up with the format of the book, the way it is, because it's a little tiny volume, and about the size of my hand. It fits very nicely into your pocketbook. You can take it to the beach, or into a pocket. They said, this is about the size that people like.

So the reflection questions that we have at the end, now they're basically, you can, or you don't have to, but we want to get people thinking, how do these apply to their own lives. That's what the reflection questions are about. We're definitely not forcing you, but we're hoping that this makes a good leap into other conversations, and that people start having the kind of conversations about their own family members, that they would sit down and have discussions about this sort of things, with their own families, and so that's why the discussion questions are there. We really wanted people to reflect on their own experiences and basically take a leap from the stories and the poetry here, to think about themselves.

Dr. Gay

Yeah, It's that lifelong learning I was referring to.

Dr. Jacobs

Yeah, exactly.

Dr. Gay

Mary Ann, you know, my background is in the arts and I couldn't help but notice your book has a really beautiful cover.

Dr. Jacobs

Right.

Dr. Gay

Would you mind telling us just a little bit about that cover please?

Dr. Jacobs

Well, we were surprised, we had a different cover in mind, but we couldn't lay hands on a good photograph of the other artwork that we had in mind, and they reached out to Jessica Clark, who is becoming a really well known artist in North Carolina. Her work is being featured at Duke, I think they bought a couple of her pieces at the Nasher Museum at Duke, and she's had different showings. And so this is one of her patchwork drawings. She's sort of gotten into this patchwork, the pine cone actually, instead of using fabric, she's basically extending the view, enlarging the view of the bottom of a pine cone. And you can see she's painted it different colors on the cover, and so you see one rising and one setting. It looks like almost a sun on the cover. So, it's really beautiful and we were just really happy with the way it turned out.

Dr. Gay

Yeah, I think it's very beautiful and I'd like to add that Jessica is a UNCP graduate.

Dr. Jacobs

Yes!

Dr. Gay

She was one of the students I taught when I came in 2004, and I've really enjoyed seeing her career blossom. She's very talented and her portraits of her relatives are just really, really beautiful and I hope everyone gets a chance to see them.

Well, Mary Ann, thank you so much for talking to us today about your book. I was very excited, because I was gifted a copy of your book by some colleagues in the office not too long ago.

Dr. Jacobs

Oh wow!

Dr. Gay

Yeah, so it was an honor to receive that. I really have appreciated our conversation today, and I hope folks will buy a copy of your book and know the proceeds go to an important organization.

Dr. Jacobs

Yup.

Dr. Gay

And I look forward to other conversations that we'll have in the future about your work.

Dr. Jacobs

Thank you so much.

Dr. Gay

Thank you.

Credits

This podcast was edited and transcribed by Joanna Hersey, and our theme music was composed by Reilly Morton.

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