

Interview on Historical Trauma with Delilah, a survivor

Hello, my name is Josie and I would like to welcome you back to Trauma Talks, Rising from the Ashes, a podcast series brought to you by the UB School of Social Work the Institute on Trauma and Trauma Informed Care. This series provides an opportunity for individuals to share their witness of how strength and resiliency has allowed them to rise from the ashes. Trauma talks follows people who have both worked within the field of trauma as well as those who have experienced trauma. Here we will reflect on how trauma informed care can assist those who have experienced traumatic events to embrace a new life of wholeness, hope, strength, courage, safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. Today, I am here with Delilah. Delilah is an indigenous woman. On behalf of the Institute, we would like to thank you, Delilah, for being here today and sharing your story with us. Today, I'm going to let Delilah begin with giving you the audience of a little snap shot of her story. I'll hand it over to you.

1:28 **Delilah:** Ali tow and hello to you thank you for having me. My name is Delilah I'm an old Choctaw woman. Ceote I am Choctaw I was born and raised in Oklahoma. Now I live in Alabama, and it wasn't meant to be, but I actually live near where my ancestors were before the removal just north of Mobile Alabama. I live here with here with a bunch of cats and I have a garden and I was asked to help you out and maybe help you understand a little bit about what my ancestors went through and trials and tribulations, where they were and where they are today. And that's me.

2:32 **Josie:** If you could share a little bit about what you have stories that have been passed down to you, or what you have carried with you from your ancestors. And that kind of thing. Anything you want to share about your ancestors and how you got to be you today.

3:08 **Delilah:** Alright Choctaw is one of the only 2 tribes that you are Choctaw membership or whatever you want to call it is your lineage. Your ancestors are directly behind you. You can go from A to B to C to D and down to me. The rest of the tribes use blood quantum. It's by how much blood of that tribe you have in your line. But ours is direct lineage. I'm directly down from one of the 3 great Choctaw chiefs. Chief Aboto me vachevy. And he was like my 6th great grandfather and then it went to his daughter Hoti Oka and then to her daughter Elea, then on down to my great grandfather, begot my grandmother, and begot my mother. So, we have a direct line of blood that so each generation carries for the other the other generations. My grandmother was my Choctaw grandmother ancestor from whom we all came. And I was really close to my grandmother, and she is the one who told me most of what I know. I didn't really know, her father died before I was very old, and my mother didn't really talk about it too much. It was the time I spent with my Choctaw grandmother that I really learned things. Mostly what I learned from my grandmother was the hardships they had to go through during their lifetime being Choctaw. Not so much what our ancestors when through like the trail of tears or the removal, but more what they had to deal with in their life time and it was very difficult then. Today you hear people say they are very proud of my Native American blood or whatever, but at that time it wasn't so great to be proud of it. It was harder to keep your pride and your dignity and your heritage because lots of doors were closed to you. It was a prejudice and all that sort of

thing was still prevalent when my grandmother was a young woman. She pretty much raised 3 children on her own and she was divorced early. Had to do that in a world where in Native Americans it wasn't in vogue to be a Native American back then. So, a lot of what I know, and then her belief system rubbed off on me I know. A lot of the things she found tragic or terrible I find tragic or terrible. From mistrust of government I find in myself. I am several generations removed from the horrible times they went through, but I'm not that far removed from when there was a great deal of prejudice and hard times for Native Americans.

6:52 **Josie:** Absolutely makes a lot of sense. I'm wondering when you are sharing a little bit about identifying certain things as tragic and having a distrust of the government what does that look like a little bit for you in your day to day life or on the other side what did that look like for your grandmother in her day to day?

7:31 **Delilah:** I think all this boiled down from our ancestors from what they had to go through. The Choctaw were very civilized when the settlers came, and I will call them settlers because they weren't all white men because they weren't all white. The first two treaties that were signed by the Choctaw were with Spain. So, they had to deal with several different countries invading. They were real civilized. They had settled communities, my family had a small plantation, they were farmers and were fisherman. They had general store they weren't what you see on Tv. Running around naked screaming and all that sort of stuff. They were very civilized. They were not stupid when they saw all this stuff that was coming in. The chiefs and the elders would try desperately to save their people, save their graze land, their farm land, you know from all these people who just kept coming and coming. So, they signed treaties. And every treaty they signed were, the first two were with Spain. There was 13 altogether. The first two with Spain and the rest with the emerging United States. Each one was signed in good faith. Ok. Now we are safe. Our people are safe, our land is safe, our water is safe, and our cattle. They went into each one of those with good faith and each one of those was broken. And so that was unheard of in Native American culture. You were a man of your word you were a man of your honor. I can just imagine that each time one of these treaties were broken how much it hurt and disillusioned them back then you know. So, when they finally signed their last treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek. That's the one we still go by today. We actually still have that treaty. It's the one where we agreed to the removal. And gave up everything where my family was here in Alabama. The Choctaw were in Mississippi and Alabama, but my family was from northern Alabama. They gave up everything here in exchange for what they were going to find in Oklahoma. They didn't know what it was, they hadn't seen it yet. But they weren't stupid. They saw the way it was happening, and they knew that they needed to preserve themselves, their families, and the tribe. So that was that their government, that was the new they didn't really understand government. They knew there was a big guy that made all the decisions, and there was a guy underneath them and to them each one of these treaties that were broken were broken by the government, by the big guy and all the other guys. So, there was of course a huge distrust. Everything they were told was a lie everything they were, that happened to them was shameful. So that, you can't overcome that easily you know. And that was passed down to their children. Everybody knew the stories, everybody knew what had happened and so many had lived through it. You can't overcome that by saying oh that was then, and this is now. As Choctaw you may look at those

things that happen back then and say oh how horrible that those men did that to them, but Native American will look at that and say those men are still here. There still greedy men still men that can tell you what to do and how to live your life. There are still men that still look at you if you live your life different, they think you are beneath them, or less than they are. So those men who did that back then are still here today.

12:26 **Josie:** Yeah, I was wondering as you were talking especially when you were referring about how the Choctaw were very civilized and not at all the way we may be seeing indigenous people depicted in media or main stream society today, so I was wondering what those depictions we see today in 2017 how those land on your head and your heart what is it like to see that and to experience that?

13:11 **Delilah:** One thing that bothers me a great deal is that all Native Americans are shoved into one category, and we weren't. Back then and even today, each tribe has their own language, they have their own culture, they have their own belief system and they were separate entities. They were scattered all over the united states, Canada, and Central America. But they were all different. If you threw a Choctaw in a room with a Nez Peirce or a Tonka they would not speak the same language. They would not understand one another. They were completely different. It was like French and German and so today they category it all as Native American, but that might be what they want to call them, but that was not what they were. They were Choctaw and they were Inca, and they were Cherokee, and they were Pawnee and now it's all put into a pot and stirred together. We weren't and still today in Oklahoma still today, during the removal they still are separate. They still have their own festivals, their own Holy days. They still have their own belief system, their own language. So that has always bothered me that in the movies and tv and stuff, sometimes you'll have, The Last Black Foot or whatever that movie was and but most of the time they are all put together as if they were just one homogenous thing. We were all separate. We had our own lives we had our own culture. And even today we still have our own culture. I think that bothers me a lot. The Indian that you see in the movies, and I will tell you a little story if you like. My great uncle, my mom's uncle my grandmothers brother, was a very tall dark skin Choctaw man, and he went to California when he was young form Oklahoma. And he was in the movies actually, some of those old westerns where they are black and white, and they are all riding down the hills and their headdresses and screaming, he was one of those. And back then they didn't, they were not the stars, they had to make their own costumes they had to make their own and they wanted to them to look alike. So, they wanted them to all make a headdress, which is worn ceremonially, they don't wear them into battle. And then they wanted them to all dress alike, not to wear their native costume, but all look like a redskin. As my uncle played in the movies and so he would ride down the hill screaming you know. Shaking his little spear. I am sure it was interesting to see them all out there. But they were all different tribes, they made them all look the same and made them all dress the same, but those were out in the wild west and those tribes were nomadic. They followed the buffalo herds and you know lived in shelters that could be easily taken apart and put together. But over here on the eastern side, the woodlands tribes and my tribe and along the coast line we were all settled like towns. We had our communal life. We didn't wonder around and live in teepees all the time. And that bothers me.

17:28 **Josie:** The way you said it has been homogenized in the media and clearly going back into old country western, and even still today.

17:47 **Delilah:** They all say Indians and Native American but it's like you want to correct them. You want to say I'm not an Indian, I'm Choctaw.

18:06 **Josie:** That it's been being a Native American it's been painted as one singular identity and there's actually a tremendous amount of diversity and beauty in layers there that are not recognized necessarily.

18:34 **Delilah:** Exactly

18:35 **Josie:** You've also mentioned going off of that the culture of being Choctaw is still very much a part of who you are, and I know culture is. So, life consuming and affirming having to do with values and beliefs, but I was curious to know if there are any particular elements of Choctaw culture that are particularly prominent or close to your heart or that immediately come to mind when you just reflect on who you are?

19:26 **Delilah:** This comes to my mind all the time. When they were making treaties back, way back then the Choctaw lived on the land, but they didn't understand how you could own the land. And so, they thought the settlers were silly that they wanted to own the land, because how could you own the land you know? And so, they would sometimes enter in treaties snickering thinking well you can't own the land you know. And so that's always been in my heart that we all own the land, the land owns us. I don't know you have to live in this world, so you have to go by the rules. If you could make it perfect, it would be where we all lived here and it all belonged to it. Not everybody's got a name plate on their part. It was, I've always wished we hadn't gone that direction you know. It was where we belong to the land and the land belongs to all of us.

20:58 **Josie:** That's really powerful to think about that connection with the environment and with the world. So, moving into a little bit about what I've been noticing as we have been talking I hear when you share about your ancestors and your grandmother and your mother and their life experiences that there times when they did experience or might have benefited from what we call trauma informed care. And trauma informed care basically is to ask individuals and service providers and societies to stop asking with what is wrong with a person and moving toward what has happened. The model that we look at by Falloot and Harris talks about the 5 guiding principles of trauma informed care. Where safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment are the tools to having a trauma informed approach and perspective or practice. And as you have been speaking I defiantly have been hearing moments where those 5 principles have come to light and most certainly times when they have been severely lacking and not celebrated by white especially by whiter society. So, what I'm curious about in moving to talking a little about safety. I'm curious to know in your experience both yourself and also you grandmother and your mother, what your experience has been with language. So, what I mean is language. So, we speak sometime, and language can be a really powerful way to make somebody feel safe. So that could be the language that is used in the media or the language that's used by a service provider, a doctor you go to, for an appointment you have. And I'm wondering what your experience has been we've already touched on this a little, about people using sensitive language. So, you've

touched a little bit about being labeled as Indian, or Native American and not Choctaw, so I'm curious to know a little bit more about that. In what ways you maybe have found some language to celebrate your emotional safety and in what ways that hasn't really been realized for you.

24:30 **Delilah:** I'm really trying to decide how to start with that one. The one of the main antagonist to almost the initiation was actually the president of the United States. He, if you go back in history, not just what you learn in school, he was one of them that believed that the only good Indian was a dead Indian. He gave powers to men in order to try to annihilate them. I'm sure you heard stories that they gave them blankets that were laced with small pox. And things like that. During the removal they did it in the middle of the harshest winters. They were not given any way to travel. They had to walk most of the time. They were not given blankets and that sort of things. That type of history is very hard to overcome. Even if you didn't live through it, you know what happened. It's passed down and I just don't know quite how to put that.

26:33 **Josie:** I think that you are definitely hitting the nail on the head with safety of your ancestors. In both a physical and emotional sense then continues to reverberate down generation through generation. Not only in language but really just in the fact that your ancestor's whole dignity as people was not recognized. And they were quite intentionally decimated by us government sanctioned actions. That is hugely significant and sounds as though it's continued to ripple onward.

27:19 **Delilah:** You never believe someone when they say they are from the government. I'm here to help. I think the way to approach any native American is to not tell them I'm from the government, but to tell them I'm here to help because I want to. And not bring up any of that background. I'm here to help because I want to.

27:56 **Josie:** That definitely plays directly into the next principle which is about trust. I know you just mentioned, I know that we discussed earlier that distrust of government from government actions from years past and that is still very much is a part of your belief system. As you said it is really challenging to trust any government entity that shows up and says that there to be of assistance. So, you just touched a little bit about how somebody could gain the trust of somebody who is Choctaw or another indigenous group. But I'm curious to know a little bit more, are there certain people or organizations, maybe even within your family where you really do place your trust. So, it's hard to place it in the government and the governing body in this nation. So, I'm curious to know where you have been able to place your trust as a young woman and all the way up until now?

29:29 **Delilah:** I'm going to bring up the BIA the Bureau of Indian Affairs. That's a decision was a lot like what they do for people today when they get a new president and they get somebody to go over I don't remember what the word is, ambassador, many years from the time that was created the Indians didn't really have a representative in government at all. The BIA was an appointed position just like they do ambassadorships now. It was very easy to corrupt it, and it stayed corrupted. They weren't Native American, they were appointed by the government and they were very corrupt position for many, many years. And it wasn't until all the tribes came together and kept getting out into the public eye and pushing for representation in the

government that the BIA was actually finally headed by someone who represented the tribe and not someone who was appointed to look over them. So that was when they started building casinos and they started building hospitals and they started being able to take care of their people each nation is sovereign. They are like a small country within the country. So, it was a collaboration between a lot of the tribes that finally came together because like I said we are all separate entities. We all spoke different languages, and though they have compacted them all a lot of them in Oklahoma where they took them after the removal, they are still spread out over the rest of the county. And they still have their own language and their own belief system and their own customs. But they came together to fight for fair representation in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. And so, things have got a lot, lot better today. Even when my grandmother was fighting for survival or whatever you know. They've been able to step out and getting on their own feet and taking care of themselves. My tribe the Choctaw tribe, we have a lot of hospitals and clinics now, a lot of homes for the elderly we are able to take care of our people way better now than they could have ever when they were hand strung. They've learned to work with the government and within the government. But there is still that healthy mistrust. I can't help but see what's happened before you know. You see what happened before, so you keep that in your mind. I'll always have a health mistrust of the government, but I also see you can work within it too to accomplish your goals

33:17 **Josie:** I mean that actually is really a great Segway into the next principle that is choice. I was wondering as your talking about that mistrust and referring to the BIA, Bureau of Indian Affairs, there are still opportunities to reach your goals even in the government that is hard to place your trust in. So, I'm wondering what has been your experiences in reaching your goals within that setting.

34:03 **Delilah:** I didn't quite understand that one.

34:06 **Josie:** I think what I'm curious to know with choice is let me put it a little differently. We've been talking about you're the way in which your culture, the Choctaw culture is still very much a part of who you are and also referring to that concept of owning the land and I know that you have shared a little bit about being at home in your garden and being connected with the time in the outdoors and in the environment. So, I would be curious to hear a little bit more, it sounds like you use that interest in being outdoor as very much about a part of who you are. So, I'm wondering if you have celebrated your Choctaw culture as well?

35:22 **Delilah:** I think that's a probably ingrained into your blood or your cells or whatever. When I was a young girl, my dad was not Native American, and he that was when he during the time when I was young. Like I said it wasn't in vogue to be Native American and my dad would tell my mom not to broadcast it that she was Choctaw. There was actually a time when he and my grandmother got into an argument about it and she packed up and left. She wanted my mom to take more advantage of being Choctaw because there are even at that time there was programs that my mom could have taken advantage of, buy my dad didn't want that. He didn't want it was like he didn't really want people to know that my mom was Choctaw. And so even as a young girl I felt that sort of thing and it made an impression on me of course. But my grandmother never lost her pride, or dignity, in being a Choctaw. She never lost that, in her will she said I'm

an old Choctaw woman and I am proud of it. She walked that way her whole life even when it was difficult to be a proud Choctaw woman and I loved my grandmother. I idolized her, so I think of course that rubbed off on me and probably affects who I am today. Because I just loved her so much and I loved the way she was. She was strong and independent and all these things you know that I wanted to be. So, I'm far removed from the hardship, but I'm not so far removed from pretty much even modern-day hardship as far as Native Americans are concerned. There is still I think second class citizens. It's popular now to say I have Cherokee blood or my grandmother was a Cherokee princess. People like it now I don't know why.

38:11 **Josie:** Yeah it what you just shared about your grandmother and also going back to how different tribes came together to work collaboratively. And collaboration is in fact the 4th principle that we are touching on in trauma informed care. What I'm noticing when you talk about your grandmother and that type of collaboration is it sounds like a really resulted in a lot of empowerment. How your grandmother has really you really admired her strength and tenacity and resolve.

39:00 **Delilah:** Right yeah. I'm proud of my history, I'm proud of my grandmother and my tribe. They really did come together. It was, if you have ever seen any of the PBS specials, the tribes still some of them today still live in so much poverty. And they were so helpless and so hopeless for so many years, but they never lost hope really. They never lost that there would be a better day. And when they came together the different tribes came together to fight for fair representation in the government and in the BIA, it was they don't really socialize so it's kind of difficult for someone else to understand, that they all came together. Even though they don't really socialize. In fact, the Choctaw split off when there was a removal the main branch of Choctaw, volunteered actually to go in the first wave. Our elders were very smart they saw the way it was playing to and it behooved them to get their people out and to safety. So, the Choctaw volunteered in the very first wave of what you call the trail of tears, there was three different waves, but we went first. The main branch went the one branch that is the Mississippi band of Choctaws they stayed here, and they slipped away into the swamps and hid. And they went on after that to prosper, but that during the removal back in the 1800's. Even though we are both Choctaws we don't really cooperate with each other. We started having stick ball tournament and stuff like that but that separation way back then the Choctaw nation of Oklahoma, whom I'm a member, went on with their culture with their dress and all that sort of thing. Of Mississippi today if you put them in the same room you really would not know they were the same. Because they dress different they have different belief system even though we all started at the same place. It's the same way with all the other tribes, native American tribes and we were all different and it was just as if you had Spain and Germany and Switzerland all coming together to fight for the same thing is what happened when all the tribes came together to get their representation. In some cases, they had never spoken to one another, they had no idea how to deal with one another, but they did it and they came together, and they got a new beginning for Native Americans. It was that help, that step that started so many of them out of poverty and out of hopelessness you know. That strength. There is so much strength in native American history I love it.

43:02 **Josie:** Absolutely. It's so powerful. You mentioned something earlier, that it's not necessarily the history that's in the history books, so that is so powerful that was passed on to you by your grandmother and it's still alive in your heart. Awesome. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to us today about your ancestors and about your identity as Choctaw and just about what that means for you today. And on behalf of the Institute on Trauma and Trauma Informed Care. I just want to say thank you for taking the time to speak with us to share your story of strength and family. And it has really been a pleasure, so thank you.

43:58 **Delilah:** You koka thank you.