

Nick

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I was a community organizer and most of my work was around community organizing, around protection of sacred sites and issues in the Black Hills. And out of those sort of worlds coming together, then we started [Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation](#). And we wanted to create an organization that could be an institution for a radical change here on Pine Ridge that could address the social economic problems that our people are faced with, and that we wanted to give our people the opportunity to be the architects of their own future. And they recognize that people parachuting into our communities, whether they be philanthropists, investors, federal government, that actually may be good-hearted people coming into our communities with their own ideas, has been part of the problem. It's been part of what has perpetuated the problem of this place. Because so many of the government policies and folks from the outside have created negative impacts on here. And so we knew we needed to basically take that sort of decision-making structure that's a pyramid and make it an inverted pyramid and give the power back to the community and the people And that through that process was a lot of decolonizing happening through that process, because we recognize so many of our people did feel powerless. (11:20-12:51)

The impact of what we're doing is not the buildings that are now sitting on site. The real impact of what we're doing is this journey of having the people been along every step of the way and having the mind frame and the narrative change to what we don't have to what is possible. And so that's a huge part of what Thunder Valley's work has been about. (14:24-14:48)

Kevin: So the only state that you haven't been to is Maine. But the amazing thing is that he's been to every other state. I just was thinking about this. Can you just tell them about that program you did when you were younger? That travel program that got you, what that was.

Nick: Yeah. So I worked for a nonprofit when I turned 18. And it was based out of San Francisco, and it was in the year 2000, because that's the year I graduated high school. So it was a sort of like the dot com boom was happening at the time. And so what this nonprofit did, it was called [Odyssey U.S. Trek](#). And the Odyssey was called the nonprofit U.S. Trek was the project, and what they basically did was there is a group of us. eight of us we traveled in groups of twos. All of us were driving Honda Civics. I don't know why we had Honda Civics, but for whatever reason, They were good on gas mileage, I think that was a thing.

And it was a diverse group of people. So there was obviously, all of us were pretty much tokenized in some way. So I was representing Native American, somebody else was Mexican American, somebody else was Jewish American, somebody else was African American. And basically, we took

the book, [A People's History](#) by Howard Zinn and used that book. Which is an awesome book if you haven't read it. It's probably one of the more accurate books about U.S. history that tells history from the eyes of the people instead of the eyes of the government. And we basically traveled around the country for eight months and we basically became investigative journalists in the history, and we would go to the places.

So we went to Gettysburg, we went to the places where the Underground Railroad was active. We came to places like Pine Ridge. We went to Wounded Knee. We went to Harlem. And then there was an interactive website that was created. So schools, actually had about a half a million K-8th grade schools around the country followed us on this trek online. And we were trekkers. So we would do these dispatches. And actually the website or some form of the website is still up 20 years or however many years, 18 years later, [UStrek.org](#). But so we do all these dispatches and dispatches into the history or whatever. So we have to travel. But also the other thing is we had to travel on \$15 a day for food and lodging. That didn't include gas. So this created a crazy situation, we slept in the car a lot. But the idea, but we also went across the country and slept on people's couches all across America. Honestly what would end up happening is we would go to a town, and we'd meet with the town historian or whatever. And then we would also do these "Making a difference" dispatches. So we would find people along the way who are making a difference, and we would do these dispatches. And through that process, people are like, "So this is a crazy thing that you guys are doing. Where are you guys staying?" And we're like, "Tonight, we don't know yet, but I said, we have a tent, we have a car, whatever and they'd be like, "No, that'd be ridiculous." Like, the total generosity, it gave me hope for America again, because so many people actually took us in.

But then there was also like the people who didn't take us in. So when me and an African American man were traveling together, we went over budget all the time, especially because nobody would take us in. And then when the two ladies that passed as white were traveling together, they got the lowest budget. And then we even wrote about that. So we wrote about this dynamic that exists or whatever. But it was awesome because, and then we were required to do two school visits a week, to basically either tell them about what we're doing, like the U.S. Trek, or to stop into a school that was following us.

And when we'd stop into the schools that were following us, to them you were like famous, like, "Oh my God, the Trekkers are here!" Because it was supplemental, and we would make it interactive. And of course all the stuff we're doing now, like none of that happens now with a video camera and all that stuff. Like, it wasn't happening at that level 18 years ago. So we would interview all his folks. We would do all that and we would tie it to history. But that's where I got to travel a lot around the whole country and all these different places. Except for Maine. Yeah.

Kevin: You were meant to save that for me.

Nick: I guess so, man. I don't know. But we have to make that happen.

07:05 **Kevin:** Can you tell us a little bit about Thunder Valley, how it started, what its origins are, and where it came from to where it is today?

Nick: How it began? Yeah. So Thunder Valley's origins was, we are a group of young people on Pine Ridge here, that were part of a movement reconnecting to culture and spirituality and identity through our ceremonies. We weren't doing that through nonprofits, we were doing that through businesses, we were just doing it organically. And through that, just a huge sense of connection in the strengthening of our own identity and our commitment to this place. And what happened next was that we had built at this time the spiritual movement of all these young people, that we were those young people, that

were reconnecting to our culture, spirituality, identity, through ceremony. It was giving us a different world view. It was giving us a sense of purpose as a place.

And then we started becoming young parents and we started having these conversations about like, we need to start addressing the social economic problems facing our people. But we needed to have our social economic problems that we're trying to improve for our people, they have to be founded in Lakota culture. They have to be connected to our identity, and to who we are. And so we talked about all these things that we wanted to do for a few years, and really didn't do anything at first because we were really worried about what it means to start something here, and bringing resources into a community that doesn't have any. How will resources or money or whatever impact our awesome spiritual work that we were already doing. We had all these concerns.

And what really led to the creation of the organization was that in the spring of 2006, we were sitting outside of the Inipi, the sweat lodge. The fire was burning down, we were playing horseshoes, there was joking around, and then we got to kind of complaining about the way that the Rez is. And kind of got into our negative, victim mentality conversation about the government should follow through on their promises. How come the tribe doesn't do this? How come our leaders don't do this? And we started talking that way. It kind of happens sometimes. And then we went into the Inipi. And when we went into the Inipi, the ancestors posed this question to us - and in a way they really chewed us out. And shewed us out in the way grandma or grandpa would chew you out. And they said how long are you going to let other people decide the future for your children? Are you not warriors? And this is time to stop talking and start doing. And they said, don't come from a place of fear, come from a place of hope. And they said a long time ago, when we rode into battle against the enemy, we didn't know what the outcome or that battle was going to be, but we knew that it wasn't the best interest of our children and our family and our people. So we did a whole heartedly. We did it all the way. And they basically said that if you want to start this - they called it *okhólakičhiye* - which in Lakota means society or organization. And that if you want to do this, the time is now. And that's really what fired us up, because we really realized that we were willing to do whatever it took in the spiritual realm, and we needed to have that same energy and that everyday realm.

And I, at that time, had a background in community organizing. I didn't know nothing about community development at all. I didn't know nothing about housing, nothing about economic development, nothing about any of those things. I was a community organizer and most of my work was around community organizing, around protection of sacred sites and issues in the Black Hills. And out of those sort of worlds coming together, then we started [Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation](#). And we wanted to create an organization that could be an institution for a radical change here on Pine Ridge that could address the social economic problems that our people are faced with, and that we wanted to give our people the opportunity to be the architects of their own future. And they recognize that people parachuting into our communities, whether they be philanthropists, investors, federal government, that actually may be good-hearted people coming into our communities with their own ideas, has been part of the problem. It's been part of what has perpetuated the problem of this place. Because so many of the government policies and folks from the outside have created negative impacts on here.

And so we knew we needed to basically take that sort of decision-making structure that's a pyramid, and make it an inverted pyramid, and give the power back to the community and the people. And through that process was a lot of decolonizing happening through that process, because we recognize so many of our people did feel powerless. And we spent the first couple of two, three years of Thunder Valley doing community engagement talk. We having a circle of meetings of the people and having meetings that were about what do people want for their future. I was blown away that for the most part, like I thought it was just something we had to do at first to get it organized. You asked the people what they want, all that stuff. But by doing that, there was healing in that the beginning to start happening because you're asking questions like, what kind of housing do you want to live in? What

kind of jobs do you want? What kind of neighborhoods do you want to live in? To a group of my people that were never asked those questions before. And so even our community engagement was radical transformation that had built this foundation.

And then I think that the next thing that we got into was like, okay, what we do has to create tangible results. We know what it's like to be a young person here and promised a bunch of shit that never happens. That's what we grew up into. And that's not all we want for our kids. And we also recognize that what we do and how we do what we're doing here, that the young people are watching this place and watching what we're doing. And so if they're watching us and we make a commitment to build a community from scratch here, founded in our values, founded in who we are, that, meets basic needs for our people creates opportunity for our people. The impact of what we're doing is not the buildings that are now sitting on site. The real impact of what we're doing is this journey of having the people been along every step of the way and having the mind frame and the narrative change to what we don't have to what is possible. And so that's a huge part of what Thunder Valley's work has been about. I mean, we definitely have all of these different programs. I mean, Thunder Valley has exponentially grown. We have 120 employees, 60 of them being full-time employees, and other 60 part-time employees, who are doing everything from saving the Lakota language to building affordable housing, to doing food sovereignty, social enterprise, the creation of different enterprises and businesses that meet needs of our people, create economic options. And so that's been a huge part of the journey. And I guess recognizing that as an organization, we began to shift the mind frames of our people here and challenge power structures. Because this work wouldn't have been possible without us being sort of this rogue, radical, non-profit led by young people and young families. Because all of us were young parents when they started this. To really challenge the power structures, the power sources of money and government. And that's been a huge part of our work, too, because we don't want Thunder Valley to be the exception. We don't want this place to be this bubble, where all these opportunities are happening, but it doesn't affect anybody throughout the region. It's important to us that we're uplifting the whole region and that the stuff that we're learning and the stuff that we're doing - both the stuff that was succeeding and the stuff that's failing - that we actually think those are equally valuable. But that the idea of things that don't work as equally and just as valuable as the things that do work, because then we can share that with our people and people everywhere.

16:37 Kevin: So two thoughts come to me. The first one is that I get so inspired every time I'm with you. Every single time I'm with you I feel lighter, and I feel more optimistic, and I feel like I can do better. And I feel like I can do more. And I feel like the world can be, you're just a really amazing person. And so I feel so blessed to know you. That was lovely what you just said, it's so spot on.

And then the second thing that you said is, even though we come from such different places, different worlds, and in the weirdest way I feel like we're working on the same darn thing, just in our own language or our own ability to do it. So I want to ask you about this. When you talk about theme, the theme that surfaces to me is what I've come to think about - you might describe this differently - but as the theme of [The Seventh Power](#). So when you talk about addressing our own socioeconomic problems through reconnecting to our own culture, letting go of the idea of waiting for someone else, like government from somewhere else, to do something. How long are we going to let other people decide our future? Becoming the architect about the future. That to me is that Seventh Power idea. But I'm just curious. I guess the question is that when you think about that phrase 'seventh power' and maybe backing up to the medicine wheel, could you just talk a little bit about what that means to you?

Nick: The Seventh Power o seven directions. A lot of different ways to frame it. But I mean, for me, it's a very spiritual thing. And I think that it's also the place of action. So when you think of the seven directions, there is the four primary directions; north, west, east, south. And then you have the sky, the earth. And then you have the *čhoká*, or the center. And the idea is that you were at the center, no matter where you are in the world. So you can be standing right here and then you could go across to that hill, and you're still at the center of that. No matter where you are in the world, because it's

acknowledgement of your place in your connection. You have your feet on the earth, you have your top of your heads touching the sky, you literally are in the middle of these directions and everything that goes into every one of those. But you're not exempt. You are actually part of that. So as you move through society and in the world, you're connected to all of those things.

And to me, the reason why we have seven directions in Lakota is the acknowledgement of our belief around *takúkičhiyA*, this idea that we are all related. We would say that we are all related. And that means not just people who are all related, all living, things are related. We're related to nature, we're related to it's acknowledgement of the fact that we're all related. And so the seven directions ideology is this concept and idea that's consistently acknowledgment of these seven directions and that they are powerful. And you, standing in the middle of the directions, you are also powerful. Everybody in every one of those directions, they're powerful too. And together, that we're all powerful, especially if we're all acknowledging our relation to one another.

And for me, one of the things that was an eye-opener is that as a pipe carrier, as a Sundancer, as a spiritual person in this community, I always remember our elders saying, "Well, don't forget to pray for yourself." Because it's so much easier sometimes to pray for people in this direction or that direction, or for other people externally. But we forget about our own well-being. We forget about our own healing. And I think that's, like communities that experienced trauma and societies that experience trauma, it's really easy to do that, because man, it's easy to take the focus off yourself. Focus on everybody else has got their challenges and their problems. But when you really start recognizing that working on that seven direction and working on that seven power, working on that is working on yourself. It's a benefit to yourself and it's a benefit to society and the rest of the world.

And there is no hierarchy in this world. That the bird sitting on a tree to the west is just as powerful as the buffalo standing in the north facing the storm. That word is just acknowledgement of part of that. And I think that it's a very simple idea that has been around for thousands of years. And to be honest, if you think about where the idea came from, from Lakota thought and philosophy, they just came up with that because they're a part of nature. Nature taught my ancestors what they know, and then they passed it onto us. And I think that's not just unique to being Lakota. Nature has been teaching human beings for a long time because human beings have come from nature. And the more disconnect that we have been is been, I think part of what perpetuates the problems. And that's why I think that this idea that we're working on the same things in different contexts, in different places, in different avenues, it's true a hundred percent.

I mean, I'm taking a deep dive into this community, because this is where I choose to raise my children. This is where I have my family. This is those things. But I sure hope that things that we're doing here on Pine Ridge, that they inspire people everywhere. That they inspire people what is possible. Because if we start getting away from deficit thinking and the thinking of scarcity, and started thinking about what we do have, the thinking of abundance that there is in the world, there is enough in society, there's enough in this planet for all of us. If we start thinking that way, I think that we're going to start shaping a world that is very different. But if we don't change our thinking about that, we're not going to get there.

I remember there's an old saying where people would say, this place was a good example of that, people will say, "Man, Nick and those guys, yeah right, I'll believe it when I see it." That's what people were saying. I remember standing up and being like, "It's actually the other way around. When you actually believe it, you will see it." And I already see this community. I already see housing for our people. I already see a community center being built. I already see our people rolling up their sleeves and putting their hands in the dirt, trying to grow their own food. I already see. street names in Lakota after our leaders, I already see kids playing in this neighborhood. And when we all start actually believing and seeing that stuff in our mind, then that's what's going to turn it to fruition.

And I think that's one of the biggest lessons of this place is that we really had nothing but solid belief. We just had full on, in Lakota we would say, *wówičala*, to have faith, to have belief. And that no matter how much we were discouraged, we had a dream and we wanted to fight for it no matter what. And those people didn't believe us along the way, but we accepted that. We accepted that part of this work was changing mind frames. And my hope is that maybe this project strengthens people's faith and belief in themselves, in their own communities. Because we're just a bunch of ragtag young people from porcupine, and this is what we're doing now.

Kevin: That's beautiful. That's so beautiful. So I'm going to move to a subject that's much less important than what you've just talked about. That was really important. Globally important. So smaller topic, can you just talk a little bit about your perspective on us – or me - if you will. Or what you feel like I'm about from your perspective, or my being here is about from your perspective, or what I'm trying to do or what that message is, just as you experience it. Not as I do, but as you do.

Nick: Yeah. Well, I mean, I wrote about it a little bit in the book. I remember that day. I mean, because it started off as a classic day. Here I am hustling in my community, trying to make this dream a reality. And I've stepped in front of my people and we're going to do this. No idea how I'm going to do it. No idea how I'm going to get the money, get the resources. I've started talking to donors, talking to investors, talking to different people. And of course, white guy with money shows up. So when you drive up, I'm looking out the blinds like, there's the money. And then the other side of my mind, the other thing that I was thinking about was, this is also problematic, too. Here's a white guy coming from the outside of our community, who this has been one of the very things that has perpetuated problems in this place. How am I going to maneuver this one? How is this going to work? And I had a lot of preconceived notions, to be honest. I had kind of, how long is it going to take, let's get to the point, you have resources, and I don't, let's make something happen. I think that's how it, like, especially at that time, I was very task-oriented. Like, get this done and get this done. And my team was like, nobody walks out of here without you asking them for money. And I think when he came in and we started visiting about the systemic issues, it became really apparent to me that sure you were going to maybe end up being a contributor to this project. Maybe, maybe not. It didn't really matter at that point. Kevin cared about why this community has struggled the way it is and he was interested in what I thought about it.

So I think having these conversations with Kevin made me really realize that a lot of times that partnerships are really built on this idea of trust, and of learning, and having empathy for one another. And I felt like that right off the bat. So a lot of my preconceived notions of Kevin went out the door. Because he didn't have an agenda, and I freaking appreciate you not having an agenda. Because I probably would have been totally shut down if he did. Because I probably would have said, screw your agenda. I'm not interested in what your agenda is. I'm interested in what my people's agenda is. And the fact that you didn't have an agenda and that you just cared, and you wanted to learn and that you had empathy for me and this place, is what I think our interactions begin to be built on.

But it's also what I think is needed for the world, too. I mean, I think that it made me have empathy for your situation, because your situation is different than mine. It doesn't mean that you don't have struggles. It doesn't mean that you haven't had hardship. It doesn't mean that you haven't persevered a bunch of shit. And I think that built us a foundation for trust. And I think that it's been healing for me. It's been eye opening for me. And I think that over time our ability to even challenge each other has been how when we're not always agreeing on the same place on certain things, but we hear each other. There's a lot of people I don't agree with who I'm not interested in hearing them, because I've gotten shut down to the point where I don't have that with them. I feel like that's what is different with you. And I think that when you can build partnerships that are founded off of trust, then kind of the sky's the limit because he kind of pushed the envelope and I feel like that's how I would describe me and Kevin's relationship.

And then also too, I mean, I think that not everybody is comfortable talking about some of the issues. I mean, Kevin and I have talked about issues about privilege, being a Native American guy from the Pine Ridge Indian reservation, Kevin being six generation owner of Hancock Lumber a company from Maine, and represents so much of the power and privilege. And the fact that Kevin was fine to have those conversations and be like, I want to hear those, I want to have those conversations. A lot of people don't, a lot of people aren't interested in that, a lot of you were very uncomfortable with that. And I think even if it wasn't uncomfortable at times, I think that Kevin had the courage to have these deeper conversations. And I appreciated that because I think that without those conversations, that we're just talking about some surface level shit was what it comes down to. And then you could have easily just been a donor, but you became a friend. And I think that is something I've appreciated about the relationship with Kevin.

Kevin could have just been a donor. I could have looked through the blinds and said, "Here comes a potential donor." He could have closed the deal on this and left. But what I got out of it was both found a partner, a donor, and a friend. But even more than that, a partner for change. Because I feel like the partnerships and the conversations that me and Kevin have, had the ability to have influenced the people around us. And I think that when you have leaders that are in positions of influence, and we become influenced ourselves, it gives us the opportunity to share that with the people around us. And I think that's what I really appreciated about Kevin's generosity. And I don't mean generosity like writing a check or buying a pickup truck like Kevin did that first time. But it's generosity with knowledge. His generosity with having the courage to share what has been learned along the way.