

Interview with Shirley Brozzo

April 5, 2002

Northern Michigan University, Marquette, MI

Interviewer: Interview with Shirley Brozzo, April 5th, 2002, Northern Michigan University. Shirley, will you tell us what your date of birth is?

Shirley Brozzo: I was born February 4, 1956.

INT: Alright. What has been - when did you come to Northern Michigan?

SB: Well, I actually transferred in as a student in 1989, so I came in at junior status, finished my degree here in 1992, I had a bachelor's degree in business with a major in accounting, and then senior year, the program, I decided I didn't want to be an accountant anymore, that's not what I wanted to do when I grow up, but I wanted to write and I'd really been encouraged by a lot of people here to do that, so I entered the master's program in English writing, and earned at M.A. here in 1994. And right now, in fact just this semester, I found out that I had been admitted to the M.F.A. program, so I'm actually starting on that degree as we speak.

INT: And when were you first employed by Northern?

SB: I started working here, actually as a student employee, in 1990 with Multicultural Student Services, it's gone through many name changes in the time that I've been here and worked for the office, but I started as like an office receptionist, and I worked my way up, in 1994 I was actually hired as the coordinator of the Gateway Academic Program, and that's the position I hold currently, so I've done that now seven, almost eight years of running this program. In the summer of 1995 I was hired to teach one of the native classes, the Native American Experience class, so I started teaching that in the summers and haven't stopped since.

INT: What is the, you said the Diversity Student Services now, is that the department?

SB: Yes.

INT: And what exactly do they do?

SB: We're here to help all sorts of diverse populations on campus. Our main focus is to assist Native American, African American, Latino, multiracial students. Our secondary focus on campus is to work with gay/lesbian students, women, and obviously anybody who comes through our doorway receives our services. And the Gateway Academic Program that I work for now is a state funded grant, it's dedicated to retention of students of color on campus. And this year it's kind of broadened a little more into being, to provide assistance to students who are academically and economically disadvantaged.

INT: So through your employment with these groups you are, would you say you are central to the Native Studies program?

SB: I think so. Well, like I said, you know, I've been working here and connecting with students, I am Native myself, so I have community connections that I can tap into when necessary, my tribe is the Keweenaw Bay Tribe of Chippewa Indians amongst Baraga area, and just being here for a long time and knowing students I think has been a big benefit in helping the Native students here. Also, I've been with the program, really, starting with it back in I would say '91 or '92, when Melissa Hearn was working on getting a Native Studies program here at all, prior to that we hadn't had one. And I was one of the students that she would come to for some assistance on the program, so I've really been working toward this goal, you know, almost the entire time that I've been here.

INT: And what did you do for Melissa at that time - Dr. Hearn?

SB: Right, I had, I was one of the students who in her very first Native Studies class that she taught here, it was very, obviously to me, a very interesting topic to study more about. So, just to get our committees and start working on putting together a curriculum, what would we want the program to be or, you know, what types of things did we need here, just growing the program right from its conception.

INT: And so you've continued to work with the Native Studies department since then?

SB: Yes, yes.

INT: Through the various directors and whatnot.

SB: Right, right. I've, you know, been on the search committees to bring people in to be interviewed and help chaperoning around, help with bringing guest speakers to campus whether it was through the Center for Native American Studies or through the English Department or through Diversity Student Services, whoever might have a Native speaker, I've just been very involved in whatever's happening with them on campus while they're here.

INT: And can you tell me about the changes the Native Studies Department has gone through over the years?

SB: Right, well way back in the beginning, like I said, at first we had just Melissa's one class, her Native American Literature class through the English Department, and, I mean I think even then people could see that we had a need for at least a minor, and I know now they're working on turning this into a program that's actually a major here in Native American Studies. When you talk about working with diverse populations in the world that you're going out to, when you look around the U.P. the Native Americans are the largest minority population here, so it would make sense that if you're going into business or working with almost any field that you're in, business, criminal justice, anything, it would be good to know more about another culture, and it makes sense to study the culture around you so I think it's a very good thing to have a Native Studies program.

INT: And what classes do you currently teach for the Native Studies program?

SB: Starting with the summer of 1995 I started teaching the Native American Experience class, and I've been teaching that every semester since, and about, I want to say three years ago now, I

created a new class in storytelling by Native American women, because I thought we had a kind of need for that, there was an empty hole that wasn't addressing the oral stories that the women were telling and women are very important with our culture so I thought here was a way to honor _____ the women's _____ and what we could bring to the community to expose this.

INT: Can you tell me some more about, following up on taking Melissa's class, and then you started up on some committees working to set up the program, can you tell us more about what work you did at that time with the actual, the work through the university, what was involved with trying to get the major – or, the minor set up.

SB: Yeah, we're still in the process of having it as a minor and creating some new courses to make sure that we have enough offerings that students can get a good background in it, and then like I said we are looking towards a future and growing the program but, gosh, way back in the beginning it was just like we'd meet in a conference room but it had more the feel of, like, just sitting around the kitchen table and thinking, ok, what is it that we need to do and what can we put together? What can we tap into that's already here and being offered? So there were some history classes, like... I know there's one out there that now it's been discontinued, like History of the Western Frontier or American Frontier or something like that, it's like, well, do we have enough Native content in there, is there something here that we can use to count this as a course if we put it in the minor program and, you know, working with the other professors who are teaching those classes to be able to say, yes, here's a valuable class and we do have a strong native content, so we could, you know, include that in part of a minor program _____, and we just started tapping into, well, Russ, obviously and history and Judy Demark while she was here had the history class and just started, like I said, checking into what other classes might fit the criteria, so we could come up with, well, the 20 or so credits that you would need within the university parameters of having minor. And the only course that we put in that was required was the Native American Experience class to kind of give you an overall picture like, a more general type of class that you get a little, you know, like a basic understanding of Native Americans and what's going on in our past that's brought us to this point and maybe what's going on in the future or what we can project into the future. So that was like the only required class and then we started doing others, like to the Music Department, we were talking with Elda Tate to start her Native American flute class, a lot of our students would take that because they're interested in learning to play some of the music or hearing the different stories that she shares throughout the class as well. So we have some history classes and we have a music class, Lillian had created the Oral Traditional Literature class that's now within English so we have a couple of different English courses. Melissa has now branched out into Canadian Native American literature under the alternative traditions in literature, it's the EN311Z class, I'm not quite sure what the exact title reads, but... To give another perspective of looking at how the Canadian Native people were treated as opposed to how natives in the Americas were treated, so it's just started growing and I mean... When, one of the things that we knew we wanted to include was a class in the language, because, well, through the boarding school systems and through the old days to become more assimilated into the dominant culture, our children were not allowed to speak in their own language. When they went away to boarding schools they were

beaten for speaking their own language and they had to learn English, so as they grew up they didn't have the language to teach on to their kids any more, and it was a very effective way of trying to break down the culture and the traditional Native American ties that there were by taking away our language. But now there's been quite a reversal in peoples' way of thinking, and now it's become more important to learn your language, to study your language, so now it's almost ironic that we're putting a language class back in at the college level to try and teach our people, who are now adults by the time they go to college, how to speak their own language or to learn, say Anishinaabe as a foreign language, too, some of the people it's foreign, certainly not to those of us who are from this continent, to others it's... So just, you know, I mean, when we've had someone available in the area who could come and teach the language course then we've had a language class, and now it looks like we've got a pretty strong language program going.

INT: What classes would you still like to see, do you have any?

SB: Oh, we have a ton of classes that we're kicking around that we'd like to get up and going. Just this semester, with the inclusion of our new director, Martin Reinhardt, he's bringing us, uh, like the Tribal _____ and, like, the Politics of Dating classes, which to me sound like just fascinating topics to be studying. I'd like to see a few more things with our literature come up, like writing Native American poetry or writing Native American short stories, I'd love to see classes in trickster stories, trickster coyote, they kind of show us a little bit more humorous side to life. We're actually working on a class of images of Indians in film and literature, but gosh, Sherman Alexie's *Smoke Signals* has been made into a movie and was based off a short story that was in his book *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, so you can teach, you know, the short story and go through the film and talk about stereotypical Hollywood images and how this is changing now that you have a Native author, a Native producer, Native people actually acting in the films, so it's a new way to look at the books, and that's being worked on right now. Most of us who teach within the Native Studies Department have all got ideas for other classes that we'd like to see put into place, like to see grow, we're working on some more, more specifically about culture and customs, especially here in the Great Lakes area so that you can have easier access to the teachers or the elders who know the traditions here and can pass them on. We'd also like to look at talking about some of our other neighboring tribes, like study more about the Oneida people, the Potawatomis, the Menominees, and see people who also interacted with the local Anishinaabe people and study a little more about their history and culture and customs and how we all work together from way back in the past and now to the present day, so we've got lots and lots of ideas. We're also looking at branching out and putting some classes available on the web through OCT and to just be able to take classes that way is one of our options of increasing our involvement.

INT: And who do you see as the primary benefit, who is benefiting from these classes, who do you think it is, do you think the program is too specific to a single ethnic group or do you think it does benefit the university as a whole?

SB: I think that it really benefits everybody who takes, even if it's only one course within a program, or if they actually go through the minor, I do know that right now there are more people from the dominant culture who are minoring in Native American Studies than there are

Native Americans who are minoring in the program, so, I mean, there's definitely an interest out there, it's not just the 150 native people who are on campus, it's others who are interested in it as well. We have a lot of teachers taking this program, I know that during the summertime I had a lot of teachers, Head Start people, coming in to take the Native American Experience class so that they had more information to take back to their classrooms, so I think that through the teachings that I pass on to one person, then they go back and help positively affect their 20 or 25 little people who get the knowledge or get to benefit. And I see people taking our classes and going home to our communities and just being better informed as to what people are going through and understand the culture a little better. So I see a lot of benefit for a lot of people.

INT: Do you see a lack of understand of Native cultures in this area?

SB: I think I still do because when you first get the group into a classroom and start talking to them about things and it's like, just some of the really uninformed answers that you get from people or they still believe a lot of the stereotypes that are out there that, you know, just don't hold true anymore, or, you know, certainly you're going to find some people who may fit a stereotypical image, but they find out for the most part that all of their preconceived notions are just wrong.

INT: Can you tell me some more about the department now as far as the new director and how things are going as far as realizing a lot of these goals of the program?

SB: Yeah, Marty's been with us just a really short time now, I'm going to say maybe six months or, certainly not much longer than that, I think maybe July 1st was when he actually came on. But fortunately we've grown enough to the point that we now also have an assistant director for Native American Studies, Tracy _____, who's just going to be a wonderful person to be working in the office, I've worked with her before when she was a student employee of mine, so it's like, you know, I've already got this relationship going with her, and that makes it nice to be able to work with people that you know and people that you know are good, and I see, well, we've got Don Chosa on as a fulltime adjunct instructor, so he's teaching at least three classes a semester, of course, we have a halftime secretary which is, you know, been, sometimes we've had a secretary and sometimes we haven't, we're growing a really huge resource room over at the center, we have five office spaces over there in Magers Hall right now which is, you know, good size considering, you know, we started all around a table in a conference room, you know, and now actually we have office spaces and people to fill the offices, which is nicer. And so many people who are Native being able to fill these positions, so that's really good. We're looking, still, Native students have a lot of issues on campus, and together with the Diversity Student Services Office we're able to provide a more combined front when we work together to help native students. We're looking at growing and creating a Native American house in one of the residence halls, hopefully to begin by fall of, you know, 2000, so this upcoming fall students come back and we'll get a house together before them, to live together as a community much as it used to be when we all lived together in a small community, kind of recreate some of that, and a lot of our students are leaving that behind when they come from reservation areas or closer knit communities where everybody pretty much is related to everybody else, and you really miss that sense of family so we're trying to recreate that, a little bit of that anyhow, when they come here

to be able to have that similar type of communal living, living facility here. So working with Marty, it's just been great, we're working at addressing the issues of smudging on campus and being able to bring the drum in and play, you know, so the guys can get together and practice on the drums so that the songs are not forgotten, and the neat things about that is that it's something that we pass on to the children, too, because that's the way we traditionally taught our culture and our customs was just through teaching to the younger children, and one of our guys who plays on the drum also works with some of the younger kids in the Negaunee Middle School and is teaching them the songs and how to drum, they've come and done performances here for different classrooms and for different, say, graduation functions for either the Diversity Office or the Center, so it's great to be able to see our young ones being taught these traditions _____ instead of having them beaten up and the traditions being _____, so it's a total reversal from, say, a couple of hundred years ago where _____.

INT: And do you feel that the university has been receptive so far to some of these new ideas? Do you still think there's some -?

SB: I've seen a lot of growth in the last 10 years that I've been working on this program, of course now we're on our third president, but diversity overall is one of goals of our university, and the president has made no bones about that, I think that she's very much behind when she says that she wants to see diversity growing here on campus. Of course we know that change is always a slow process and it takes a long time to get some of these ideas up and running, but I think that now we have a group of the professors within the program, teachers who've been working together for a long time, we know how one another operates, but now, you know, with Marty on board we've had a lot of good outside influence, you know, someone who hasn't been in on all the things we've been doing before so he can give us new thoughts and new ideas and, yeah, definitely provides a really strong leadership for us, helps guide us in the things that we have to do.

INT: Do you feel like now that the program is much more established, and especially it reaches the major status as well, it is easier to get some of these decisions made?

SB: I think that it will be with the closer that we get to actually becoming a major, I know that when Dennis Tibbetts was here, too, he got a lot of work done, made a lot of connections with other universities who do have major programs in Native American Studies, or, say, American Studies with an emphasis on Native American Studies, and got a lot of good ideas, especially where language is involved, like growing language immersion camps or just being much more proficient in growing, say, for your program and language, something where it might even become, say, a teachable minor, so that people in education could also then take parts of our cultural curriculum and actually study that and be certified skill to go into the school systems and it would be looked at in a similar vein to, say, getting a minor in social studies or a minor in science or different types of more traditional minors and then be able to teach our language, that's very important as we go towards growing more Native American schools that are out there so far, some of Northern's charter schools are Native American schools, and we have a lot of Native kids in the schools who are still being taught by teachers from the dominant culture

because we're still growing our own Native teachers to be able to go back into the community, so I think that all of these changes will become very beneficial.

INT: And do you have anything else, any other thoughts that you'd like to add on the program, or...?

SB: All of a sudden while we were just doing this interview it really just dawned on me that it has been a good 10 years that I've been here, I've been working on this, and that just seems like, in one respect, an incredibly long time to be doing something, and in another respect just a really short amount of time, you know, in the greater scheme of things, to be working on this project, and really, to see how far we've come in 10 years, you know, from having, say, one class offering and now we're so much further beyond that, I think that it's really good and I think the longer that we're here and in existence as a program, people are really becoming more accepting, more used to us being here, taking us seriously, I know that the class that I teach, the, it's just been reclassified to NAS204 instead of just UN204, like general university studies, it's really part of the NAS program, and generally the class is supposed to stop at 35 students, and I usually always have over 40 each section, and, you know, have like a waiting list of 10 or more students who want to get into the class if anybody drops, and very few people ever do, so I think that that sends a positive message, not only to the university but to other people that this is a valuable class, and then when others have come on and also taught sections of the class, the same thing has happened, classes are filling, and they have a waiting list, so there's obviously an interest in the class, and I know it fits Liberal Studies and World Cultures credits, but there's many more options of classes students could take, but they're interested in these topics and I find that very promising, both for the university and for our people.

INT: Ok. Thank you for the interview.