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INTERVIEW

"We're Living People with The Past, Not a People from The Past": Cultural Revitalization at the Myaamia Center

An Interview with Daryl Baldwin & Kara Strass

SHANNON TOLL

This interview took place on October 19, 2023, at the Myaamia Center, a nexus of Myaamia tribal knowledge production and revitalization. Located on the campus of Miami University in Oxford, OH—which is located on the traditional homelands of the Miami Tribe—the Myaamia Center and the university share a deeply unique relationship that developed over years of exchange and collaboration. In the following conversation, Daryl Baldwin, the Center's executive director, and Kara Strass, the director of the Miami Tribal Relations Office, discuss the origins of the Center and how the work taking place there contributes to building the future of the Miami Tribe.

The terms "Myaamia" and "Miami" will be used throughout the interview; "Myaamia" is the tribe's name for itself, and means "the downstream people," while "Miami" is a derivation of this name and how the tribe is recognized as a sovereign nation, the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma.[1] *The text has been condensed for publication, but a full recording is available.*

Daryl Baldwin: *aya. kinwalaniihsia weenswiaani. niila myaamia. tipeewee išiteehiyaani oowaaha eepiaani*. I'm glad to be here. My name is Daryl. I'm a citizen of the Miami tribe of Oklahoma. First and foremost, I also serve my community as the executive director of the Myaamia Center here at Miami University. My background and career has largely been in the emerging field of language and cultural revitalization and working with the community and the university that's in partnership with the Miami Tribe around building capacity and infrastructure to support the needs of the community as it pertains to language and cultural revitalization.

Kara Strass: *aya. mahkoonsihkwa weenswiaani. niila myaamihkwia. meehkimwiaani owaaha myaamia nipwayonikaaniki*. My name is Kara Strass. I serve here at the Myaamia Center as the director of the Miami Tribe Relations Office. I came to this work starting out by getting a Master's degree in student affairs here at Miami University and came on full time in 2018.

My job is really to serve as the liaison between the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma and Miami University. Part of that work is to provide advising and support for the Miami students who attend Miami University. Really trying to build strong relationships with them so that I can understand what their needs and challenges are to ensure that they can be successful here at Miami.

Interviewer: Could you all discuss a bit about how the Myaamia Center was founded, what its history is here at Miami University, and why that history is so distinct?

Baldwin: Yes. I would say that what used to be the Myaamia Project in 2001 really emerged as a result of the last couple hundred years of history. The forced relocations

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of the 1800s, the boarding school experiences of tribal members, the social pressures to assimilate and to dispose of our traditional language, culture, knowledge system finally hit an apex, I think, at some point where the community recognized those losses. There was a recognition on a national level.

Congress began passing important legislation like the Native American Languages Act of 1990, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act. I think there was just a growing consciousness of what took place in the colonization of this country and the impacts that that had on tribal communities. Through that process, tribes retained their inherent right to govern themselves. Tribes began to reposition themselves both economically, socially, culturally, I think especially in the middle part of the 1900s to really start, one, recognizing what happened but then, secondly, what is it that we're going to maintain and preserve as we move forward.

Our unique identities as tribal people, at least in our view, have to be central to that. We have to have economies. We have to build social infrastructure. There's a lot of capacity building on the national level that has to happen on the tribal national level. Through all of that important work, we can't lose ourselves. We have to remain culturally distinct people.

There are health benefits for our community through that work. It was that motivation that began to emerge in the early 1990s that caused tribal leaders to think, what can we do about this? There were some individuals who were doing some grassroots work at the community level around language and cultural revitalization. We had lost our speakers by the mid-20th century, so we had to turn to documentation. We didn't know how much documentation was available.

We had to go searching for that. We ended up collaborating with a graduate student at the University of California, Berkeley, by the name of David Costa, who now works here in the center. He began much of his early linguistic research in the late 1980s. A lot of things were starting to come together. At one point, the tribal community just really realized we didn't have the resources to move this forward, whatever it was going to be and whatever it was going to look like.

They reached out to their friends at Miami University, which they already had a relationship with that dated back to the 1970s. It started with really just getting to know each other. I think Kara can talk more about the beginning stages of that. Moving ahead, the tribe asked the university, can you help us with language and cultural revitalization? The university said, well, what do you want to do? The tribe's like, well, we're not really sure, but we think there's probably resources there that could benefit us. The university agreed to create a position for three years.

They called it the Myaamia Project because it was just a project. They would try it out and see what might become of it. I was asked to come and serve in that position in 2001. As they say, the rest is history, maybe the early history of the university relationship, because I think that factors into this pretty significantly.

Strass: Yes, so we talk about this relationship beginning in 1972. That is when the chief of the tribe at that time, Chief Forest Olds, he was in Cincinnati on tribal business and had always heard that there was a university that carried the name of our tribal people. He decides that he wants to visit, but he didn't tell anybody. He arrived on campus entirely unannounced and goes into the president's office.

I always wish I could have been a fly on the wall when he walks in and introduces himself as the chief of the Miami Tribe. Unfortunately, the president of Miami at that time, President Shriver, he was out that day. Some other folks, they took him on a tour of campus, they took him to football practice. That's really how we talk about the start of

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this relationship. He comes back two years later in 1974. Unfortunately, [he] passes away not long after that second visit.

Chief Leonard, who becomes chief after Chief Olds, he was chief for almost 30 years. He also started coming to campus and building relationships with administration, with the alumni office, with faculty on campus. I think we can't ignore the fact that, when they stepped onto campus in those early years, they were stepping onto a campus that was already having a lot of conversations about their Native mascot. That contributed, I think, quite a lot to the relationship in those early years.

Looking back on what happened in those first couple decades of this relationship, I think Chief Leonard was really interested in "how do we provide some education, allow people to learn about our tribal nation?" The tool that they had at that time was this mascot. They tried to provide some authentication, some training for especially the student who was presenting himself at football games and things like that. Chief Leonard would come here quite a lot. People would go to Oklahoma.

I think in the late '80s and early '90s, there was this question of, okay, people aren't really able to learn from this mascot. It's still built in a stereotype. People are still bringing with them their own ideas of what Native people are when they see somebody out performing on a football field. He was very interested in "how can we work together to create educational opportunities for the Miami University community, but also for Myaamia people?" That's why they worked to create a scholarship program for Myaamia students to come to Miami.

Our first students arrived in 1991. It's a full decade before Daryl [Baldwin] arrives on campus. Three students in 1991. At that time, the way that students learned about and were encouraged to go to Miami University is that Chief Leonard would call them up-

[laughter]

Strass: -and tell them about this opportunity and ask them if they would be interested in going to Miami and getting this tuition waiver. There was really nothing created for them. Yes, they received a great financial offer. The students, they didn't even know each other. There was no reason for them to get together. They were from different parts of the country. We have pictures from like campus visits when Chief Leonard would come, but as far as I can tell, that's really the only times these students ever got together.

Those students weren't especially successful academically in the first 12 or so years before the creation of actual programming that brought Myaamia students together to learn about their history, language, culture. I'm assuming we'll get more into what that looks like-

Interviewer: Absolutely.

Strass: -now, as opposed to, what it looked like in those early years when there wasn't anything for Myaamia students here. They're stepping onto campus. The mascot was still here. That's the part that I didn't really finish the story. The tribe was considering the mascot for a long time. Was, I think, mostly ambivalent, but on paper supportive of the mascot for a long time. That changes in the mid-1990s. The tribe asks the university to change their mascot in 1996. They do at the very next board of trustees meeting; they vote to change.

I think that was a real recognition of the sovereignty of the Miami Tribe and also recognition and support for this relationship that had been built for, I think, 24 years already at that point. I think that that really laid a foundation of increased trust, of thinking of Miami as a partner that they could go to. That's in 1996. The changes happened in 1997 and I think really sets up this idea that they could come to Miami University and ask for support in cultural revitalization just a few years later.

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Baldwin: Because the relationship is not going to be about a mascot. What's it going to be about? There was a paradigm shift at that time. It was one that was—we didn't know what it would be. Miami University didn't have then and still doesn't have a Native Studies program. What is that relationship? They needed something to really define that beyond just the student scholarship program, so Myaamia Heritage Award.

Interviewer: I remember when we first arrived here, the coterie of us from Dayton, and you mentioned—I'm paraphrasing here, but you said that, right now, you're on Myaamia sovereign space, in this area, I believe, or in this building. This is Myaamia homelands, and this is a Myaamia space in here. If you could maybe talk about, when you think about, there's not a Native Studies program here, there's not that kind of an educational apparatus. Could you talk about why the Myaamia Center is so unique compared to other kinds of programs that exist across the US?

Baldwin: Right. The beginnings that Kara described, it really is the foundations that formed the relationship. Once the mascot was terminated and we decided to move beyond that, then we started to gravitate more towards education. There's a couple different ways to look at that. One is education that could be provided to tribal youth who might come here and get degrees in whatever they may be interested in.

The tribe was thinking about education around how are we going to preserve, promote Myaamia ways of knowing, being, expressing through language, through culture, through dance, through art forms, all of those sorts of things. There's a different education that's equally important to us. What Miami University did, whether it was conscious or not, is they created a space that the tribe could step into and explore that, what that might look like because there were no models.

I remember coming to campus, and I pretty certainly cleared out a closet on the third floor of King Library for me to step into. I remember sitting down thinking, okay, now what? There really weren't any models. We had to explore. What was important at that time when they set up that position that I took is they connected that position to student affairs. The reason they did that was because, at the time, student affairs was primarily responsible for maintaining the relationship between the tribe and university. They wanted to keep me out of departmental politics.

We were not tied to any academic unit on campus. Working with student affairs, who are people trained to work with students, and they were the relationship builders, right? It allowed us to have a space under the radar where we could quietly explore what might be possible here for ourselves. That lasted for almost a dozen years. The first stage of the development of this whole entire thing was us exploring in this space that they created for us. What's important is that the tribe was directing my activities, not the university. That was really critical too.

I was waking up in the morning, coming into work, first and foremost, thinking of my community. What could we do to help our community heal from all of the things that have placed us in this position of loss and the need to recover things? We didn't plan that. It just organically happened. I think it was really, really crucial that that happened. We didn't really come out from under that radar until 2013 when we became an official center. We had grown significantly.

Our student numbers have grown. The staff numbers have grown. We're at 47 students this year, and 19 full and part-time staff in the center. The amount of growth over the last 20-plus years has just been remarkable. I don't know how you could plan something like that. It literally just happened. Now, our challenge isn't figuring out what to do. It's responding to the growing needs of the community and, more recently, the university.

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Because being in a relationship, we agreed to share this work on campus. Even though the work is primarily driven by and for the tribal community, being in a relationship, we agreed to share that. Miami University is figuring out how that's going to happen, how we can share across campus more effectively.

Interviewer: My next question would be in that same vein, is what kind of research and knowledge production takes place at this center? It sounds like it's starting to shape the university itself in a larger way, a bit more now, but what is the sort of research, knowledge production work that takes place here?

Baldwin: I think there's two things that happen here that are important. The Myaamia Center is really a research and educational development unit, an arm of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma that exists in an academic setting to build capacity around those needs. The Miami Tribe also has a cultural resources office, which is equally staffed with approximately the same number of individuals as the center. We work as a left and a right hand on behalf of the tribe.

The cultural resource office located on tribal [lands], within the reservation, on the Miami Nation's reservation really is there to handle NAGPRA-related issues, so these are Native American grave repatriation issues. Anything that really has more important sovereign responsibilities tend to fall into the cultural resource office. They also do a lot of community programming because they're right there physically where the tribe is.

We, on the other hand, are more interested in the content, which comes from a lot of our broad-ranging research activities, but then also teacher training and trying to help build up the educational infrastructure that's needed, whether it's online education, in-person education, teacher training, whatever it may be, curricular development, things

like that. That's our role, and then we work together with the cultural resource office to do community programming.

That's what we've evolved into. In terms of the range of research, it started out as really primarily a language effort. When I came here in 2001, I'm a trained linguist. I was interested in the revitalization of my heritage language. I was doing already a lot of work in the home with my family at the time. My wife and I homeschooled for 18 years for that purpose. My wife did the vast majority of that work, but I provided a lot of the language content from the research we were doing.

What we've learned in language revitalization is it's not really just about language. When we think about what language is, language has a community and cultural context. As we begin to grow the effort, the revitalization effort, we couldn't ignore that community and cultural context. We found ourselves looking at ecology, especially botany, understanding our ancestors' relationship to the land, to the plants, to the animals.

Storytelling started to emerge, what's the role of storytelling. We had a number of traditional narratives, winter stories, *aalhsoohkaana* we call them, that we had been working with for many years. We wanted to reintroduce them back into the community. There was a fragment of the community that was really interested in revitalizing the old form of ribbon work, which was an art form. It just goes on, history topics, ecology topics, cultural topics, just a wide range of things.

A lot of what we focused in on had to do with interest of the community, availability of someone who might have some expertise or training in that area and then funding. It really was an organic growth in terms of what areas we research. Today is quite fascinating because we have so many more tribal members involved, and especially a whole generation of youth that are coming into this who've come up through our youth programs since they were young children.

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I would say a big chunk of the staff here in the center came up through our youth programs. We've literally trained the next generation of cultural bearers, knowledge bearers, to be able to step into, and this is the important part of the center, we needed to create a professional space where our younger people could bring their skill sets and their professions and feel like they're working on behalf of their tribal nation in a professional setting, whether it's research, educational development.

It's really nice to see younger people bringing an interest in weaving, various art forms, things like that, being able to grow and breathe life back into the culture, and it becomes their expression because it's not a static thing. We're living people with the past, not a people from the past. We're not interested in being our ancestors. We can't do that. We're interested in capturing the things that represent us as a cultural group but are also good for us and are appropriate in the present.

Some things are going to get left behind, but some things we're going to move forward and revitalize. We do it now as a group. It's not driven by any one individual. It's very community-oriented, which also means that the staff in the center are very interdisciplinary, which again I think is unique in academia. We have historians, we have linguists, we have technology folks, student affairs folks all working in the same space for the benefit of a particular group of people-

Interviewer: That's such a better idea.

Baldwin: -that are from the same place, right? The other thing we really wanted to do, we didn't want our youth just to feel welcome here in Miami. We wanted them to feel like they belonged here. This is their ancestral homeland, and this space is their tribal space by which we do the work for their community. Creating that, I think, that's not

what Native Studies really does. It's mostly purely an inter-tribal academic, which has a role, which is important.

I'm a graduate of a Native Studies program. I value that because I learned a lot about Indian Country, and I learned a lot about the history of the United States through the lens of many Indigenous tribes, and I think there's a really important value to that. I'm fully in support of Indigenous Studies programs. What was missing for us is our own form of education around our own identity as it pertains to language culture and other forms of knowledge.

Interviewer: Could you talk a bit about some of that process that happens when it comes to language development? When I was here last time, there was a discussion about having to add words to the dictionary that fully reflect Myaamia experience now. Could you talk a bit about how that happens here at the Center?

Baldwin: Looking purely at just the language and the language reconstruction and the revitalization side of this, we have a set archive, and for us, there's a number of documents, manuscripts, and they've been spread all over the country and Canada that span about 270 years. Being able to gather, digitize, and start an analysis process is huge, and it'll take generations.

We have so much material to work with that it's just going to take us a long, long time to really fully have access and to develop a level of understanding for a portion of it. There's some things in the historical record we may not ever fully grasp or understand, but there's a lot of very useful material that can feed into a revitalization effort, so we're focused on that.

First thing is we didn't have the tools to do that outside of the linguistic training. For instance, what do you do with thousands and thousands of pages of linguistic material from archives in a dozen different spelling systems in two different languages, French and English? How do you bring that all together into what format so that you can even work with it? We were forced to actually develop our own software, our own archival

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software, to handle that material, because any of the database software that was made available to us didn't do what we wanted it to do.

We had reached out to the National Endowment for the Humanities for help in 2012. We eventually created what is known today as the Indigenous Languages Digital Archive (https://mc.miamioh.edu/nbol/ilda-prospective), because we now share that software with tribes around the United States. For us, we needed a piece of software we could work with. We knew we had a static, bound set of archival materials to work with, and that was designed to be worked by linguists. We also needed to create a complement of that, which was a living dictionary.

A living dictionary was for teachers of the language and for our programs and for the community in and of itself to use. Looking at 200-year-old materials is not very useful for most language learners. It had to be transferred into a format that was usable. Even though this is static, the actual living dictionary continues to grow. We understand enough of our language in terms of grammar that we can provide new inflected forms.

There's a slow process of word innovation where we start creating words for new things like computer, *kiinteelintaakani*, "that thing that thinks fast," that's what we call it. It has a name now, it's a noun, and we can talk about computers. It'll take a long time, because what happens in a process of language oppression, languages are always evolving. All languages are evolving based on what they come into contact with. English certainly does the same thing for a lot of the things that we do there.

What happens in a situation where language is oppressed is that natural process of creation and evolution gets oppressed. There's a long period of time where the language didn't continue to create new things like our ancestors did. We have a lot of

catching up to do, and it'll just take a long time for that. This is very much an intergenerational process.

We're looking to build the foundational pieces that are going to allow us to not only continue this work but grow this work in a way that's sustainable for the community. We're just the foundation builders for it. Hopefully, this next generation will take it to the next level, and future generations will take it from there.

Strass: I think one aspect of this that's interesting, and maybe you can speak to it a little bit more, is how we try to ensure that we're not just doing translation as we come up with new words, but that we're actually thinking about our language and culture, and how to create new words. Does that question make sense to you?

Baldwin: Right. There's a way to be embedded within a knowledge system, a cultural environment, where you start to build an intuition for the way in which people think about things. The natural process is in a speaking community where the culture is still vibrant and living, and you can immerse yourself in that. You start to have an intuition for how people do things, think about things, talk about things, things like that.

To some degree, and I don't even know how to quantify this, you can spend enough time in archival materials to get a glimpse of that. We've tried to build an intuition over time, and there are times we'd say, well, I know what you're saying, but it doesn't sound very Myaamia. I would say it probably more like this because it just feels more like the linguistic materials we've been embedded in for now 30 years.

There is that intuition that—and you can't get that through a college program, right? I think what Kara's really pointing to is there's a certain kind of training that happens here to do this work for the Miami Tribe that can really only happen right here.

Interviewer: Creating that context.

Baldwin: Yes, that cultural language context, and learning how to think as a Myaamia person in Myaamia.

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Strass: I think it might help to give a tangible example that somebody—land you can make requests through our dictionary for words. People are always coming up with things that they would like to be able to say. I remember one of them, somebody, had a family member who was going through some sort of like illness or something. They wanted to talk about that person being like a warrior in fighting this illness.

Then when that request came in, we had to think about the fact that, from a Myaamia perspective, English is so full of war and violence terms that being a warrior is seen as this really beneficial, good thing. What we don't want to do is start bringing that context of English into Myaamia where violence and war terms become part of our everyday speech because that's not what's seen in our language.

Instead, thinking about, okay, well, what is it that's good about what this person is asking, but can we give you an alternative that still represents what you're trying to say through the language, but isn't necessarily just a Myaamian translation of "warrior."

Baldwin: Right. Even the word for disease, *mintaakani*, it means "they have done something poorly." Our ancestors would oftentimes think about disease as something we've done to ourselves. If you think about how disease is often talked about in American English, we're going to fight this, we're going to beat this, as if it's something that you go to for fight, like Kara said, like war.

The very framing of that becomes a challenge when we're working with the community to help them understand how we might think about things or at least reflect on them in a way. It may be that—we know a lot about disease today and then cures for disease where maybe the notion of I did something wrong here doesn't always apply.

Interviewer: Sure.

[laughter]

Baldwin: It gives us that historical and cultural context. Then our challenge is how do we want to think about these today and how do we want to support our loved ones and our community in dealing with sometimes very difficult and tragic illnesses that come along.

Interviewer: Yes. How language is always changing, but recognizing when it's been inflected by non-Myaamia frameworks that are less productive in that way. That's really interesting… What kind of classes do you offer Myaamia students? What are the requirements of this program? How does this experience unfold for your students?

Strass: I think we had to think about—one of the things that's very unique about this program is that, for many of our students, we know them well before they come to Miami University.

Interviewer: Oh really? I'm impressed.

Strass: [laughs] Exactly, right? For many of them that have come through our programs or even if I don't know them, one of the first things usually that we find out is who are they related to?

Interviewer: Right, yes.

Strass: A vast majority of our students come in having had a sibling or a first cousin already through this program or maybe second cousin at the farthest. I think it's at this point, probably it has to be at least 70% are coming in with a very close relative. It makes this experience very different.

Interviewer: They're coming from all across the nation.

Strass: They're coming from all across the country, right. Today, our community of about 7,000 tribal citizens lives in 49 states as well as internationally. This is actually one of the opportunities to bring the most diverse concentrated number of Myaamia

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people from across the country to a single place where they can spend significant time thinking about their Myaamia identity and engaging in educational opportunities.

I start working with students primarily in their sophomore and junior years as they're thinking about college and help them think about what that application process to Miami might look like, for students who are coming from across the country, knowing like it's a big decision to send a student from California to Ohio. I work with them through the whole process leading up to their application to Miami. I'm not involved in the admissions process at all. That's partially by design.

We want all of our students to apply and to be accepted into Miami based on Miami's standards, because what we don't want is students coming who can't be successful. It's not beneficial to them in any way for them to show up on campus and not be able to meet the standards. Then as soon as they're accepted, then I kick back in with information about our program. Even as soon as their orientation sessions here on campus, I'm meeting with them. I'm talking about what this experience will look like.

We have our first-year students move in a couple days early so that they can connect with us and connect with each other. Really, the goal of the Myaamia Heritage Program, which today is now a full four-year program, is really about connecting our students with the Myaamia community. For them, it's primarily the other students and staff who are here in Oxford and with their Myaamia knowledge system.

There are a few requirements for them around some events. We have a retreat. We have a lunar new year party. We have a variety of things that they attend throughout the year but the biggest being the Myaamia Heritage course series. We have three years of a one-credit class that students take. It's a cycle. It's not a hierarchy. All of our students in their first through third years are together in the class. It just rotates.

Whatever the topic is in the year that a student arrives, that's where they start. Then we go through this cycle of classes.

This year we are in contemporary topics in sovereignty, so really talking with students about what is sovereignty. It's an idea that many of them may not have even thought about before. Also, just what does it mean to be a citizen of a tribal nation? How do you express that? In the second semester, we look a lot through the lens of art. Next year will be ecological perspectives in history, so allowing our students to learn more about their environment, about how our ancestors understood that environment, but also thinking about our landscape as our history book.

That's how we connect those two topics. We spend a lot of time outside as long as the weather will allow us. Then once it gets cold, we move inside and talk more about history. Then the third year is Myaamia language and culture. That's much more intensive language learning, although language really infuses throughout all of the years and ecology infuses throughout all of the years. Obviously, there's a focus for each one of those years.

Then in their senior year, our students do an independent study project. The intention is that they can combine what they've learned in their major or minor with what they've learned at the Myaamia Heritage course series. They can create a project that gives back to the community in some way. It's just two semesters of a one-credit project. It's not a giant requirement for them.

Our goal is it's allowing students to process, okay, now I've taken in all of this knowledge over four years. How do I apply that to my life? How do I give back to my tribal community in some way? That can take a lot of different forms. That might mean a student writing and illustrating a children's book. We've had students who've worked on database creation. We've had students who've worked in communications and marketing, in art, just across the board, kinesiology.

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What we ask students is to be able to apply that knowledge in some way. For a lot of our students who have come through and now our staff at the Myaamia Center, it was like the foundation of what became a job for them, which is really—

Interviewer: You're one of those students?

Strass: I came here for my Master's degree.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Strass: Yes, I was not here as an undergrad. Even through the time in my Master's that I went through those classes, it really provided a foundation of knowledge and understanding that allows me to then apply to the work that I do with students. I meet with all of them at least once a semester, and that's the other requirement of this program. I see them every week in class. I see them at a variety of events and things.

I really do try to get to know them really well so that we can support them in whatever their challenges and successes are and ensure that they can be successful. Most of the students here would not come to Miami University without this award. That's very clear. They tell me that, I understand that. Miami was not going to be their first choice for many of these students. Then we have a responsibility to ensure that they can be successful. That's really what my position is, and I do that primarily by creating relationships across campus. I'm not an academic advisor, but I know how to connect students with their academic advisors and what questions to ask and those types of things. I'm not a counselor, but I have a direct contact in student counseling who I can make sure that students can connect with if they have some sort of issue.

It's about providing that support system to students. Then in addition to me, there's the 18 other staff people here who can help them explore different ideas, if they're interested in it. Again, the goal of this is all about community building, about allowing

them opportunities to engage with their Myaamia identity while they're here. What we found is, in the 12 years before the heritage class was created, our students had a 56% six-year graduation rate, higher than the national average for Native students, but not great, obviously.

Today we have a 92% graduation rate for Myaamia students, higher than [Miami University's] average. I think, our numbers have increased dramatically. Started with 3 students, now we have 47 students. I think a lot of that comes because our community trusts us to send their students here to have their best interests at heart and understand that this is probably the only place where you can get this.

You don't have very many opportunities in your life to spend so much time engaging with these topics. It's a really unique opportunity for our Myaamia students. We have 113 graduates of this program who, like Daryl said previously, really are the next generation of Myaamia leaders in a lot of ways. They serve on the committees with the tribe and with the university.

They are instructors in our summer youth programs. They're our cultural practitioners. They work for the tribe or consult for the tribe.

Baldwin: Business leaders.

Strass: There's a lot of ways that our graduates have become active participants in community revitalization and are really leading to thinking about what our community will look like moving forward.

Baldwin: It literally wasn't there 30 years ago. Absolutely, literally wasn't there. The numbers of people that gathered in the community for annual meeting were mostly the older generation. Kids played outside. Teenagers didn't bother to come. Those numbers were small. That's completely transformed compared to today. You'll get 200 people, all families, all generations, coming together for National Gathering Week. We start on Wednesday and go all the way through Saturday and Sunday.

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The revitalization activity has completely transformed. What we've noticed, over the years, is that there has been this huge positive impact to the community. It's caused us to start thinking about the role of language and culture, not only in youth identity formation, but in community wellness. We're just starting that research now. We were recently funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to develop a wellness model for the community, based on revitalization work, to strengthen our understanding of what processes are at work and what the impact is in the community and how we might grow that. We're really excited about that new research that's coming out of our Assessment and Evaluation office here in the center.

Interviewer: That next step.

Baldwin: That's the next step.

Interviewer: And it keeps developing.

Baldwin: Yes, exactly. It's all just new frontier because there's just not a lot of research on the impact of language and culture revitalization on Indigenous communities. We're having to create our own research so that we can understand it better.

Interviewer: Is that where the National Breath of Life Archival Institute comes into play?

Baldwin: Sort of. That's an interesting question. National Breath of Life was a program that started in the 1990s, mainly out of California, the University of California, Berkeley, because California had the most Indigenous languages spoken anywhere in the United States. They also had a large number of those communities that had either lost their speakers or on the verge of losing their speakers.

Archival materials was becoming very important. National Breath of Life was created, or Breath of Life was created, to begin working with those communities around archival

materials. In 2011, those organizers began to think more broadly that, the idea of getting tribal members into archives, getting digital copies, and then taking those back to the community to help support their language activities has more of a national scope.

They reached out to the National Science Foundation, and in 2011, they were funded to create a national version of it, and that's where National Breath of Life comes from. I've been an instructor in the Breath of Life, in the National Breath of Life, and even some regional Breath of Lifes for many years. In 2015, the National Breath of Life organization recognized that the Myaamia Youth Center was growing and becoming stable, and National Breath of Life looked like a very viable program in the future, and so they wanted to give it an institutional home.

They asked the Myaamia Youth Center if we would take it on. The reason we said yes was mainly because that has been the focus of our work, archive-based revitalization. We saw it as a way that we could not only take the tools we had built, like the Indigenous Language Digital Archive, and through National Breath of Life, start sharing that with other communities that were at different stages of developing a community-curated language archive, but we could also learn from those communities as they were building their programs out.

National Breath of Life is our pipeline to support and learn from other tribal communities, and so it's become a very important program for us.

Interviewer: I did have a few more questions, and one of them was, you mentioned that when you did—this is back to our earlier conversation, that when your children were being homeschooled, that you were able to create a lot of the materials that were being used, the course content, if you will. Can you talk just a bit about what those materials sometimes look like when we think about like that body of knowledge? Just a few examples would be great.

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Baldwin: My motivation to homeschool and to pursue language was really driven on the need for me as an individual to give meaning, purpose, and understanding to my own heritage that I claimed. That launched me on a new path, if you will, toward discovery. Because there was nothing there, there were no tribal programs, there was no Myaamia Center, there wasn't anything, and 1991 is when my wife and I really started to look at this. 1990 is when the Native American Languages Act was passed, so there hadn't really been enough time for really much to grow. We were alone.

We were alone in the process, and it really wasn't even understood, at that point, what role archives could even play in such an effort. There was a lot of uncertainty. It was an unprecedented effort, so like any unprecedented effort, there's a lot of questions, there's more questions than answers. We decided to move forward with it, which also meant that if we were going to do something in the home, we had to first learn ourselves, and then we had to create our own learning materials.

Interviewer: That's intimidating. [laughs]

Baldwin: Yes, very intimidating. The kids were young, and so we learned as a family together, and we used the homeschool environment to structurally share that information. My wife created a lot of the materials, whether they—we had a body parts game where all the body parts were labeled, and the kids would learn different body parts. They would create little stories in the Myaamia language and read those, especially to the younger siblings.

We tried to create a space in the home that was a Myaamia space, and then that was the safe space by which we as a family could use Myaamiaya as much as we could. That also motivated me into the field of linguistics, meeting David Costa as a trained linguist, and that changed the way that we understood the grammar of the language. We

started reconstructing fuller sentences, communicating more, and so my kids grew up in that environment.

At the same time, I was starting to learn that there were other families in the tribal community that were interested in the same thing. We started doing summer camps, weekend programs, all unofficial, not really funded by anybody. There was no tribal funding at that time. That's where I learned that there were others from my generation essentially that were interested in the same thing, and I'd say that would probably form the nucleus of what has become this effort.

Interviewer: You've always been doing this.

Baldwin: Yes, since I was in my late 20s.

Interviewer: I mistakenly thought that you were first trained as a linguist, and then got interested—so it was the opposite.

Baldwin: That was the opposite.

Interviewer: That's extraordinary.

Baldwin: Yes, I went from looking at language materials thinking, I wish I could make sense of this, communicating with [Dr. David Costa, Director of the Language Research Office at the Myaamia Center] who would eventually say, "I think you need a degree in linguistics." I went from wildlife biology to linguistics as a Master's, just so that I could support this effort, which was a huge risk because there were no jobs in this.

Quite frankly, we had to create the job that I had here because it didn't exist. Yes, it's been an interesting journey, that's for sure.

Interviewer: It's been a whole journey.

Baldwin: I think I never would have guessed it would have had this impact.

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Interviewer: I know that the center takes trips to Oklahoma a few times a year. Could you describe those trips and what they're meant to accomplish for the students or how they bring students into these different spaces?

Strass: Sure. The Myaamia Tribe has several large events each year. In the summertime, it's our annual gathering. Really, the primary part of that is getting together as a general council to vote in our elected leaders. Lots of our staff and even students come to that, but because it's in the summer, it's a little bit harder. Everybody's not in the same place.

The other large event that happens every single year is our winter gathering. It's always the last Saturday in January. To me, it's one of our most fun events because the idea being, it's wintertime, there's not business to be done as a community. It's really just a time to come together and have fun and gather as a community. There's a couple of things that happen at that event. The first being winter storytelling [*aalhsoohkaana*].

Daryl already mentioned that we have these winter stories that can only be told in the winter story cycle. This is the primary physical gathering of people where storytelling takes place. We have storytellers from across the country who come in for that event. Then the next night, we also have a stomp dance. Now we're, I don't know, I think 22 years into having an annual stomp dance at that event, where many people from tribes across Oklahoma come in for the stomp dance.

For many years, other tribes helped us in putting on that stomp dance. That's something that we've been revitalizing in our community again and are working up to the ability to really run that ourselves. This happens just as our spring semester is starting. It's a unique opportunity for us to take our Myaamia students. We have a bus that goes. For lots of our students, they've never been to Oklahoma before.

Lots and lots of students when they go to Oklahoma, it's their first time. I think that's such a fun event for them to experience that. We also take faculty and staff and non-Myaamia students on this trip, which is always very interesting. I think a lot of people tell us, even people that we're really connected with, "I've heard about this relationship. I've heard about the work of the Myaamia Center, but I didn't really understand it until I went to Winter Gathering."

I think stepping into that community context, recognizing the impact of this work in our community, really shifts people's understandings. We're planning for that event already in January. I think we'll have a big group going again this year. It's such a wonderful opportunity for us to gather.

The other opportunity we have for our students is they can be counselors in our summer youth programs. We have a week of camps in Oklahoma, and we have a week of camps in Fort Wayne. Our students are really just—they're stepping in as role models, counselors to these programs. Most of them tell us, they learn as much as any of the participants do in that week.

It helps a lot because then all of these younger students meet Miami University students, and they're like, "Oh, those cool college students. They come from Miami. I want to go to Miami." It's like the best recruiting tool we've ever had is Miami students who come in as counselors in those summer youth programs. We have students from the time they're 10 or like 11, "Well, I'm going to Miami." Then they know students and staff by the time they arrive here on campus, which is a very different experience, obviously, than your average college student who, even if they had parents, maybe who went to the same school, you still don't have that connection to people when you arrive.

Interviewer: Such an extraordinary difference from that first batch of students who came through in the '90s, like to have someone just feel already a part of the space, like even at such a young age.

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Strass: I wasn't here, obviously, in those early years, but I've heard a lot of stories about what it was like to even just try to get those students to come together… They didn't know each other. All of those things, and now to walk into our classroom and, sometimes it takes a while to get them to settle down because they're excited to see each other. It's just such a giant difference in the experience. That's why I think, when we talk about the success of our work, and the academic and graduation rates are great. I think people are always looking for, "Well, what's the one thing that you did that led to that?"

It's like, "Well, you can't take one piece of this out. You can't take out the support system. You can't take out the community building." I think the thing that's hopefully clear through this whole piece, but I think it's worth being explicit about it, is one of the things that's very different about this experience is, because we have a relationship from this university with a single tribal nation, Myaamia language and culture and values infuse everything that we do here. When you're on another campus and have an intertribal experience, that's just not the case.

Not to say that that's bad. None of us feel that way, but you're not able to dig into the same level of understanding and identity development that we're able to. When we stand up in front of a class and the first thing we say to students is *aya eeweemilakakoki*, "hello, my relatives." That's a literal thing. We're talking to people that we're related to. Even our students talk about this a lot, that they have a responsibility to each other and to care for each other because we are this kinship network.

I don't know of any other experience where that happens, right? It's, I think when several students from a family come to a single university, it's like this big—they write stories about it. Here we are with hundreds of students who've now come through this program who are all family.

Interviewer: Crafting that larger future you were talking about.

Strass: Yes.

Baldwin: Right. For a community that has experienced forced relocation, became fragmented for a number of reasons, and they're now living in diaspora, we have to find ways to come together and reconnect. The revitalization effort is providing those various environments to do that, whether it be physical, online, or whatever they may be. It is community rebuilding, yes.

I think most community members recognize that, for the nation, this is a healing process. Looking at our recent history, we're trying to recover from those things that happened at no fault of our own but are our reality. We have to get on with the mending part. We can't stay in that space too long because it's not healthy to be there. We have to get on with rebuilding our nation, connecting the generations, and having fun and celebrating that.

Interviewer: Joy.

Baldwin: Right. Yes, that's what has to be the goal. Our number one goal in the youth programs is to have fun. The learning will take place. You bring the right people in, that learning will take place. The goal is to have fun. Our young people love to go to those programs. They encourage their cousins to come. They eventually grow up and come to Miami University. They spend four years here. Then they become adults and parents. We're just now starting to experience that, where a lot of the ones that came through our early programs in the late 1990s and early 2000s, they're parents who have kids now. Very different generation.

They come to annual meeting. They bring their kids with them. It's a very different way of engaging today than it was 30 years ago.

Interviewer: The sustainable model you were talking about that continues to replicate itself and radiates outward.

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Baldwin: Right. Exponential growth is now our challenge in all areas. Tribal leaders struggle to support us because they fund a lot of the activities of the center. I would say that's another big important thing, is we're primarily funded by the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma and Miami University.

If we're going to be directed by the tribe, then the tribe is going to invest financially into this effort.

Interviewer: That helps keep you out of some of the university politics and demands and things like that, which I think is something that those other wonderful Indigenous Studies programs encounter a lot, are those like institutional pressures and things like that.

Baldwin: Yes. We take our direction from the tribe, not the university. We can say that because the money is behind that.

Strass: It is, again, I keep using the word unique, but it is so unique in that way.

Baldwin: We don't mean that in a way to push back.

Strass: No, of course.

Baldwin: We mean that in a way to protect the integrity of the work that we're doing and to find more legitimate ways to share and to support the university. We want to support the university work in a committed relationship with the university.

Interviewer: I think that pathway that you're discussing that first it's your community. Then in that way, by serving your community, you can better serve the university because it comes from this space and that context and that set of ethics.

Baldwin: The university doesn't have to be responsible for that. It's not really the responsibility. It's our responsibility. It's ours as a community and as community members to be responsible for our community and for also taking on the responsibility of how to share that appropriately.

Interviewer: I think that's a wonderful note to end on—the idea of sharing appropriately.

[END OF AUDIO]

Notes

[1] For more information, see the "Miami Tribe of Oklahoma" webpage at https://www.miamination.com/.