NB: My name is Natchee Barnd, I am an Assistant Professor of Ethnic Studies and Native American studies as part of the School of Language, Culture and Society. Today’s date is May 30, 2013 and I am interviewing Mariah Huhndorf, a staff member of the Native American Longhouse at Oregon State University. So, we’ll start off with the basic questions just about yourself. If you can tell us what is your name and then please spell it out loud.

MH: Okay, my name is Mariah Huhndorf; that’s M-A-R-I-A-H and then Huhndorf is H-U-H-N-D-O-R-F.

NB: Great, and what is your hometown or where is home to you?

MH: I was born and raised in Kenai, Alaska.

NB: So that’s both home and hometown?

MH: Yes.

NB: Ok, just want to make sure [laughs]. What is your age, year in school right now and your major?

MH: Ok, I’m 21 years old, this is my third year in school, and my major is General Science with an emphasis on Pre-Physician Assistant.

NB: And then, fourth, are you affiliated with a particular tribe or tribes?
MH: Yes, on my mom’s side I’m Athabaskan, and then for my dad’s side, Yupik.

NB: Alright, so these next set of questions are geared toward asking about your work here at the Longhouse. So the next eight questions or so, so first, what is your position at the Longhouse right now and what do you do? And then, as sort of a follow, how many years have you worked for the Longhouse?

MH: My current position is activities coordinator…

NB: Just what is that, what do you do?

MH: I just put on events. Other organizations also reach out to me to help them put on events that have to do with the Native American Longhouse. So I’ve been doing that this year. I also worked at the Longhouse last year as a sophomore, and I was an office assistant then. There I just helped around the office, led people to the right resources, and just was a welcoming face when people came in.

NB: Can I ask you a follow up? So when you help the groups that are coming in that want to have events, what kind of things did you, what’s the range of things, I imagine there’s a lot of different variety.

MH: Usually they want to do some kind of craft. A popular one is making dream catchers. So, I usually give a little background on dream catchers and then teach them how to make them. A lot of people show up for that. I’ve also done this new event that I kind of created was Totem Art. And we just painted totem designs on pieces of wood. And of course before then I explained the meaning of it. It’s just kind of a fun craft, as well as learning a little bit about the culture that goes along with it.

NB: So, were those initiated by outside interests? Or was that something that you proposed and then brought in folks to participate?

MH: Um, both, for the Totem Art, I first did that for my own event here at the Longhouse. Then I had like dorm halls come and say “Hey, I want to do an event for my dorm.” And then I kind of collaborated with them and did it. And same with the dream catchers, we’ve done dream catchers in the past as just an event. Usually like in the beginning of the year to kind of welcome people to the Longhouse and tell them what it’s about. Then word kind of gets out that we do that, so then other dorms…

NB: Will ask for it?

MH: Yes.
NB: Ok, thanks. So, second question on this. Have you worked for any of the other cultural centers, and if so when, and what position?

MH: I have not. I’ve worked here at the NAL.

NB: You only have one more year left, two out of three here. Why did you decide to work at the Longhouse?

MH: I decided to work here because I heard about it when I was in high school because my brother and sister used to work here. So, my junior year in high school I came and visited them, and I thought it was really cool, and I just kind of thought I’d kind of bring on the tradition so all three of us worked here.

NB: Wow, that’s amazing [laughs]. That is a nice tradition. Were your expectations or hopes for your work here matched, surpassed or not matched. And it sounds like you also had that background, so I imagine you had some ideas about your experience when you came in. So, either in your position last year or this year, I guess, how did you feel your expectations for the work here were matched, or not, or surpassed?

MH: I thought it was pretty good. Like, I always thought working at NAL would be pretty cool because, like, I’d be able to share my own culture from Alaska. I definitely have been able to do that because people always ask about it, and it’s just cool to compare Alaska native culture to Native American, like, here on the coast. So, yeah, I think my expectations and hope of working here were matched.

[00:05:04]

NB: [Laughs] Okay. Can you describe the projects—I’m going to break this into actually two parts—can you describe the projects, events, activities, etcetera during the Fall Term. So, specifically during Heritage Month that were especially meaningful to you, whether they were your events or just Longhouse events more broadly.

MH: Yes, so as an activities coordinator I had come up with events, and we just obviously did them during Heritage Month. One that I did was Alaska Winter Games, which is based off the Native Youth Olympics from Alaska.

NB: Right.

MH: So I just went and explained, like, what those games, like, how they were done and then kind of the meaning behind them. And that was obviously meaningful for me because it allowed me to bring Alaska native culture down here and people kind of
realized how different it was but how there’s still connection. So, I had a lot of fun putting on that event.

**NB:** I definitely heard a lot of good feedback about it too. Everybody was very excited about it [laughs]

**MH:** [Laughs] Yeah.

**NB:** Sounds like it was a very memorable activity for a lot of folks. So if I can, so the second part has the same question, but I kind of wanted to break up the Fall Term Heritage Month stuff from the more recent stuff because, obviously, the most fresh set of events and activities just happened, so I wanted to make sure we sort of think about the year, across the year. So, can you describe the projects, events, activities, etcetera during the Winter or Spring Terms that were especially meaningful to you?

**MH:** One event that I explained earlier was the Totem Art. That turned out to be a pretty big event. I would say that’s pretty meaningful too because, again, that kind of like, goes back to my culture in Alaska and it kind of originated from there. So, just being able to do events like that, that kind of relate my culture, just makes it more happy, and I’m more excited to do stuff like that. And it was also cool too because now that with the Totem art, or Totem Pole here, like, it tied everything in. It just was a lot of fun.

**NB:** That’s great. So, what have been your challenges working at the Longhouse and how have you overcome them? [laughs]

**MH:** um...

**NB:** No challenges? [laughs]

**MH:** [Laughs] In terms of…?

**NB:** It can be in terms of anything. It can be business it can be…you know…

**MH:** Um, I would say like we have so much going on here and we’re not all working like at the same hours. So, just the communication, we do pretty good at it, but there’s just always a little thing that might not get understood. Especially with the new Native American Longhouse we have a lot of events that aren’t associated with us, so, people expect us to know what that event is, so they come in and ask questions. And I’m like “I really don’t know because that’s not our event.” So, that’s been really challenging.
NB: So, has there been a way that you or the Longhouse has found a way to try to...how do you manage that communication? Do you have to leave little post-it’s all over the place? You know what I mean, how do you...

MH: During staff meetings we usually go over the reservations. That helps because we kind of are warned ahead of time, like what events are coming up that are reservations. And then I guess we kind of ask questions of what it’s about, but again, we kind of always don’t really know. So I guess, when we do reservations we should probably, like, ask the people that are putting it on more about it, just like general stuff so that we know.

NB: Thanks. So what have been your successes working at the Longhouse? Obviously the events that you felt really good about are successes, but I think maybe just more generally as well if there were certain things you thought were successes for you.

MH: Um, I’d say in general, just working here feels like a success, um, it makes me pretty proud when I go back home and I tell my family and stuff what I do here at Oregon State, it’s not just going to school, but I’ve come to, like, share my own culture. And I know I have an uncle that, like, he’s always is excited to hear me working at the Longhouse. I’m just pretty proud to work here.

NB: Good. Let’s see, last of this grouping. What have been your interactions from staff from the other cultural centers?

MH: Um, let’s see...I think more like just support, like, we first had the little retreat in the beginning so we get to know the other staff members from other centers. And there, like, I feel like the bond like is pretty good for the start, and then like throughout the year we, like, will see each other know just knowing there’s that support. Like, we go to their events or they come to our events, and I think mostly that.

NB: Okay, so for sure the retreat and then the specific events people show up for?

MH: Mmm hmmm.

NB: So then, we have a couple questions here about the new Longhouse, which we just opened, now what, it’s been not even two weeks I think. Has it been two weeks?

MH: Since we’ve been open?
NB: Well, since the grand opening of this, well I guess it’s been open since January. I mean the grand opening in just the last couple weeks here. So, first question along those lines. Were you a part of the design process for the Longhouse, and if so, if you can talk a little about that?

MH: I’d say sort of like, when, before the Longhouse was really built, well, I guess in the process of it being built, like during staff meetings be told what’s kind of going on and then we just kind of just put our input of just tiny little things like maybe where statues should go or paintings. Um, in that sense we’ve had a part. As far as the actual building, maybe not so much, but I know it was pretty cool because when my sister was working here, like I know she would talk about, like, she actually had a part and like them coming up with the garden and how the building should be facing and stuff, so I thought that was pretty cool.

NB: Okay. And then so, follow up on that, what does the new Longhouse mean to you? That’s a big question right? [laughs] So maybe you can think about it, and we’re sort of looking out the window where the old site was, so thinking about the difference between the old one and the new one and having a new one, and what that sort of might mean for you, especially because you were here for that transition this year.

MH: Um, I guess it’s kind of like a new start, but we still keep a lot of the like, obviously the memories, and like, what it means. So, I thought that was kind of cool. Um, I don’t know I just [laughs] um, maybe you should pause it. Okay, so not only the new Longhouse kind of a new start but it kind of like leaves something. Because I know I graduate next year and like it will always be cool to come back to Oregon State, and no matter, like, how much kind of changes, the Longhouse will always be here. And I know that’s kind of for my siblings as well, like, they were in the old center, so, I mean, they won’t see that anymore, but they still, like, feel like they kind of left something here that will always be here.

NB: Yeah, that must be a nice thought to have when you come back here to be like, “I was here when that thing opened. I was the first staff that was a part of that.” That’s pretty cool. So these next questions are about the future and sort of a larger picture thinking about the Longhouse and the campus more broadly. The first one is, what projects, events, or activities would you have liked to have seen or would you like to recommend for the future? So I’m think about some things that maybe you didn’t do or that you wish or that you imagined what would have been really good to do?

MH: Um, I always look for like projects and events that like tie in everybody, because I know, like, the Longhouse everybody thinks it’s just like native students or like maybe they don’t feel as comfortable walking in if they’re not native. So, like, it’s tough
because as an activities coordinator I try do this, but try to get more, like, diversity in here or people feel comfortable about coming in here and even if it’s an event. I know we always try to like keep it to like Native American culture, but sometimes I feel like just an event that doesn’t really have to do with that would be fine because it would allow people to just come in and kind of get used to what the center is about.

**NB:** So it’s like a balance between the two, so reaching out but also working within. Sounds like you’re looking for kind of a balance.

**MH:** Yeah.

**NB:** So, what advice would you give future Longhouse staff or and/or OSU cultural center staff more generally? Folks who might be coming into this position or reading this or listening to this about to start their work here?

**MH:** Um, for the staff, like, I’d say like obviously…the way I see the Longhouse is like for people to come in and just kind of share their own background culture, like, no matter what it is. So, like for staff I know it’s kind of common like they want to share their Native American cultures because we’re the Native American Longhouse, but I would definitely suggest like asking people about their background even if they are obviously if they are not Native American, but like I don’t know, just make it more welcoming that it’s like for all cultures, so that people just feel more welcome.

**NB:** Based on working in the Longhouse, what is the take-away that you gained or that you would like to share with others? So something more like an advice that you know, someone coming in, what one thing would you want them to know? Or actually maybe the, or now that I’m rereading this, sorry, I’m mucking up our interview here. I’ll read it again, based on working at the Longhouse, what is the take-away that you gained that you would like to share with others. So, it sounds actually more like, what is it that you will actually bring with you, and we talked a little bit about that with that sort of this moment, this new beginning, but is there something else that you are taking away from your work here, assuming that, let’s assume, I don’t know if you’re coming back next year? Assuming that you don’t work here again, what is it that you’re going to take with you from working with Longhouse?

**MH:** Um, on the business sense of it, I’ve definitely taken away, like, just working with the community, being able to talk to be people, being able to work around that. Otherwise working at the NAL, I definitely gained more appreciation of like where I come from, because before like, obviously like, I knew my background, like being an
Alaskan native, like, it was just something, I lived in it so it wasn’t like that significant just because it’s my lifestyle, but coming here like learning other people’s like, oh, wow people actually live differently and have different cultures or whatever. So, I guess it just gave me more appreciation of where I come from, when I go back home to Alaska, like when I see things that I would have not though much about, now is like, oh wow, it has more meaning. Or even when I see like my own people it’s like, I don’t know, it just gives me more pride about being an Alaskan native.

**NB:** Yeah, it sounds like you’ve sort of a fresh set of eyes to see…

**MH:** Yeah, exactly.

**NB:** To see yourself and your family, that’s great. What is the biggest issue for you in terms of the purpose of the Longhouse and why is it important? The biggest issue, it sounds to me like what’s the, I guess what’s the biggest challenge for the Longhouse or the biggest…

**MH:** Um, I think again it has to do with people thinking it’s just for Native students. That is our goal, is to make Native students welcome, but like that’s the goal for everything is to make everybody feel welcome here. It’s a place people should take advantage of and use the resources, just a comfortable place to be on campus. So I definitely think that’s a challenge because I don’t know how many times people come in and ask, “Is this for only Native students?” Like, “No, it’s definitely for the whole campus and community members.”

**NB:** Yeah, I know I also get a lot of folks that say I’ve never been to the Longhouse. It’s sort of odd to me to imagine never having stepped foot inside. I think it’s part of that same idea that they are sort of a little bit leery or wary of whether or not they’re welcome. How would you describe the impact of the Longhouse on Native students, specifically, and you can talk about yourself as you have already, but you can also sort of speculate on how you see it impacting other Native students.

**MH:** Um, having the NAL definitely gave me, like, kind of a purpose on campus. Like, my freshman year I didn’t go in the dorms, so I didn’t like meet other students or anything. So when I was on campus it was like okay, I’m just here doing classes, but having the NAL like, that gave me a place on campus, kind of somewhere I kind of belonged. Also, it allows you to meet other people. I know I met Ramsi here, like our sophomore year. We both weren’t working here yet, but like I met her through the Longhouse and she ended up being, like, my best friend throughout college. So, for students that are not really clicked into the campus, it’s definitely a place where you can…
NB: Okay. How would you describe the impact of the Longhouse on the OSU and the local...I’ll reread that...how would you describe the impact of the Longhouse on the OSU and local community? So, stepping sort of outside just Native students, but thinking about OSU as a whole or even the broader, sort of, Corvallis or Oregon community?

MH: Um, I think it definitely, like, makes OSU and the local community kind of like more aware of the culture, like obviously there’s tribes throughout Oregon but people might not put much thought into that. So having the Longhouse here kind of maybe sparks that…[laughs].

NB: People are always asking, “What is that building?” It doesn’t, architecturally, it doesn’t match anything at all [laughs], so it definitely peaks people’s interest it seems. Last two on this section, what suggestions or ideas do you have for future collaboration with the OSU and local community? So, things that you think, again, the Longhouse might do or do better in terms of that connection to OSU campus more broadly or the community more broadly.

MH: I guess we don’t do too much with the community, like whenever we do events or anything we are focused towards the campus, which is fine, that is kind of our goal. But it would be cool to even like put our flyers or something not on campus because all of our flyers, they always stay right on campus. That would be pretty cool if we just went to local stores and were able to put up flyers like that. We do have some local community come to our events, but it would be a lot cooler if we got a lot more.

NB: Right, find a way to build that relationship a little more or something, formally maybe it sounds like.

MH: Yeah.

NB: And then last question in this section, can you describe your thoughts on why sharing your stories, and this can be your stories, or I think stories of students like we’re doing here with the history, the oral history and the interviews, why sharing your story individually or the story of the student staff is important to your identity or to your Native identity?

MH: Let’s see…I think it’s important to share like my story or anybody to share their stories because it allows for better connection between people. Like, you understand where they come from and kind of who they are that allows for better understanding of
each other. I know like, obviously I share a lot of stories of about back home in Alaska and like people aren’t really aware of what that culture is up there. So, just being able to share that like they get interested and I don’t know it’s just a fun way to make people more aware I guess.

NB: I guess I feel like, in sort of the lower 48, Alaska kind of gets left sort of out and sometimes in terms of the stories, even within sort of Native stories. I can imagine that could be attention or a little bit of a gap that often gets sort of left there.

MH: A lot of people think Alaska is the little, or the big island near Hawaii on the maps (laughs).

NB: Um, and so we have one bigger question here about more campus sort of experiences, and then I’ll ask if you have anything else that you want to add that maybe we haven’t covered or things that you want to go back and discuss a little bit more. So this is sort of the last question: Can you describe your experiences at OSU pertaining to your racial or ethnic identity and/or tribal affiliation? So how those identities impacted your experiences here at OSU.

MH: So, my experience at OSU coming from Alaska, like, there’s definitely a lot more people. With just the population of Oregon State students, that’s more than I’m ever used to back home [laughs]. So like just having more people around and like just the culture of it, it’s a lot different than Alaska, just even the way people might act and even dress.

[00:25:24]

NB: What were some of the first things that maybe struck you, are there any particular things that you noticed right away? Things that just struck you as odd or different or that you realized, oh, I’m somewhere new?

MH: I guess I don’t know, like I guess the Oregon culture I guess. Like in Alaska we always seem to be a couple months or even years behind in like what’s going on down in the States. So even when it came to like the music or the way people are dressing, I noticed its different, and then I see it happening kind of later in Alaska. Even when it comes to like recycling, that was kind of a new thing for me [laughs]. I was like, wow people are constantly recycling down here. So like I know I started recycling back in Alaska now. People think I’m weird up there [laughs]. But yeah, it was kind of culture shock, but it’s nice because Corvallis itself isn’t a huge city, but it’s definitely bigger than where I grew up. Overall, I think it was a pretty good transition from Kenai to going to school here.
NB: Well, so the last part is just to see if you have anything else you wanted to discuss or add or change. Sort of an open ended opportunity for you, any last statements.

MH: Well, I guess overall, I’m very proud to say that I’m going to be graduating next year from Oregon State, and I definitely think that the Longhouse has made my experience here at OSU really good. Like I said before, I met my best friend here, it was fun to be able to share my culture here, and just kind of have a bigger part of OSU campus. Like I couldn’t imagine coming to school here just going to classes and getting my degree without having the Longhouse here, like having no connection on campus or just being able to meet more people like through the cultural centers and like definitely with the cultural centers and just working here I’ve met a lot of pretty people and like my experience just wouldn’t be the same without it.

NB: Great, well, thank you so much.