

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

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Who are you, and what motivated you to become an archaeologist?

I got interested in archaeology from a young age, but I learned about my past, my pueblo's past, in a much different way. Growing up as a Tewa person, I was surrounded what archaeologists would call archaeological sites or artifacts, but I learned about them as traces of my ancestors and the places they lived and built in the surrounding landscape. As I got older, I noticed that surrounding me, a lot of these places and objects were being disturbed. So, I chose to go into archaeology to help preserve them.

At the University of New Mexico, I learned the value of archaeology as a different, complementary way of understanding our own past. This study led me into graduate school where I began deeper thinking on issues of colonialism, museum studies, and representation. Today, I wear many different hats—I am an archaeologist, deputy tribal historic preservation officer, museum exhibit and museum content developer. I like having so many interrelated aspects to my work in cultural heritage. The work that I do is community-based—where it's in the interests of my community, the preservation of our language, culture, and heritage.

What drew you to the topics that you study, and what do you hope that people will learn from your work?

My research looks closely at the Pueblo Revolt era, as it related to the events that happened near and around my home community of San Ildefonso Pueblo. The Pueblo Revolt was this Indigenous uprising that was a reaction to Spanish colonialism in the late 17th century. This is a very nuanced era of history that has only until recently been understood through the lens of European histories, so we get a very one-sided perspective. Indigenous voices, Pueblo voices, are hardly ever heard in any kind of understanding of that time period. The problem I saw was that colonialism in this region was glorified, and Pueblo voices weren't being heard.

Of course, as Pueblo people, we know our histories intimately. However, sometimes we closely safeguard those histories and don't share them outside of our communities. I wanted to find a way to give voice to Pueblo people, both past and present, and a really cool way of doing that was through archaeology.

Unfortunately, archaeology has a terrible legacy amongst Indigenous and Pueblo communities. In the past, archaeologists and anthropologists came to our communities, extracted objects or information, and didn't offer much back. A tremendous amount of information and material was taken from Pueblo people, and now sits in museums and universities across the world. As our people began to realize the detrimental effects that archaeology has had on our communities, it created resentment and bad relationships. That's true for our own community, too. We have human remains, objects of cultural patrimony, sacred objects, and the data associated with them kept in museum and institutions across the world. So much has been extracted from our community—I wanted to find a way that archaeology could start to reverse this.

I think that the representation of Pueblo people and their histories in museums and other similar institutions are just as important as what archaeologists produce, because the data that archaeologists collect eventually end up in museums. One hundred years from now, museum materials might be used to design an exhibit that represents Pueblo history and culture. Because of this, I'm also engaged in several museum projects, doing exhibit design and collaborative projects with museums across the country on how to display, exhibit, and represent Ancestral Pueblo cultural history and material.

What would you say to young people considering a career in archaeology or anthropology?

To a young person from my Pueblo, I would tell them that archaeology and anthropology are really useful in understanding our own past and histories. Archaeology is not a replacement for a traditional understanding, but it supplements one. The past is so nuanced, it is so complex. A lot of times, neither archaeology nor traditional knowledge of the past capture this full complexity. Merging these two types of knowledge is useful for our communities. For young people outside of our community, I would say that you really have to engage with the communities that you work with. When studying the past, you really have to strive to build friendships, and to be a partner with Indigenous communities.

What challenges have you faced choosing the discipline that you've chosen, and how have you faced these challenges?

There are so many challenges being a Native person doing archaeology, because archaeology has a terrible legacy in Indigenous circles. Archaeology in the Southwest, since its inception, has been practiced in a way that really wasn't considerate of Pueblo concerns. As a result, not many students want to enter the field of anthropology today.

When I became an archaeologist, I got pushback from friends, community members, elders who made offhanded comments—calling me a grave robber, or asking “what are you doing digging up your ancestors?” But the way I do archaeology is much different than has been practiced in the past. I try to use methods or techniques that are least harmful to the heritage resources in my community. I foreground traditional knowledge in the work that I do, and I use archaeology as a supplement to that knowledge. I helped establish San Ildefonso Pueblo's Tribal Historic Preservation Office, which is like a hub for archaeology-related matters. We do a lot of compliance work, but we also do a lot of community engagement that shows the community that cultural resource management and archaeology can be beneficial for the Pueblo.

How does your work as an archaeologist connect with your role in and your responsibilities to your community?

I always see myself as a Pueblo person who happens to be an archaeologist, not the other way around. I always put the interests, wants, and needs of my community first before my own. In historic preservation for our community, this “community first” model is written into our Heritage Resources Plan, a founding document that we created to guide the work that we do.