

**Rafael Otto:** Welcome to the Early Link podcast. I'm your host Rafael Otto. Today we're going to be talking about the impact of COVID-19 on native American communities, and I have the pleasure of speaking with Jillene Joseph, who is executive director for the Native Wellness Institute and a partner with the Future Generations Collaborative, and Suzie Kuerschner, who is also a partner with the Future Generations Collaborative and serves as the education mode coordinator.

Jillene and Suzie, welcome to the early link podcast.

**Jillene Joseph:** Thanks for having us!

**Suzie Kuerschner:** We appreciate the opportunity.

**Rafael Otto:** I wanted to start with the Future Generations Collaborative. If you could tell me about the work that's happening with that group.

**Suzie Kuerschner:** Sure. Well, it has been my privilege for, I think. I've gone about 11 years now in terms of the point at which there was community and inspiration and responding thoughts about how we could kind of collaborate, come together and in particular be focused on generating, promoting, supporting the development of our families from a healthy perspective, a wellness perspective, [including recognition of] historic trauma. And that's inclusive of boarding and residential schools and all of the things that have impacted our culture, our people, our health and welfare.

We recognized that fetal alcohol spectrum disorder... the use of substances during pregnancy—particularly alcohol, which produces the only lifelong disability from drugs and alcohol. We could look at it in a non-stigmatic way and really understand its presence. That it is an expression of the hurt and the pain and that its presence can carry with it shame, but rather an understanding of what is the opportunity, how can we address it?

In forming this, it was understood that we would not be an organization unto ourselves, but rather a collaborative and potential collective impact of everyone reciprocally, cooperatively, supportively, working together to create a non-stigmatic non-judgmental understanding of how fetal alcohol impacts all parts of life and all ages and stages.

How can we wrap around in a collaborative circle of care, a love and understanding of healing and understanding that is trauma informed, not only the environmental trauma that has happened within our indigenous community, but also the neurotrauma? That has come from that which we have needed to do

and in their differences, they would change the people. I'd really like to turn it over to Jillene to talk about how in so doing we recognized those folks who we identify as our elders and natural helpers who are really the community.

I've given you a bunch of gobbledygook around sort of expression of FASD. But really what's important is ... our community coming forward through groups and forums and listening sessions that guided the direction of the FGC and then carried that knowledge and continues to grow in its carrying of knowledge through our elders and natural helpers.

**Rafael Otto:** Well, Jilene, I'd love for you to talk a little bit about that as well, and if you could tell us more about the Native Wellness Institute.

**Jillene Joseph:** Yeah, sure. Thanks, Suzie. That was a great description. So the Future Generations Collaborative, we approach our work, we call it a four mode approach. We have the education mode that Suzie takes the lead on. We have an evaluation mode, we have a policy mode, and then we have a community engagement mode.

Myself and some of my colleagues at the Native Wellness Institute, we take the lead on the community engagement mode. We work with community members that we call elders and entry helpers. And they are the eyes and the ears of the community and they help us to do our engagement work by talking to people one-on-one, by helping to recruit people to attend our training and community outreach events. They help facilitate those events and community outreach. It's a really unique, culturally specific model. We're trying to provide services to our community members that might be impacted beyond the Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder spectrum.

And then of course, we provide opportunities for healing as a way to prevent it as well. So the work that I do with my organization, the Native Wellness Institute, we're based here in Oregon, Multnomah County, and we're a national nonprofit. I like to say social profit because we're benefiting society.

**Rafael Otto:** I like that shift.

**Jillene Joseph:** Yeah. This is our 20th anniversary, even though many of us that founded this organization have been doing this work for many, many decades, and we exist because of the lasting impacts of historical and intergenerational trauma and how that contributes to the contemporary trauma that we see in our communities today.

More importantly, we exist to provide opportunities for healing, and growth, and

We're doing these daily, what we're calling, Native Wellness Power Hours. Every day at noon Pacific time, we're offering an hour of programming. Workshops, storytelling, comedy, concerts... All sorts of things. That's been our response and contribution to the pandemic and just helping to bring uplifting messages and tools for people's wellbeing and things like that.

**Rafael Otto:** What else are you hearing from communities about needs? What's urgent right now related to COVID-19 and what's happening across the state?

**Suzie Kuerschner:** A tremendous potential and opportunity... is to look at what can emerge as the strengths of nurturing families. In their bonding, their attachment... the joy of being with your child, the joy of playing and learning together.

One of the first things that we all saw as a potential takeaway was the ability to help grow that within families. But at the same time, recognize the tremendous anxiety, frustration, and just lack of, you know, predictability, etc, for families and how that can grow in a more challenging direction.

So how can we be in people's lives, whether it's through frequency of contact, through phone calls, but we're all doing a lot and having some really nice responses on a daily contact base. We've been developing a toolkit that has activities, has specific COVID approaches, general and family supports from a developmental perspective.

**Jillene Joseph:** I think the Native community here, the two main Native-serving organizations, NAYA and NARA, have been outstanding in the things that they've done for the native community. And then within that, different programs, other agencies and the community have really stepped up to help reach the needs of the community.

So that's just been beautiful. Online programming, culture nights, things like that. Everything went online. It has been really, really beautiful. I always say that we are trying to help our people realize that we are descendants of miracle survivors of genocide. We've been through pandemics before, and when we focus on and embrace that resiliency. That becomes a tool to help us get through this.

We're an already traumatized community. And now here we are experiencing more trauma through this pandemic. So we're very mindful of that and very mindful of just checking in on one another and providing opportunities for continued healing and continued opportunities for balance.

encouragement or put a voice to what they might be experiencing.

**Rafael Otto:** In the collaborative. Could you say more about how widely it reaches? I know Multnomah County is involved, but how broad is the collaborative

**Suzie Kuerschner:** The Metro area is sort of its first circle. This wouldn't have happened without Multnomah County Public Health department and their support in many ways, as an infrastructure.

The support that Multnomah County commissioners gave us from the beginning—we were able to develop and deliver a proclamation for the county-wide area so that it was really understood that it could, in fact, touch not only education, but housing and really importantly, justice—community justice and then justice as a whole.

We are now a presence throughout Oregon. Yesterday, I was in a long conference meeting and then call with a variety of clients in both COOs and Douglas counties and shelter homes that we're reaching.

So it seems to be growing... Looking at the stimulus package and what might be omitted, we are looking at the federal level...[how do] we make sure that those services are not waived or eliminated.

And there's a federal bill that we'll be looking not only support, but really help guide it's deliverance and presence around fetal alcohol.

We have all of these concentric circle models, but there is this core, and at the heart of that core are the values and the commitments, the beliefs, the strengths in the beauties. Of our own indigenous Portland urban population, but in their generating of their good spirit and their good strengths of resilience, as Julian was talking about, those are radiating out through service systems for our county, metropolitan state, and then federal.

**Rafael Otto:** I did want to go back to what you were talking about Jillene with this, you know, the role of historical trauma and historical resilience, and Suzie, you brought it up again around indigenous values. And I wonder if you could just say more about that and how those intersect at this point in time.

**Jillene Joseph:** So historical trauma examples, you know, the boarding school, disease, massacres, all that sort of thing. What I always make sure that people understand is, yes, we have those examples of historical trauma that contributes to the intergenerational trauma that contributes to the contemporary trauma that

historical wisdom piece, or the historical resiliency piece. We have the cultural values, and we have the language. We have the songs and ceremonies, even if we don't know what tribe we are, or we think that that hasn't been passed down in our families, like it literally is within us, and our elders will call that blood memory.

So for example, my son, he's an avid hunter and a rifle hunter. And a couple of years ago he wanted to learn how to bow hunt. So I had a colleague, a friend of mine who is an amazing bow hunter. He got to spend a week with him. And I had another friend, a good family friend, teach him as well, how to make his own bow as well as how to bow hunt.

During this pandemic, actually, he just finished his second traditional long bow. He would also jump on YouTube and look at YouTube and learn. What I told him was, you know, just close your eyes and rely on the knowledge that's in your DNA and help that guide you as you're making this bow.

So he would save the sinew from his elk and he would make his own string out of the sinew. And it's just pretty amazing. And so that's an example of that historical resiliency that we all have. And the interesting part about it is that one of the lasting impacts of trauma is chronic negativity. One of the lasting impacts of trauma is also almost like being addicted to chaos.

And this pandemic very much like feeds into both of those, right?

**Rafael Otto:** Sure.

**Jillene Joseph:** We can go down those negative rabbit holes or we can get into chaos. And next thing we know, we think we all have the virus. So being mindful of that and when we find ourselves spinning out in that negativity or spinning out in that chaos, like to allow that to be the trigger that makes us pause and to step back into the deep breathing. Or reach out to our friend or get outside or have some movement, do something to turn that around. Through all these efforts that we're doing with the Future Generations Collaborative, through my work at the Native Wellness Institute, we're trying to be very mindful of that and to help our people focus on the positive and have that hope and have that sense of resiliency.

**Rafael Otto:** Suzie, did you have something to add to that?

**Suzie Kuerschner:** Well, I think that was beautifully said. We have at the core or the center of many of our traditional values, caring, sharing, and respect. And those values grow compassion and care and they are the strengths, as Jillene

myself saying to people that my grandmother taught me is that when we have that actually joyous privilege of participating in people's lives, we have the opportunity to hold up that mirror, that reflection of their beauty, because so many of our relatives, the hurt and the trauma—it maps the negative. Particularly when I work with families and with parents, you know, one of the first priority activities that I want to do is —yes, it's good to hear what everyone's challenges are—but let's look at what each other's beauties are. We need to really practice.

As any people who have had oppression or hurt need to do is—let's look at what is right. What is that beauty? What is that goodness within ourselves that we can see? What can we tell each other? All this talking and doing community healing is... Let's grow good gossip.

You know, we can say what we're noticing each other doing wrong. Let's just turn that well. Let's particularly turn that for our children. So when we take these stories and we bring them forward, let's hold up that mirror so that they can see their beauty. Let's tell them in these frustrated times. And home. Let's point out to them what they're doing is beautiful and kind and let them see those opportunities. Whether it's the older kids creating a poem or the younger children doing a drawing and sending it to an elder in the community that you know is lonely or a grandparent. There are so many ways that we can help our children and families really put forth those very ideals and traditions that our ancestors showed us we have. As Jillene says, those are the blocks of building those foundations that have created that resiliency.

And I think that's really one of the great treasures to share—not only among ourselves right now—but with all peoples right now. That ability to look out and to see that beauty and to bring it in and then to give it out as a gift to others.

**Rafael Otto:** I agree. I agree. That's wonderful. I wanted to ask, I don't know if there's something that we should be aware of in terms of the tribal response to the pandemic in the context of how states and the federal government is handling things, and what does that dynamic look like right now?

**Jillene Joseph:** Well, I've been pleased to see, at least in the Pacific Northwest tribes, like weeks ago, we're jumping on this and we're using their sovereignty and closing their reservation borders as an example to help address this pandemic, you know, to keep their people safe. And there was a tribe up in Washington, the Lumbee tribe, who weeks ago started their own facility to deal with tribal members that could potentially become infected if their clinic couldn't house them all. I think that response has been very proactive and because of social media, other tribes and other areas would see how other tribes are handling this.

them, and really, really stepping up. It's just been beautiful.

And that really is an extension and a modeling of our traditional values, you know, that we care for one another. The traditional value of generosity. When we pause and just look at the responses. I mean, they are really based in our culture and it's beautiful and it's inspiring to see there's other tribal communities that have high numbers of this virus already.

And so there again, when we look at communities that are already traumatized, when we look at the health disparities, and when we look at public health as a whole, traumatized communities are disproportionately represented with other diseases. This particular virus has great potential to cause much death and harm in our communities. We have to be super vigilant in protecting ourselves and protecting each other. And when we have close knit communities where maybe multi-generations are living together... close knit communities that may not have access to TVs, or radios, or social media, to even understand that we're in a pandemic. We have to work extra hard to create the awareness and then create prevention opportunities too.

**Rafael Otto:** I wanted to ask you if you could tell us where people can find out about the Native Wellness Power Hour. You mentioned it earlier and it's online. Is it through Facebook? How can people tune in?

**Jillene Joseph:** Yes, it's on our Facebook page, Native Wellness Institute. We go live every day. If you miss it, you can go back to our Facebook page and watch it. Or you can also go to our website, [nativewellness.com](http://nativewellness.com) and we have all of the videos on there. We also have a YouTube channel under Native Wellness Institute, and you can go there to view them as well.

**Rafael Otto:** Suzie, earlier you mentioned the stay-at-home toolkit that's going to be available for people. If people are interested, how do they get that?

**Suzie Kuerschner:** We provide them a link that [offers] quite a packet. That sort of begins with an approach, especially from an indigenous perspective, but hopefully it will be relevant to others in terms of how are we looking at and talking with our children about this. And then we provide, as I mentioned before, developmental activities through the age range all the way through elderhood to be supportive to those multigenerational households—both activity and information based.

And hopefully it will be fun for families and children to use over time or however long we might be sequestered. And then people should feel very free with that link to make copies because we have multiple coloring books and activities, art

Link podcast today.

**Suzie Kuerschner:** Thank you. Thanks for the opportunity.