

Interview with Don Chosa

Northern Michigan University

Marquette, Michigan

January 28, 2002

Interviewer (I): Interview with Don Chosa, Northern Michigan University, January 28, 2002. Don, would you tell us your birthday?

Don Chosa (DC): My birthdate is 3-15-1958.

I: Alright, and how long have you been at Northern?

DC: Since 1991.

I: Alright, and why did you come here? What was the circumstances? You were offered a position teaching?

DC: Yes, because they were starting a new Native American Studies program and it was the start of that year.

I: So you've been here since the beginning of the program?

DC: No, no. I worked here for two years, then I worked, and then I went to northern Minnesota for, to learn more about the language. And so I lived there for four years, and then I came back here and started back here again in 2000. And I think I worked here up until from 1991 to 1994, or maybe '95. I can't remember.

I: And what did you teach originally?

DC: Ojibway Language or Elementary Anishinaabe, I can't remember what it was called then. But, and Culture. There was, the two were included and put together.

I: And so you went to Minnesota then to, you took classes there or you were?

DC: No, I went and stayed near relatives that were fluent in the language so I could learn more about the language.

I: And then when you came back in 2000 you came back as the language professor?

DC: Yes.

I: And that's the class you teach now?

DC: Yep.

I: Are there any other classes that you teach?

DC: I teach Anishinaabe Culture and Community, but next year that's going to be included in the language, so language and culture and community are all in one class, or it'll be in two classes, part one

and part two and they'll be included together. But I also teach one section of Native American Experience.

I: And so you are a traditional speaker then? You have been speaking Ojibway language since you were a child?

DC: Yes.

I: And you are Ojibway?

DC: Yes, um-hmm, and Ottawa.

I: And Ottawa?

DC: Uh-huh.

I: And where are you from initially?

DC: Well I was raised for the most part in northern Minnesota, and then, but my grandfather and mother were from here in Keweenaw Bay so we used to come back here and visit while I was growing up. And then when I got older we moved here, and we live on the Keweenaw Bay Indian Reservation now.

I: And have you taught anywhere other than at Northern?

DC: I've taught the language at Suomi College, and also at Michigan Technological University, and Vermillion Community College, and Mesabi Community College, the last two are in northern Minnesota.

I: And so, do you see that getting, wanting to go back to the culture being part of the language classes or being separate?

DC: So, that it fulfills more requirements for the students so that they, so that they can get those credits that they need.

I: And that would give you a better enrollment in your classes?

DC: Yes, a better enrollment.

I: So when you came to Northern, who was the Director at the time, of the Native Studies Department, was there one?

DC: There was an interim-director, Leanna Loonsfoot but before that I had been in contact with Dennis Tibbetts. And, so I was keeping, keeping up with what was going on here, as far as the Native Studies program, even, all the while I was gone I had been in contact with the Directors that were here.

I: And so did you know either of the directors prior to coming here, or did you apply and at that point how did you?

DC: Well I applied when Dennis Tibbitts was here, but at the time they already had an instructor so, but then in time it didn't work with the instructors that they had, and so as soon as the position became available I came back because I wanted to work here.

I: And so you say that the Ojibway Language class, classes is, are central to the Native Studies Department? That you need to have them?

DC: I would think so, yeah.

I: Yeah, and just Ojibway language because that's the language of the area, because that would be or do you think that additional Native language classes should be taught?

DC: No, no, I think that the Ojibway language would meet the needs of anyone and any other tribes in the area because they're all related languages anyways. So it'd fulfill the needs of anyone from any tribe in this area.

I: So as a, you're a full-time professor at this point or an adjunct?

DC: Full-time Adjunct.

I: Full-time Adjunct.

DC: Um-hmm

I: And what is your educational background?

DC: Currently I'm taking classes to get my Bachelor's Degree, and I'm taking them here at Northern, so.

I: And you are [studying]?

DC: History. With a minor in Native American Studies. I already have my minor all done, all the requirements for my minor, so now I'm just working on the Bachelor's Degree itself. Which I expect to have in two years, or probably two years because I can't take classes fulltime like I would like to but I'm too busy with work and with family and different things. So I can only take what I can take in the time that I have.

I: Was that part of the agreement to become a teacher that you needed a bachelor's degree, or it didn't matter?

DC: No, it didn't matter. But I just want one.

I: After you have that degree and you'll try to teach classes beyond the language portion of the minor?

DC: Yes. I would like to, it's not something I've really thought about but if they wanted me to, I would.

I: How do you see _____, the department for eleven years now, how do you see that it's changed over the years?

DC: Well, they didn't have any like offices or anything, I think, then. They didn't, I'm not sure who the Director was but I know that it may have been Melissa Hearn or Lillian Heldreth, I don't remember which. But I know they were both working with it, but I wasn't sure what their titles were or whatever. But I know that they had their, they were teaching other classes that weren't involved with the Native American Studies so it was kind of like, it seemed like it wasn't a full time thing with them. And now we have a fulltime director and, you know _____ Stephanie Russo who is the secretary or, she keeps track of everything and _____, so it's actually like a department now with different people working too with the department, so.

I: And as a distinct department how does that affect how the students view it or the other ____ departments, do you think it gives it more, it gives it more legitimacy or precedence?

DC: I think it would give them more legitimacy as a department and to see there is so many students that are involved in the classes and that, you know, that it's really functioning as something that the students want and need.

I: How about external Native Studies programs? ____ the department ____ like the Pow-wow, are you involved with any of those aspects of the department?

DC: No. I attend the Pow-wows, I don't really...I don't like put it on or whatever or help, you know, in that way as far as other than I attend them. Well, I dance at Pow-wows, I'm a traditional dancer as well as my whole family. So, working here and being a part of this institution, I feel obligated to attend the pow-wow and be a part of it in that respect. But as far as maybe fundraising, things like that, I think it was usually the, there's a committee or whatever comprised of students that do all of the leg-work more or less, setting up, doing that part of it.

I: Do you feel that there's a, that the department is a unified group, that there's a lot of, there's a friendly feeling among all of the various parts of the department, and those professors who are not actually in the department but teach?

DC: Yeah, I feel almost like, it almost feels like a family or something. I get along with all the people that teach, you know, that aren't necessarily in the department as well as people who are in the department. And so it's a real warm feeling to be around the other people that work here.

I: Can you tell me some more about your, your authenticity and how that, tell us about all that, about your. You said you were born in, or you were raised in both Minnesota and the Keweenaw area. And why, could you just tell us a little more about that?

DC: Well actually, my dad was in the Air Force. Like, do you want my life story more or less? Okay. My dad was in the Air Force, and so and my mother, well he met my mother in Keweenaw Bay when he was stationed there at a Air Force base in Houghton or Hancock somewhere. And so he came to the reservation to visit and met my mother and then they got married and then when he was stationed overseas, she just went right along with him. And then so I was born in England. And then he retired from the service when I was six. And then when I was six we moved back to his reservation in northern Minnesota and then we lived there. And the reservation was...they, well no one on the reservation had running water or electricity or anything like that. And we used to haul water from the lake, and then that's just the way we lived until maybe I was twelve, and then they started putting running water and electricity and they started building new houses there. And, so we got all the modern conveniences and then when I was, then we lived there up until I was a teenager. Then I lived a couple of years in Bessemer, Michigan, and went to high school there because we had, my mom moved there because she had a sister that lived there. And so we lived there up until, up until I, until the year before I graduated from high school, then I moved to Portland, Oregon and then right after I graduated I went in the Marine Corps. And then was in the Marine Corps for three years and then was discharged, and then I came back to the reservation, and the living conditions were so poor at that time. There were no jobs and there was a lot of drinking, and it was just real, there was nothing there. And so my dad had moved to Texas, so I moved to Texas to stay with my dad and that there is where I started going to college, and

I went to college there for two years. And then, and then after a few years of college I moved to my mom's reservation in Keweenaw Bay, and then there I continued on to college, I took courses at Soumi College and got a job working at a lower type print shop for a while and after the print shop I started working at a kind of group home for teenagers, for Native American youth, and I worked there for six years. And in that time I, I was teaching the clients that we have there the language, and also taking some classes, and then just took classes. You know, whenever I could, but I didn't get my Bachelor's Degree, so. And then I got a job working at Northern, well, first at Soumi, I started teaching. And then from Soumi, I went to Michigan Tech, I started teaching. And then for a while I was teaching simultaneously at Michigan Technological University and at Northern, and then I started at Northern I was teaching between the two just as a part-time adjunct at both places. And then, and then as well I got a job teaching in the Bilingual program at the local elementary school in L'Anse summers. So then for a while there I was teaching at three different places. So, and then, and then, I got tired of, like all these part-time jobs. And then I moved to Minnesota and had a fulltime teaching job there at, and in the evenings I was the Youth Director for the reservation there. And so I worked with the youth in the evening and then taught during the day at two of the colleges there. And then I felt like living in Michigan because it's different up there. It's a more, kind of a depressed area. The reservation is hard to live on because of the politics that go on, and, and so we decided to move back here again. And the schools are, the elementary schools, and I have five children, by the way. I forgot to mention I got married and had five children. But, and so we don't like the elementary schools there, we didn't feel like our children were getting the proper education they needed. And so we moved back to L'Anse, where we felt the schools are much better. So that's where I am at now.

I: Do you think it makes a difference, not only being Native but living on the reservation and being involved with Native Communities where you are teaching, especially culture classes would actually give you a different perspective on Native cultures, more current?

DC: Well, I don't, well, when I was a teenager we lived off the reservation for a while, and I didn't like it because it felt like I was losing my identity or whatever. And so, I guess for myself and my personal well-being I felt that I needed to be on the reservation. And I think it does make a difference as far as teaching, you know, to be able to. It's kind of like you're involved with it so much that you know, living there, that you know everything that's going on, and I think living off the reservation you just don't know as much, and you don't know what's going on, you don't know what's up. And the thing is, is that reservations are changing all the time and the culture is changing all the time, so that if you aren't involved with it, well then, there's a lot of changes taking place that you're not aware of, and if you aren't aware of them you certainly can't share them with students. So, I feel that it has made a big difference.

I: And you also go ricing for example and.

DC: The cultural things such as harvesting wild rice, we're involved with, we're involved with, well we attend pow-wows and we dance at pow-wows, we're all dancers. So a large part of our time is also spent working, say, making moccasins and our traditional regalia that we wear. And so we have five children, and every year they're outgrowing what they have, so we have to make, we're always working on something for one of our kids or maybe a part of our regalia, you know, wears out and has to be replaced, so. And all of the things that we wear are handmade, so we have to keep up that. And we harvest rice every year, wild rice. We go to northern Minnesota and harvest rice and we also harvest

rice in Keweenaw Bay. They, about four years ago they planted rice in some of the smaller lakes on the reservation that probably had rice at one time, but due to neglect and to not maintaining water levels there, the wild rice no longer grows in the area. And they reseeded and it took right away. So now we have a couple of good rice beds in Keweenaw Bay also. So now we, every year we've been ricing Keweenaw Bay first and then packing up and going to northern Minnesota and also harvesting rice up there. And we practice our ceremonies, yearlong, all year long, the ceremonies for, that we do in the fall and in the spring and in the winter, and the things that we do for the different seasons. And we teach our kids, and we have language classes for our own children, right in our home once a week or we'll all meet at, say, one of my sister's houses and all of our children, because I have one brother and three sisters and nieces and nephews who all have children, so usually we have about sixteen kids that meet once a week and we have language lessons for our own children. Kind of like homeschooling them, so we do that as well.

I: In the classes that you teach at Northern, what is, are they mostly Native students or is it a mixture of wherever ____ minors and, or ____ minors. What is true of the general breakdown of the class?

DC: Yeah. I never really, other than, well there is a mixture of Native American students as well as non-Native students. There is generally more non-Native students than there are Native American students which is only logical because there's not that many, but, but then a lot of people that are, that you would think are non-Native have some, a lot of them have an Indian background. You know, like even though they're not enrolled in any tribe or a member of any tribe at all then you know still have someone in their background who they have an Indian or they have a little Indian blood in them. So there's a lot of students like those, I don't know what you would consider that, me neither. I mean I guess they're a non-Native but they have an interest because of that, and a lot of them are there just because they have an interest in the language. And I think this year my enrollment was either twenty-two or twenty-five students. I have to look at my roster, but the enrollment's pretty high even though, even though it hasn't been integrated with the culture yet, like they're planning on doing. And, I have my new rosters right here of how many students are enrolled in there now. There's twenty-two, twenty-two students in the updated roster. Twenty-two that are just taking it because they have, purely because of an interest in the language, so the enrollment's been going up. But wherever I've worked, after I've worked there for a couple of years the enrollment starts rising. I don't know if the word gets around or that the class might be interesting or what happens but it seems like the enrollment starts going up. Oh I think too that, before the, well when I worked here before when I started in 1991 it was just a part-time position, so I was actually forced to leave to find full-time employment somewhere, because I needed the benefits and things like that. So now that it's full-time, and I think in the meantime then they'd have like some instructors that were, that had problems whether may have been through alcohol or whatever, which is a big problem with a large part of the Native American community. But I think it affected them to such a degree where they just didn't show up to class at times. And so I think that it didn't look too good for a while, for the department, but, but now I think that the students see that there's someone that's there steadily and, who has like a set curriculum, I guess, and everything's all planned out. And I think that they see that and that's probably what they're looking for. So that's why the enrollment is rising.

I: Is there anything you'd like to say as far as what you hope to see out of the department over the next maybe five years or so? Is there anything that, any changes or anything you'd like to do the same or?

DC: I would like to become tenured. Something that I would always be looking forward to if that were a possibility. And, and just that it keeps going, you know, at least as long as it has now. I know that they're looking at, I don't know if they're trying to expand or just have like a, like right now our offices are all, I think they are kind of looking for a more central location. They're keeping their eye out for something that's maybe considered a more central location, instead of just the little offices that are adjacent to each other. They're looking for like an actual, sort of a place, I guess, I don't know how to describe it but. Other than that, I don't know.

I: Do you see the minor changing into a major hopefully in time in the near future?

DC: Um, yes. Something we had also talked about and do I see it? I don't know, yet, you know that would be good if that could be a possibility if there were enough students involved and if they were as, the interest in possibly, marketable skills out there that people would need, you know, for someone to get.

I: What do you see as the benefits of being either a Native Studies minor or a major if that happened?

DC: Well for the minor I think that it's a good program, especially those who are in education or maybe those that are in Social Services, you know, where it gives them a feel for diversity, and I think that it also answers a lot of questions of you know, things that were taken for granted at one point or maybe weren't understood. And I think that it dispels stereotypes, as far as people working in those fields, so that they can go in there with an understanding of the people that they're going to be working with. And that they garnered a more diverse background and have a better understanding, and you know, instead of like how it's been in the past where the people have been treated poorly actually because they were Native American, because of the stereotypes, because of Social Workers and teachers that didn't know anything about Native Americans and those people with a Native American background. So I think that it helps there, and actually I think it helps, you know, whoever takes these classes, I know that they learn a lot especially with the Native American Experience classes, I think they learn tolerance, you know, I think that's needed in the whole country as a whole. So I think that...

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DC: Okay. I think it teaches them a lot about their history that they haven't learned, that they get a truer sense of the history of the United States or you know, seeing through another people's eyes and _____. And so I think it helps or would help them a lot in their lifetime to know more about their own history. And I think it gives a little better understanding of where they've come from as well, to reach the point where we're at now.

I: Do you, have you published anything, do you have any books planned, any projects planned along those lines?

DC: Well actually, yeah I do want to write some stories, I know that there are some family stories I guess if that's what you want to call them of things that need to be published, you know, that are a part of history I guess that these stories and anecdotes aren't, aren't written somewhere that ours is probably the last family that knows a lot of these things and if they aren't written down then they're just going to

be lost more or less. So there's things that I would like to get published. And I've done some artwork and I've had illustrations for books that have been published, so I've illustrated some books that have been published but I've never written anything myself. And I would also like to make a language curriculum and, you know, that's more specifically to this area. And you know, the dialects that are spoken in this area. And there's a lot of things we have now are like not from this area, but we're using them you know for convenience. But there's nothing published so I would like to get a curriculum published as well, right through Northern Michigan University or for the students of this area, for the language. So that's something I've been looking at. I've attended a workshop on an A.N.A. grant, on a language grant, and I've been working on, towards getting, trying to get the different materials that required for that grant. So I've been gathering those materials, I don't know if I'll be able to do it in time. I think I have like three days, or maybe two but, to try to get that grant, for the reservation as well as the college.

I: Do you attend a lot of conferences? _____?

DC: Yeah. I have attended a lot of conferences, language conferences. I've attended one in Sault Ste. Marie and different things, other than going to the pow-wows, _____ different things. But I wouldn't say a lot of them, but I'd like to go to more of them if I could. And I guess kind of keep, keep in touch with other speakers, keep in direct contact more if I could.

I: Is there a large? What is the size of Ojibway speakers in the area?

DC: On the reservation right now? There's hardly any, there's maybe probably two, so there's not hardly any. But they do have these language conferences like in Sault Ste. Marie and also around the other end of the lake, towards Duluth area. And up north of Duluth they have _____ conferences where more of the fluent speakers live and so they get together and have these conferences so often. But it all depends on how much money is available. So if there's no money, then or if it needs to be used for other things, like a lot of times if there's money available it's more important to have guest speakers and presenters, you know, for the students, than to attend conferences or anything.

I: Do you have anything else for me?

DC: No.

I: No? Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW