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Oral history interview with G. Peter Jemison, 2021 April 25 and May 3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with G. Peter Jemison on 2021 April 25 and May 3. The interview took place in Jemison's studio and home in Victor, New York, and was conducted by Nicole Scott for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

G. Peter Jemison and Nicole Scott have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

[. . . -Ed.]

NICOLE SCOTT: Hello, this is Nicole Scott with G. Peter Jemison. Today is Sunday, April 25th, [2021]. We are recording from the Smithsonian—sorry, I messed up. We are recording for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. We are recording from Peter's studio, the Schoolhouse Studio, located in Victor, New York. Victor is located on the land of the Onodowaga, the People of the Great Hill. In English, they are known as the Seneca, the Keeper of the Western Door. They're one of the Six Nations that make up the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. Okay. Great job—

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes, well done.

NICOLE SCOTT: Hi, Pete, how are you?

G. PETER JEMISON: I'm good, Nicole—

NICOLE SCOTT: And so we're—

G. PETER JEMISON: —it's great to get together with you again.

NICOLE SCOTT: Yes. We're in the Schoolhouse Studio.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes, we are.

NICOLE SCOTT: What does this place mean to you?

G. PETER JEMISON: Well, it's a place that I've been working in for quite some time, and for some reason, it's kind of a freeing atmosphere, where I seem to get a lot of ideas here, and I seem to be able to create a lot of work. One thing that I do have to battle with is mice, you know—[laughs]—occasionally, but other than that, the studio is, you know, a great space. And when it gets warmer, sometimes I'm seeing wasps that migrate in but, you know, I still manage to get a lot of work done here.

[They laugh.]

NICOLE SCOTT: You said mice, and I put my feet on the chair.

G. PETER JEMISON: I saw you!

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: There are no mice running around, you can be—you'll be fine.

NICOLE SCOTT: Okay. Well—

G. PETER JEMISON: [Coughs.] Excuse me, okay.

NICOLE SCOTT: So, your artist name is G. Peter Jemison—

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes—

NICOLE SCOTT: —but—

G. PETER JEMISON: —my real name is Gerald Ansley Jemison, but since I was a child, I have gone by the nickname Pete, which then became Peter. And I always say it's my nom de plume, meaning it's, sort of, my artistic name that I use, Peter Jemison, or G. Peter Jemison, and it has just really stuck with me, you know, like I say, for years. And so, now, I just commonly use it when I'm, you know, doing anything related to my art.

NICOLE SCOTT: So for this interview, we're going to call you Pete.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay, that's perfect, I don't mind.

NICOLE SCOTT: So Pete, tell—tell us a little bit more about yourself. Where did you grow up, when were you born?

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes. Okay, I was born January 18, 1945, and I was born in the small town called Silver Creek, New York, which is in western New York state, and it is probably 10 minutes away from the town where I actually lived. There is a small hamlet called Irving, and I grew up in Irving, New York, which is a border town of the Cattaraugus Reservation.

[00:05:08]

The reservation was across the Cattaraugus Creek, and I could throw a stone across the creek, literally. It—this is a—this is more of the size of a river, the Cattaraugus Creek, especially the part where I am—where I would—grew up. And there was a car bridge that went across the creek that connected the reservation with, I say the hamlet of Irving, the small village of Irving. And so I grew up in this border town, or border village, and—but I was back and forth across the—the car bridge, the walking bridge, I wouldn't say daily, but, you know, maybe almost daily, because, you know, we played on both sides of the—the river. We fished, we hunted, we rode our bicycles. I worked, later I worked in a canning factory that was on the reservation side; my grandmother lived there, my cousins lived over there, and, you know, we were in and out of people's homes, you know, and that kind of thing.

And so, it's where I grew up, and I have been describing it to people as a kind of a multicultural community, and the reason I say that is, in the summertime, these men came from the tropical islands like Puerto Rico, Trinidad, and Jamaica to work for the farmer who lived next door to me, and they literally stayed in a housing that he provided at the back of his property. And then in the summertime, when the canning factory was working, and it went until the early fall, people came from the South, Black people came from the South, and they worked in the canning factory. And people from the town worked in the canning factory, Senecas worked in the canning factory. And then there were a group of Italian immigrants who had kind of a dormitory style of housing that they all lived in, and they came out of Buffalo, and they worked in the canning factory. So there were all kinds of people around, you know, especially in the summertime. And, you know, it was a place where they canned beans, and tomatoes, and beets, and so it was a job. One thing I laugh about is that our hourly rate was one dollar an hour. Regardless of what you were doing, you made a dollar an hour.

I also describe the town this way, and I say that there was a general store in the town, and everyone came there to pick up their mail, those that didn't get rural delivery, and they also came there to get cold cuts and other kinds of things that he had. You could buy rope there, you could buy pants there, you could buy some shirts, and things like that. And in the back of the store was a post office, and so I often describe that there were all kinds of different smells inside there. You could smell the cheese that was behind the counter, you could kind of smell the area that was a little bit dusty where all of these older things were. It was kind of jumbled up, it wasn't really well kept on one side of the building where the clothing and other items—I don't know what they called that, but—dry goods, they were there. And then a post office, seemed like it had a kind of its own smell, too. And as kid, you know, you notice these things, and you think about them.

And then across the street from that was a place called Mott's Store, and they sold canned goods and ice cream cone, or an ice—you know, like a fudgsicle or a popsicle you could get there, candy bars, and later on, they sold beer from that place. And so that was—that was the town, and people came from the Rez. This is before really big supermarkets came, you know, around us, and it was before variety stores, you know, like Dollar General or anything like that, nothing like that existed. And so, you know, as kids, we grew up just seeing a lot of

different people coming into town, and that was my childhood.

And one of the things I didn't mention was I could walk to school. There was a school right in Irving, and it was, you know, a five-minute walk from my house, and so we would go home for lunch. But we—[my sister and -PJ] I went—in my school, it was very small, so the first and second grade were in the same room, third and fourth were the same room, fifth and sixth were in the same room.

[00:10:11]

We didn't go to kindergarten, we went right to first grade, and so we were relatively young when—about seventh grade, our schools centralized, and all of these remote country schools really all came together in a central school in Silver Creek, and so we all got—put together, and we met people from different parts of the, you know, outlying towns. And—and, you know, we—we suddenly had to kind of really knuckle down and be in school, because in Irving it was a much more relaxed atmosphere, where, on a day, we might leave school and go out and walk along the creek bank and just look at things that were out there, and maybe we'd even have a cookout. In the afternoon, we might be playing softball outside, or in the morning, we might be playing dodgeball in the basement of the building. You know, we—the games were as much a part of the day as were—as was the schooling that we were doing. And that's—you know, that's—so it was kind of much more relaxed, until we went to Silver Creek, where we had to really do homework and do schoolwork and kind of knuckle down. And some of us really struggled in that transition, you know. And I know I struggled, but I managed to pass seventh grade. I guess that's what I would really say about Irving at this point.

NICOLE SCOTT: How about your family; tell us a bit about your parents, are you the oldest sibling, the youngest, the middle?

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah, I'm the oldest, and I have a sister Ellen who is two years younger than me. My father was an ironworker, so he commuted to Buffalo daily, you know, Monday through Friday. And my mother was, I guess people would say a housekeeper, you know, or a stay-at-home mom. She really took care of the kids and took care of the house, and it was a lot of work, because in those days, you know, for—when I was really young, I mean, we had a pump where she pumped the water. And so, when she was doing, like, her washing, she had a washing machine that's set out on the porch, and she had to boil water on the stove and bring that over to the washing machine, pour it in, you know, and, I mean, we had things like a scrub board, you know. There was a while when I was very young when we washed up in a tub, you know, that was one of those—I don't know what they are, galvanized steel tub, you know, we washed in that. When I was very young, we had an outhouse, you know. I know people—have a hard time believing that today, but that was—that was really the way it was. And we burned coal, and coal was delivered and went down into the basement of the house. It was a really rough basement; it had a dirt floor.

When I was really young, we had an icebox, so, a truck came through town with a block of ice on it, and my parents bought the ice, put it in the bottom of the icebox, and that's how we kept our food, you know, chilled. In those days they delivered milk to your back door; you set out the empty bottles, and they brought in new bottles and set them down, and that was your milk. You know, it sounds quaint, but we would run along behind the ice truck, and he would throw us off a piece of ice, and we would suck on that ice in the heat of the summer to cool off, and it was something that was fun to do, you know.

And we had kids that would come to town in the summer, and they lived in Florida, and they didn't wear any shoes, you know. We'd see them walking barefoot. We all had, like, sneakers or something like that, but these kids were barefoot all the time, and that was sort of the way they were. And I just—I remember those things from my childhood, and it seemed like it was kind of dusty, you know, the town was a bit dusty. And in the spring of the year, we got floods, and the water would—the ice would come out of the creek and go down to the mouth at the lake—at Lake Erie, jam up there. The water—

[00:14:59]

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G. PETER JEMISON: —would back up, and it would flood the fields behind my house and all around the town. And we lived on a road called Buffalo Road, but Buffalo Road was like one

of the highest roads in the town, and it was also known as the dike road because, literally, the water would not go over that road, and if it did, it went into town, and all houses would have been under maybe three feet of water, or something like that. So that dike road held that water back, and our house was just a little bit higher than the dike road, so the water never came into the house. But I—as I got older, I saw a time when the water was right up to maybe less than a foot beneath the floor, you know, down in our basement. And so it—you know, there were times when it was a little scary watching the water rise and wondering what was going to go out, and this part of the story, again, I think people would find hard to believe. As the water went out, fish would get trapped in the fields, and I would go hunting with my bow and arrow and hunt fish, and then take the fish to places where I knew people would buy them, and I would sell my fish. [Laughs.]

NICOLE SCOTT: A little entrepreneur.

G. PETER JEMISON: A little entrepreneur when I was younger; didn't get a whole lot of money but, you know, go get a candy bar, or whatever else I had in mind. [Laughs.] Yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: So we're sitting in your studio, it's yellow and white, bright colors.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes.

NICOLE SCOTT: And we're by a warm fire. Just describing for people who are listening, the environment. It's very cozy, but on the wall over here are some images of your family?

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes.

NICOLE SCOTT: You want to describe this art piece?

G. PETER JEMISON: I started doing a series of stories about members of my family, my mother and father in particular, but many other people too. I say I inherited from my family shoe boxes full of family photos, and the photos, you know, I just kind of would look at them, really, and sometimes wondering who were these people in the photos that I couldn't identify. And then I would, you know, of course, see photos of my family members that were gone now, and yet, you know, that I had good memories of them, and I wanted to see them again, and so I had these photos.

And so—and in this one we're looking at here, I gave it the title *Bridgeman*. This bridge that goes across the Cattaraugus Creek; or that, I should say, went across the Cattaraugus Creek, is no longer there. That bridge that I used to walk back and forth across, at some point, the highway department, I guess, decided it was not safe, so they took it down. And so now there is no way to cross the creek right there, unless you walk over to the railroad tracks, which is kind of dangerous, there's a lot of train traffic, so—

But the story is that my father, who is in this photograph facing the bridge and his back is to us, at one point, painted that bridge. You know, it was at a time when it was repainted; basically, I mean, it had probably been painted when it first was put up, and then he was hired to repaint it. At least this is what one of my cousins told me, and this would've been, you know, when I would have been very young, or perhaps even before I was born that he did it. He grew up in this town of Irving, and he basically never left it except for a brief time during the Second World War. My father was—did not pass the physical to get into the Army because he had a sinus condition, and so he escaped the Army, but he wound up working in a factory in Buffalo. And so, for probably at least a couple of years, my mother and he moved into an apartment in Buffalo, and this was before he started ironworking. He began ironworking because one of his uncles was an ironworker and got him into the union. So, this is my father looking at this bridge, and he's fishing. He's fishing in the Cattaraugus Creek, he has a line in his hand, and later on he used fishing poles, but there was a while when he would just fish with a line, and he knew where he wanted to go.

[00:05:00]

And on the—on his right is an image of my grandmother holding a hammer in her hand, and standing on the back of a stool—standing on top of a stool, and doing something with the window. Whether she was trying to open it or what she was trying to do, I'm not sure, but she was up on this stool, and my mother managed to get a photograph of my grandmother up against the back of her house. And she didn't like having her picture taken, so this is one of the few where I can actually see her facing toward us. And my grandmother's name was

Carrie, she was my father's mother, Carrie Jemison, she was Wolf Clan, and therefore my father was Wolf Clan—was Wolf Clan.

And then the next photo, the smaller photo, is of my father as an elementary school student, and he would've gone to Irving Union too, the same school I went to. And then there's a photograph of my aunt; my mother is holding my cousin Mike, and then standing on the ground is myself and my sister. And there's an image of the back of a car, and that car is from 1947, as I recall, so I was about three maybe in that—roughly that age, and my sister would've been younger. Maybe I was as old as four; I could've been a little bit older. And then if we go all the way to the far left, there's a photograph of our outhouse flooded during a time when the spring floods flooded the fields behind my house, and that would have been a real problem with the outhouse underwater.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: And we—by that time that building would've become the toolshed, and we had an indoor plumbing at that point, so I don't think we were using it anymore in this—from when this photo was taken. A lot of the photographs were taken by my mother, and of course if my mother is in the photo, it wasn't her, it was maybe my father, or another member of the family was holding the camera.

And then, in the lower half of this canvas, on the far left, it's my uncle Ansel, and then a picture of me, and my grandmother's on the porch of this house that we see, an image of her standing there, and then my sister is on the Allegany Territory, and kind of walking through. And it's a photo that she likes, so I wanted to use that in this—I call them photo assemblages.

And then there's a photo of my mother, it's almost like it was taken in one of those photo booths; she's got a hat on. And then, next to the photo of my father in elementary school, is a photo of me in the backyard of my grandmother's house, yeah, with sheets handing—hanging on the—hanging on a line—[sound of cat meowing]—behind me, you know, drying. In the background here, you'll hear our cat, and his name is Hobbes. [Sound of cat meowing.] So, he wants to come into the studio, but I know he'll be a little bit of a pest, so we—we've kept him out, but you might hear him in the background of this recording we're doing today.

So this series of pieces, I did a number of them, and it's taking these very small photographs, taking them to Staples, blowing them up, assembling them on a black wall that I have here, or a black canvas, and then taking a photograph of them with my phone. Sending that image that I take in my phone, after I've adjusted it, to a printer who is here in Victor. That printer then prints the image on a canvas and stretches it for me. And so that's how these pieces have come about, and the quality of cameras—or of phones, cell phones really—it's taking a picture with my cell phone, if I didn't say that correctly—you can get this kind of quality, you know, with a cell phone. And so that's how these pieces are created.

NICOLE SCOTT: I'm looking at this, and I'm just thinking, like, the—having a camera back then—

[00:10:06]

G. PETER JEMISON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NICOLE SCOTT: —was it expensive, like, were you one of the—did everyone have a camera?

G. PETER JEMISON: I don't know how many other people had one. It couldn't have been too expensive because, you know, we—we really were not wealthy, we were really not well-off. My—when we were younger, my father always had automobiles that were not—they were always used cars, you know, and—and some of them—and there was a time when he had to tie the door with a rope, one of them, so the door wouldn't come open. [Laughs.] And so, he had the window partly down, so the rope was tying off the door so it wouldn't fly open. I think that was a short-lived experience, but he did have one like that. And I—you know, I think we had just enough to—we could eat, and we could have—you know, take a trip here or there, like to the city of Buffalo to go shopping for school clothes or something like that, or go shopping at a market that was in the city of Buffalo where they had good quality meats, I guess. But we were living, really, you know, pretty close to the margins; we—we didn't have a lot of money.

But I think these cameras, like the Brownie and so forth, they weren't too expensive, I don't believe. I do have a camera that my mother used, but it's at my house, and it's a small one like this that she would've used quite a bit. It's not a Kodak product, but it—it's a good camera. Yeah, I—but my mother apparently really liked taking pictures because, like I said, I had a box full of—you know, about probably two or three boxes of photographs.

NICOLE SCOTT: I think it's so cool to have pictures of your parents and your grandparents. This collage reminds me of a time when, for Mother's Day, when I was young, of thinking I was going to create this collage for my mom for Mother's Day, and I had all my siblings create one with me. And we went through the photo album, and we cut all these pictures up and gave it to her, and she had to like it because we made it for her, but later on when I got older she said that she was devastated that we had cut up all of these photos, these precious photos and pasted them onto, like—some silk fabric that I had found somewhere—

G. PETER JEMISON: [Laughs.] Yes, yes.

NICOLE SCOTT: —and pasted them onto a cardboard. And now that I'm older I'm like, well, this is smart, taking a picture of the pictures and then putting them on, instead of destroying those images, but—

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah, that's—that's what I was thinking too, is that, you know—of course, I wanted to preserve these little photos, and—you know, and kind of take care of those and not wreck them. But I—one time, you know, we do the husking bee here, where we get the corn ready for drying, and a—a young Mexican guy came who was, you know, an illegal immigrant anyway, he was brought by a friend, and I was showing him these, right? And he was saying, "Don't you feel lucky, and aren't you—you know, you have a lot of responsibility because you have these." And I hadn't thought of that, you know, like, that sort of responsibility, and I did feel lucky. He—but he went on to say that when he left Mexico, he was not able to bring anything with him, that everything was left behind except the clothes on his back. And it—then it really dawned on me, you know, that—I mean, he didn't have any images or memories of his family or of his town or anything like that, you know, not that he could carry and look at. And then I really began to think about, I was lucky, you know, to have these, and I—I should take care of them, and I should, you know, try to pass them along to my other—my sons.

NICOLE SCOTT: How has—I guess, these photographs, your childhood—

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NICOLE SCOTT: —how you grew up, how has that influenced your art?

G. PETER JEMISON: Well, you know, when I grew up, my family, they were members of a church, which was an Episcopalian church, and the church was on the reservation, and so the congregation was Indian, right, it was Seneca, with a few other, like, Cayuga maybe, or other nations there, and there may have been one white family that came to the church, and then of course the minister, he was white. And so, I grew up in a reservation, I—in a reservation environment with Senecas, but I knew almost nothing about being a Seneca. I—my grandmother spoke the language, but she didn't teach us, and she hadn't taught my father either, and I would only hear words, you know, occasionally, and would learn those few words that I would hear.

But, again, I would become an adult before I really began to explore, what does it mean to say I'm Seneca, and as my friend used to say to me, it means you have a language, it means you have song and dances that are—that belong to us. It means you have land that belongs to us, you know? It means that there's a way of life that is really ours and unique unto itself, and that we have knowledge of plants and trees and, you know, animals and birds and things and that—that—all of that and more. You know, the—the law that united us as a confederacy, the message that came from the man we call our great messenger, which is called the *Gai'wiio',* or the Good Word, we have that. We have other teachings that came along with the time period that the Confederacy was founded, and our clan system, and all of those things.

Well, I had to learn all of that as I became an adult, and I suppose I started learning it—I was in my late twenties when I began to focus on it and start to think about that, and try to find

the sources for learning. And in the beginning, it was really books. I was looking at books written by white anthropologists or, you know, a white historian or something like that, until I got hired by my Nation to come home and run an education program. And when I went home, about 1975, maybe the end of '74, I guess it was, I—one of the great things I got to do was hire all of these people who maintained our traditional way of life. Either they were singers, they had—they were great dancers, they were carvers, they might have been cooks, they might have worked with other materials like basket making, or maybe they did beadwork, or maybe they did—worked with corn husks, and maybe they did silverwork. Anyway, I got to meet these various people that were taking on the responsibility of carrying on these traditions, and language being a big one, and so now I was learning. Instead of reading in a book, I was learning from the people that knew, you know, and learning things that weren't written in a book—things that we maintained among ourselves, really. And that—that was for me a great gift, you know, that.

So, I had grown up at Cattaraugus, and that's where my father was from, and we seldom talked about where my mother came from, which was Allegany, in a place called Carleton. We almost never talked about those people. I know, kind of, that she came from there, but in the course of this work I began to connect with my relatives from my mother's side of the family, and I began to learn from them as well, and learn from a whole—a different group of people, right? And that was—that was amazing, you know, when I think back on it, because they were very welcoming to me even though I didn't know much, you know, and I had a lot to learn, they were welcoming to me.

[00:05:06]

And, you know, I have to throw in here, that the reality was I was also struggling with drinking as a problem. You know, my alcoholism, which I kind of got really into by—when I was in college. You know, partying and drinking just was part of college life, you know, and so I was drinking then. And I had gone through bouts where I—where it really was affecting me, you know, and so I was still struggling with it, even though I was doing this, this work, this, you know, cultural work, and trying to be a good example, you know, and that—and trying to get the respect of these older adults that I was working with. And, you know, it was—it was a mixed bag. I mean, the Rez is kind of a different place, you know, and the rules are different, you know, they really are. And so I might, you know, be kind of thinking, you know, I got to behave myself, and then I might go out and see some of those guys that I was learning from out with me, you know? We'd be drinking together, you know, and they'd be singing songs and teaching me songs, you know, and I'd be listening, I'd be learning. But, you know, there was a lot less judgment, you know, of each other, you know. There was a kind of acceptance of one another, and at the same time, you know, the Rez can be tough. You know, you kind of have to be able to take care of yourself, you know, and so—[laughs]—it is a real mixed bag, you know.

And—and I had been an athlete in high school, I had been an ironworker, and, you know, I was physically strong, you know, and I continued playing sports. Whether I played basketball, or I played softball or something, I continued those activities until I was into my 30s, really. And, you know, that's a whole part of the story that probably is for another time, but it's—but those are sort of the broad things. And—and in this process, I met my youngest son's mother, you know, and my wife from the area we call Jonegano, or Cold Spring. I met her there, and we got married, and my son Ansley is the—is my offspring from that marriage. And so, you know, that—and eventually I moved them to New York City, to Brooklyn, when I started working for the American Indian Community House Gallery. And, you know, that's a whole different chapter, so different from this very remote community in the Allegany mountains to—to New York City, over seven hours away, you know, that's a big difference, a lot of adapting.

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah. So, growing up in a small community, and you brought up meeting your wife.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: Maybe share with us how that works in your community because, as you know, I'm Navajo, and we have four clans, and you were trying to avoid those four clans, which—what I get from you is, you guys have one clan, and you only have to avoid that one clan, is that right?

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay, no; yes, I have one clan. I'm Heron because of my mother. My father was Wolf Clan, but we take our clan from our mother. And so we have four on the bird side, so Heron, Hawk, Snipe, the odd one is the White-Tailed Deer is on the bird side of our clan system. And then on the animal side, we have the Wolf, the Bear, Snapping Turtle, and the Beaver. So I can marry any—someone from all the other clans, the other seven clans, but I can't marry someone from my Heron Clan, because they're my relatives.

So, luckily, my wife was Wolf Clan, and I could marry her. You know, as I say, even though my father was Wolf Clan, we were not directly related, right? And she came from Allegany, and that's the—they kind of came from a different—they had a different pattern to wind up at Allegany. They moved in different areas—from different areas, I should say, than where my family moved from.

[00:10:00]

But—and this is—okay, so when I met my wife, my wife was very young, much younger than me. And, in maybe the other world, or the world outside of the reservation, it wouldn't have been acceptable, but her mother literally wanted me to move in with them. So, that was like in a tradition, you know, when a man got married during the time period of Ganondagan he moved in with his mother-in-law and her siblings, right, the siblings of his wife, and as they married, the women, as they married, their husbands moved into that longhouse, and it if it was necessary, the longhouse expanded. So when I met my wife, her mother wanted me to move in with them and to live there, right? And so they—they gave us, you know, a space in the house where we—a bedroom that we could use, and we lived there under their roof. And she was a hardworking woman; I mean, she worked every day, maintained the house, did the—did all the cooking, virtually; the girls did some. And my wife had three sisters, and they were still living at home. One of them was out—just beginning to get out, I think, living away, but all still staying in the same community; nobody went far, you know, and she had a brother. And so, you know, I just became a part of that family and lived there, and began to attend that longhouse and that community. When I say that longhouse, I mean where we take care of our traditional ceremonies and our way of life. I began to go to that one because I was living there, and got to know those people, those men and women, and that's where my clan mother was. My first clan mother, or my only clan mother, really, she was from Allegany, and her daughter worked for me, and so, you know, the next thing I knew I had family there, and I knew those people. But, yeah, that's how it was—we— [Laughs.]

NICOLE SCOTT: It sounds a lot easier.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes.

NICOLE SCOTT: But you also mentioned earlier about going to church, and your family went to church.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes.

NICOLE SCOTT: So, I have a few friends that I've been trying to get the story straight, and I keep saying that I'll ask, I'll ask, because I forget how you explained it. But you were saying there was someone who came to your people, and you had mentioned, you had said you might know him as Jesus.

G. PETER JEMISON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NICOLE SCOTT: So, for anyone listening to this who is just curious about learning more about, you know, the parallels, maybe, between what the Bible says, and the traditional teachings. Can you go into that a bit?

G. PETER JEMISON: I'll go into it a little bit. So, there was a Seneca man, and in English we call him Handsome Lake.

NICOLE SCOTT: Hold the mic here.

G. PETER JEMISON: Is it—

NICOLE SCOTT: There you go.

G. PETER JEMISON: —is it good?

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah.

G. PETER JEMISON: We call him Handsome Lake.

NICOLE SCOTT: Wait, start over, start with in English.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay. In English, there is a man—there was a man who in 1799 was given a vision, and this vision comes to be known as the *Gai'wiio'* or the Good Word. This man in our language is known as *Sganyodaiyo*, which translates "a beautiful lake," or "a handsome lake," is kind of how it's been translated. He was, at a time, going through terrible alcoholism, to the point where he literally could not stand, and was—he was confined to a bed, and he was in this bed for about a year. And, at one point, his daughter thought that he was going to die, and then she felt this tiniest pulse and realized that it was warm in the center of his chest, that he was not dead, that he was alive, and he could barely stand. And she and her husband were in the yard of the house, and they were cleaning beans getting ready for planting, I believe, and they heard him say, Handsome Lake, say, "Nyoh," and they turned and looked, and he was standing in the doorway.

[00:14:59]

[END OF TRACK jemiso21_1of3_sd_track03_m.]

G. PETER JEMISON: And he said he had a vision of three men who came to him, and they were like these very good-looking men, and they had very nice clothing, but what he noticed was their feet were not touching the ground. And they began to relate to him, kind of, he—he had at one hand had a vision, and they began to ask him, "What did you see?" And he began to relate to them what he saw, because he didn't know what some of it meant. And so they—as he would tell them what he saw in this vision he'd had while he was unable to stand, they would explain to him what he had seen and what it meant.

And even though he had seen this, unfortunately, when he was able to recover, he went back to drinking again, and this time he was in really bad shape, and another year passed before he could get up again. But at one point they took him, I guess you could say, on a journey, and they said, "There's one of us missing—you're going to meet this other one who's coming." And so, I'll just put it that they were walking along a path, the three of them, these three messengers and him, and they saw a man coming, a figure coming toward them. And when he got close, he noticed that his hands had scars; they had been pierced, and he held out his hands like this. And in a way, one way or another, he explained that he had been given a message to share with the people, and when he shared his message, basically, no one believed him, no one believed his message, which he said came from the Creator. And so, he said to Handsome Lake, who was then beginning to share his message, and that was the instruction that he had received, is that, "Even though we're telling you this, your responsibility is to now share it with your community, to start teaching people what we're telling you." And so, this man that he saw with his hands pierced, he asked him, "How was it going?" And he said, "Some of them believe me, some of them do come and believe me, they come and listen, and they believe what I say." And that's when he said, "Well, over there on the other side of the water, they didn't believe me, and so you're lucky that, you know, these people are listening to your message."

And, you know, it was all about trying to provide guidance to us at a period when we had really gone downhill, where—because of the loss of land, because of the influences that were coming into our midst from the white world outside of our world. Alcoholism was very destructive to us, gambling had taken ahold of us in some places, and there were other things that were happening that were taking us away from our traditions, and kind of pulling us in the direction of stopping to think of ourselves as Seneca, but to give up our language, and to give up our way of life, and gradually give up more and more of our land. And this confusing time period was very difficult for our people, right? And so the message that they were imparting to him was that, on the one hand, we had to remain who we were, that was essential. If we're going to survive into the future, we have to remain as Senecas, okay?

So to—to back up, then. So, when I was growing up, I would say the entire message was really about assimilation. It was really about accepting a Christian religion, accepting a white education, accepting that the world was mainly run by white people, right, and other people came and worked in this world, or you—I saw them, I knew my father did.

[00:05:07]

And yet we—I really have to say, were still on the margins, you know? Like, those men who came from Puerto Rico and Jamaica and that, the money they earned picking crops and doing whatever, they sent it all back home, as much of it as they could, because there was no real way of making a living on the islands that they came from. This is how they could make enough just in that summer season into the early fall to support families living in those places, you know, out in the ocean, really. And I saw the poverty of the Black people who worked in the canning factory, who were making a dollar an hour, but they came from the South because, again, there was no way for them to make a living, and I would assume that discrimination was a little bit less—discrimination was still there, but it was a little bit less. And I grew up in a time period when, you know, discrimination was something you just experienced, you know. And, I mean, they look at me, most people would say, you know, "You don't look, quote, Indian," right, but the last name told everybody everything. You know, if you were Jemison, you were—there was Jemison, Jimerson, Jamison, all Senecas, right? So, if you had that last name, you were Seneca, right, you were Indian. And there was a kind of a looking down your nose at Indians, you know, by the people that were around us from that border town at that school that I went to. And yet, I was the kind of guy that could make my way through the—through that world.

I—I accepted the idea of education, I wanted to do well enough, and then I started to think in terms of college, so I knew I had to do well enough to be able to get into college. And I—I had a guidance counselor tell me, "With your grades, you'll never get into college," right? And that just made me more determined than ever. I mean, all you had to do was tell me I couldn't do it, and I'll prove you wrong. I—I made my mind up, I'm going to prove you wrong, I'm going to do it, and I got into the college of my choice.

NICOLE SCOTT: What was that?

G. PETER JEMISON: Buffalo State College. It was—some people used to call it Buffalo State Teachers College, but it was called Buffalo State when I went to school, and it's in Buffalo, on Elmwood Avenue, and I could get an education that might prepare me to become an art teacher. At that beginning, I really had no greater vision than that, you know, but through the course of my study, I learned that there were artists and there were designers and there were all kinds of people who used art to make a living, you know, find a way to make living. But I had only been exposed to an art teacher in junior high and high school, and the same teacher all the way through. And her notion of art was pretty limited and was pretty conservative; going to college, I was exposed to a lot more, and a lot more to think about.

NICOLE SCOTT: So take us through the college years.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay. Well, I always preface it by saying I wasn't a good student—[laughs]—and that is because I did not focus on the academics, right? And in my freshman year, I started playing soccer and—I think I need to get a drink of water.

NICOLE SCOTT: Okay.

G. PETER JEMISON: Can I pour some of that into a cup I have here?

NICOLE SCOTT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

G. PETER JEMISON: I got a clean cup; I don't have any clean water.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: That's good.

NICOLE SCOTT: Good?

G. PETER JEMISON: Thank you, Nicole.

NICOLE SCOTT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I'll drink water. You're doing most of the talking.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah. Yeah, I don't know why I want to start here, but I'll start. Is the recording all right?

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay.

NICOLE SCOTT: I'm just making sure.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah, still going good?

NICOLE SCOTT: It says nine minutes.

G. PETER JEMISON: Nine minutes? Been a lot longer than nine minutes, because we started just after 11.

NICOLE SCOTT: Maybe it's, like, going by chapters, this thing.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah, because we've been at this for a good hour.

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah, I think—

G. PETER JEMISON: It's probably nearly a quarter after when we started, and it's now 11 after 12.

NICOLE SCOTT: I wonder if it's counting down and saying like we only have nine—

G. PETER JEMISON: Nine minutes left of recording?

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah.

G. PETER JEMISON: That could be.

NICOLE SCOTT: Hold on, 2:55.

[00:10:00]

No, it's saying 10. I'm going to take this out.

G. PETER JEMISON: All right.

NICOLE SCOTT: And we'll just start there with another one, because I—

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay, that's fine.

[00:10:14]

[END OF TRACK jemiso21_1of3_sd_track04_m.]

NICOLE SCOTT: Okay. This is the second SD card.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay.

NICOLE SCOTT: And I can hear you well.

G. PETER JEMISON: All right.

NICOLE SCOTT: Huh. It's going.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay.

NICOLE SCOTT: I'm going to have to look at that first one. Probably just supplement it with anything else. Okay.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay, all right.

NICOLE SCOTT: All right. So, we're going into your college years, and you were going to preface it with something.

G. PETER JEMISON: I—I'm going to change it up a little bit. So I—I had gone out to look at schools, and I looked at, I think, three different schools, basically. I had gotten accepted into a place called Fredonia State, it was another college, state—part of the state system, New York State system. But it didn't really have an art focus there, it was more of a music college at that time. And then I had also looked at a—kind of a two-year college, and that didn't look

at all like an art school to me in my mind, whatever I pictured. And then I went to Buffalo State, and I always say it was—we took a bus, my mother and I into the city, and we went to this place where I was going to have an interview. And on our way riding up Elmwood Avenue on this bus, I saw this young woman walking down the street struggling along with a canvas under her arm, sort of, and the wind was blowing, you know, and I could see her kind of hanging onto this canvas. And then we walked into the building where I was going to have the interview, and I could smell the paints, the smell of the oil paints, and I thought, this is a real art school—[laughs]—you know, this is where I want to go, right? And I was put on a waiting list, and it was a kind of uncertainty whether or not I would get in for that fall.

And so, I knew I could get into Fredonia, so I had to send a deposit there to hold my place, and so I had earned money during that summer doing—working in that canning factory, and all that money went to pay for that deposit at Fredonia, and then I get the letter saying I'm accepted at Buffalo State, right? And like, oh, no, now I don't have money, not the money that I earned anyway, so now I got to turn to my parents. And when I first told my parents I want to go to college, they kind of got—they didn't get exactly upset with me, but they just were like, "How are we going to pay for it?" Right away, you know. Like I said, we—we didn't have a lot of money, and I got mad because they weren't immediately embracing the idea of me going to college. And I ran out of the house, and my sister had to come find me, and I came back, and we talked about it, and I said, "I don't know, I'll borrow money, or I'll do whatever has to be done, you know, take out a college loan." Somehow, I knew about that, I guess. [Coughs.] And anyway, that's what I did in the beginning. And my father came up with some money, and anyway, they managed to help me get—to get into school.

And I had been an athlete all through high school.

NICOLE SCOTT: What sport?

G. PETER JEMISON: I played football, I played—I was a wrestler, and I ran track, right, so I had done three sports. So really, every season, I was doing something, and throughout my younger years, I'd played baseball in the summer, and it was just like you had to, almost, where I lived. And so I start—and we didn't have soccer at the high school that I went to, but the college had the soccer team, so I went out for the soccer team, and I made it on, you know. And then over the—I made it through my first year; not great grades, but I made it through the first year and, you know, kind of got used to the idea of living away from home and all that, and then I had to look for work for the summer in order to get some money to go back—back to school. But I got a letter from the college coach asking me to try out for the soccer team, the varsity, right, because I had been on the freshman team, and I thought this is great, they want me to play, so I'm going to do it.

[00:05:05]

So, sure enough, I started getting myself in shape, I started running. And you couldn't even buy a soccer ball around where I lived, so I had to buy a ball that was like the—nearly the size of one, and just practice being able to kick it the way I wanted with either foot. And I was working outdoors at the high school that I used to go to, doing plantings around the school, and so I, you know, had a field right there where I could go over and kick that ball around on the football field.

And I went back to college, and I made the team, right? And—but I quickly realized I wasn't going to be able to play sports and keep my college career going, or my classes going, because we would practice immediately—at the end of the day, we would practice until it—the sun went down, basically, and then we'd go and eat, and then I just wanted to go to bed.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: And I hadn't done any homework at all, of course, up until that point, because I had gone directly from practice to the—you know, to the dormitory, or rather to the cafeteria where we ate, and then went back to the dorm. And so I had to give up soccer, and I made the team. I was on the first team, you know, and I knew, you know, I could stay there if I wanted to, I would be able to, but then I was, like, but how am I going to stay in school? If I stay on this team, I'm not going to make it, and so I quit. And it really made my teammates mad at me, made the coach mad at me, and—oh, it was a bummer, really. And I didn't handle it exactly as well as I could have, you know. I just kind of quit without really explaining it to everyone. I would explain to anyone who asked me, but I didn't explain it to

—by going directly to the coach and telling him what was going on, you know. I don't know if he could've helped me, but I—for some reason, I—I was always, when I was younger, reluctant to ask for help. I didn't know how to ask for the help that I might've needed, and there were people who were willing. But in art, I was more willing to ask for help, or listen to other people tell me things, my teachers.

Anyway, and—but I really liked the choice that I had made about college, I really—there were all the courses that I would like to take. You know, there was pottery, there was jewelry, there was sculpture, there was drawing, painting, design, all kinds of courses that, you know, just really—photography; that opened up new ideas and new avenues of being creative. And I was reading something that I had written, and a guy, or I had—a guy had interviewed me, and I just read it this morning. I moved off campus; I couldn't live on campus anymore in a dormitory, I just—it was just like a repeat of my freshman year, and I really wanted to get away from that. So I moved into an apartment with a friend of mine who was on the soccer team, and one spring day I was standing in the doorway and I noticed the reflection in the window in the door gave me a simplified version of this landscape across the road, across the street, and I thought I could use that to make a painting. So I got a piece of paper, I guess, and I right there painted what I saw in the window reflecting, instead of painting what I saw directly, and I had—and it was a simplified version. And the minute I showed it, people loved it, really, and, like, were like praising me, and there were people that wanted to buy pieces that I was creating, and I was like 19 years old. And I suddenly realized that I could do something that I had not really previously figured out. I had found something that I could really do, and yet I wasn't fully satisfied with that. I knew I could do more, I could do much more than that, but this was a good way to get started.

[00:10:06]

And so, this professor I had gave me a show of those paintings, of the original ones, in one of our snack bars on the campus, and he helped me to pull it together, and all that, he showed me how to mat it and everything, and I put it up.

And—but anyway, my friends—my friends decided that summer that they wanted to go to the Bahama islands and work in a hotel, because this island was just developing. It was going to have a new hotel, they would allow gaming in this new hotel, and other hotels would be built, and all that stuff, it was a resort. And so I literally hitchhiked from Irving to West Palm Beach, Florida.

NICOLE SCOTT: Oh, wow.

G. PETER JEMISON: And I got on an airplane and flew over to the Bahama islands and took a job at this hotel. But to start with—I'll make this fast; I landed on the wrong end of the island. I landed on the end of the island that was all developed, and it was on the other end of the island where there was new opportunity. So I couldn't take a cab there, because I would—I didn't have enough money, so I started walking and hitchhiking in the blazing hot Bahama summer, and this is the funny part of the story. As I'm going down the road, I suddenly hear this *koo, woo, whoosh,* all of this commotion on the side of the road, and I'm like—I just stopped in my tracks. I'm standing in the middle of the road, and a crab came out of the brush, which grew right to the edge of the road. He was this tall on his back legs, and went across the road in front of me, like—I just, like—I couldn't even believe my eyes.

NICOLE SCOTT: Like a video game?

G. PETER JEMISON: It was like a cartoon or something.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: I was like, "God Almighty, what else is on this island if this crab is that big," you know? And I was like, oh, my God, you know. And he goes to the other side of the road and just like wiggles his way through this really dense brush and disappears, right? [Laughs.] That was the first time I ever saw one.

And so, I had the name of one place on the island, it was called the Bright Better Days Restaurant. And along comes this guy who was a Scotch salesman, and he picks me up, right? And I probably told him the story about the crab, I don't know what he said, but I said, "Oh, I'm looking for the Bright Better Days Restaurant." He goes, "Oh, I'm going to be making a delivery there, " and he goes, "I'll drop you off." So he drives me to this place,

which is just a tiny, little restaurant, with a kind of a hotel that had—or a motel, I would say, probably, with maybe four rooms in it, maybe; maybe five rooms. And I go and introduce—myself to the guy, and he offers me a free meal, you know, and I'm going to stay in his motel overnight. And I said the next morning, "I've got to go to the other end of the island, the Lucayan Beach Hotel, and look for a job." And, so anyway, I did, and got a job, got a job as a bellhop, carrying people's luggage, you know, taking them up to their room, carrying their luggage out to the car when they were leaving, and that kind of stuff. And they provided housing, and they even had a place where you ate, and so all you did was earn money by doing this, and you got tips. So that was the advantage of being a bellhop, is the tips. And this was a brand-new place, a brand-new hotel.

NICOLE SCOTT: Did you find your friends?

G. PETER JEMISON: My friends had gotten there, they had taken a cab, and the cab driver beat them for all their money—

NICOLE SCOTT: Oh, no!

G. PETER JEMISON: —took their money, and now they had turned around and gone home, because they couldn't afford to stay, so that I never met them there. No, they had gone, they left. I was there by myself, right?

NICOLE SCOTT: That—that's horrible!

G. PETER JEMISON: I know—

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: —I know, and so I just had to make the best of it, because I also didn't have money to go home now. I had to earn money, you know, by working in that hotel in order to—

[00:14:59]

[END OF TRACK jemiso21_2of3_sd_track01_m.]

G. PETER JEMISON: —get enough money to get the airplane back to the mainland, and, you know, was I going to have enough money to take a bus part of the way and then hitchhike the rest, whatever would happen, you know?

So, in the meantime, I had applied to go to Italy for a semester and study in the University of Siena and live in Italy, live in the city of Siena, and I hadn't yet been accepted, so I—I took off for the island, right, and was going to work down there. And then I checked in with a girlfriend that I had, and she said, "You've been accepted to the program, you know, to go to Italy in the fall, so you've got to get back here because you've got to do X, Y, and Z," you know, whatever it was, all probably shots and whatever else I had to do to get ready to go to Italy for a semester. So I worked until I had enough money to be able to get myself a plane fare back to West Palm Beach, and then—and then from there hitched—I took a bus. I was able to get to Baltimore, I think, or something like that, and then I had to get out there with my thumb again and hitchhike.

And I wound up hitchhiking to New York City, and I had one friend that I knew there in New York City, and I looked him up. And he was so anxious to have me come over, because he wanted to hear the story of the Bahama islands, you know, and everything that had gone down there. So I went to see him, and now he wanted to go to the Bahamas after hearing my story. [Laughs.] So, I think he went, actually, I think he went down there. And then, eventually, I guess I hitchhiked back home again, you know, back to—because I remember my girlfriend picking me up in the city of Buffalo. And then, sure enough, I went to Italy that fall.

NICOLE SCOTT: So you went just to visit New York City, to visit your friend—

G. PETER JEMISON: Visit my friend—

NICOLE SCOTT: —came home—

G. PETER JEMISON: —came home.

NICOLE SCOTT: —and then flew out to Italy?

G. PETER JEMISON: Then got all my things together and flew to Italy, yeah, that fall. That—say, September, my father and mother and my sister drove me down to JFK airport, basically.

NICOLE SCOTT: Oh, wow.

G. PETER JEMISON: And I got on an airplane with, you know, my classmates, and we flew over the—they call it the polar route, and we landed in Luxembourg. And from Luxembourg we got on a train, and took a train down into Italy, and from Italy, we got on a bus. I think, from Florence, got on a bus and went to Siena and met the family that I was going to be living with for a semester, right?

NICOLE SCOTT: What year was this?

G. PETER JEMISON: 1964.

NICOLE SCOTT: I was not yet born, yet.

G. PETER JEMISON: Right.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: And, you know, my family—no one in the family spoke any English, and I didn't speak Italian, and so they had to teach me the language, and it was total immersion because they didn't speak any English.

NICOLE SCOTT: How long did it take you to pick it up?

G. PETER JEMISON: Not long, not long. I mean, I—you know, they would work on it every night at the dinner table going around and, you know, teaching me their names and, you know, their relationships, and then teaching me the things that were on the table and, you know, teaching me other things, like greetings and, you know, whatever else I had to know. And then I was also taking Italian language in the school, but I learned so much more, just in person, working with people to the—I always say, to the point where I eventually could go to the market. They always bartered; I mean, you didn't just take the first price, you had to go back and forth, you know, with, like—to get the price you wanted. So I would stand off to the side, and I would watch what an Italian bought, whatever it was I wanted, how much did he pay, and then I would go in and barter until I got to that price, then I would buy it for that price. [Laughs.] But I understood the language well enough to know what was being said at that point, so I could do that.

And I'll end that part of the story by just saying I was very lucky, because I lived into—I moved into a modern apartment, an apartment that didn't have one stove that heated the whole house, you know, even though you were living in rooms, and. And it wasn't a house that had walls like this thick, like over a foot thick of, two feet thick perhaps, because they were built, these houses, in the 1400s, right?

[00:05:00]

And I'm living in a modern apartment where you could take a shower a couple times a week, or once a week if you wanted to do, or you could be warm. And, my family, the man worked for the biggest bank in town, and so he was considered well-off. And he thought I was really rich because he saw the size of my father's car and immediately equated that with, we had a lot of money, and we really did not, but I couldn't really quite explain it. Everything was bigger in the U.S., it was just—you know, but that's the way the streets were, and the roads were, and the houses were, and all that, anyway.

But we studied the art of the Renaissance, and all week we would study one particular city; the artist, the sculptor, the family that sponsored these artists, the commerce of that city, any details. Then we would get on a bus on a Friday night, and we'd go to that city, and we would spend the weekend there, and we would go and see the original work by all these people, whoever we had studied. Whether it was Rome, or it was Venice, or it was Florence, or wherever it was, you know, we went to these cities, and just with this teacher. And he was, like, really strict, and he would walk into the room, and when he walked in, you stood up.

you waited till he got to the front of the room, he turned around and looked at you, and you sat down, and then he started teaching. And there was no talking, there was no asking questions or anything until he was through lecturing. [Laughs.] That was—it was intense, he was really—he was really knowledgeable, but he was old-school.

And in the afternoon, we would go to a high school, and that's where we would do art. We would paint frescoes, we would work on a sculpture, do some drawing. It was all creative work in the afternoon, and in the morning, we took our academics at the university. And it was history and art history and language. And, you know, we would have to—we'd walk wherever we went, pretty much. Only if I wanted to go someplace out of the city, I'd get on a bus, otherwise, you walked everywhere and ate their diet, and every lunch and every dinner, you'd drink wine. If you poured yourself a glass of water, they poured wine in it to purify it. [Laughs.] So wine was the main beverage, and you got used to that—that wine went with every meal, except breakfast.

NICOLE SCOTT: I was going to ask, even breakfast?

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: No, not at breakfast. At breakfast you had a little cup of coffee.

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah, like a little cup?

G. PETER JEMISON: Right; well, actually at breakfast, you'd get a bigger cup of coffee.

NICOLE SCOTT: Oh.

G. PETER JEMISON: And they would dunk whatever they had in that, you know, and that would be kind of like—and you might have a little fruit, but you'd have some bread, and that would be what you would, kind of, start off with, that cup of coffee.

NICOLE SCOTT: See, I've got to ask you so many questions about Italy, because I want to go to Italy.

G. PETER JEMISON: You want to go to Italy?

NICOLE SCOTT: That was the plan before the pandemic. Like, a week before we shut down, I was scheduled to go for at least two weeks; that was going to be my vacation. So, I still have my ticket—

G. PETER JEMISON: Oh, you have a ticket to go?

NICOLE SCOTT: I have a ticket.

G. PETER JEMISON: To fly where?

NICOLE SCOTT: I think I was going to Rome first. And then I'm planning on extending it a lot longer than two weeks. I want to see the whole thing once—

G. PETER JEMISON: Well, definitely go to—

NICOLE SCOTT: —we're able to go.

G. PETER JEMISON: —go to Tuscany, you know, which is Florence, and Siena would be, too, but there's other cities, but those two are really—just really beautiful. And, of course, I don't know what it's like now, you know what I mean. I was there so long ago, and it was so much slower and smaller and, you know, all of that. I know it's all changed.

NICOLE SCOTT: That's—

G. PETER JEMISON: But the character of the buildings, they couldn't change, they don't tear things down and just get rid of them. They build new, but—but the old stuff stays around, you know, and they preserve it. And these are, right, like streets without sidewalks where you and the cars are all in the same spot—[laughs]. Narrow, small cars, small streets, and that's the way it was when I was living there.

NICOLE SCOTT: So before we move on—

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes.

NICOLE SCOTT: —what—what's, like, a memory that you remember fondly—

[00:10:02]

G. PETER JEMISON: From ?

NICOLE SCOTT: —of being in Italy.

G. PETER JEMISON: Being in Italy?

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah.

G. PETER JEMISON: Well, there's a couple, and one of them is really—you know, I always tell this story, but—we had an art exhibit, a friend of mine and I. The goal usually was, at the end of the semester, all of the art students that were there would show one painting, which was a fresco we had created, literally, on a wall, and they were able to transfer it off and stretch it on a stretcher bar. But he and I did a show before the end of the semester in this place they called an *enoteca*, where they have every kind of wine that is raised in the country in the cellar of this restaurant, and they're all, you know, from years back, you know, so. And that was really fun and interesting. We had no idea how complicated it was when we said we're going to do a show there, because, literally, we had to invite the bishop to come and open it up, you know, the show. And it got very formal, and all the schoolteachers were like, "Why are you doing this?" You know, "You're supposed to be waiting till the end of the year, and you're showing now, and, you know, this is where professional artists show, and you're students." I mean, it was just a whole thing, but anyway, we had the show.

At the end of the year, before we left, we had an oral exam in art history. And my test that I started with was, he showed me a blank map of Italy with no names on it, and he said, "Start at the top of the country; name the city, name the artist, name the family, and keep going down until you miss," you know, "name them, as many as you can." And I went all the way down, you know, to whatever, Venice or Rome or wherever I went to, and then I knew them, you know? And in—I was standing in the courtyard, and we had this big, thick art history book, right, and I was standing in the courtyard waiting for my turn to go in and take this oral exam. There were three of us together, and I opened up the book, and there was a listing of the people who were—who had the last name Borgia, and the Borgias who had been popes. The second question on my test was, "Name the Borgia popes," and I went, *boom, boom, boom.* Otherwise, I would've had no idea.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: I don't know how that happened, to this day, but that literally happened, and I got an A on the test.

NICOLE SCOTT: Oh, gosh.

G. PETER JEMISON: There was only one other girl who got an A-plus, and she was really good, because she wasn't even an art student, and all my friends just really struggled, you know. And I had a photographic memory, so I—if I saw an image, I could remember it, it was just like it was in my head, you know? So that's a memory that I always have with me to think about from Italy.

But the beauty of some of the cities, and some of the art—I mean, standing in the Sistine Chapel, and looking up at Michelangelo's painting, you know, or this other artist, Giotto, or this other one, Fra Angelico, these different artists, you know, you realize you're standing and looking at something that was painted 300 years, you know, earlier or, you know, even 400 years earlier. And just, like, it was amazing to see them, and to know, because you've been taught now what you're looking at. It's not just something you don't understand; it's something you actually know about.

So, contrast that with this. So when I would go—when I—so I moved back to Buffalo after being in Italy, and this friend of mine tried to talk me into staying an extra semester in Italy. And we would've had—we'd have to drop out of school for a semester, and we'd have had to find a way to support ourselves while we were over there. You really couldn't get a job, so it was going to be really a challenge. But I decided not to, I decided not to stay. I had even

written my family, and they said, "Well, we'll support you if you want to do it, if you want to stay, it's okay, we understand," but I changed my mind, came home, and when I—

[00:14:59]

[END OF TRACK jemiso21_2of3_sd_track02_m.]

G. PETER JEMISON: —came home, it was like I was a hero, because I didn't realize that that little show that we had done over there had gotten into the paper in the city of Buffalo, and there was a story about the two of us. And these two guys that I admired as artists, who are older than me, had read that article and whatever, and decided that I was like, a hero, I was like this special person, they wanted me to move in with them, into their apartment. And it was like acceptance by two men, two artists that I respected, you know? So I moved in with them, and, there was more—more like—

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: —building my ego, but anyway, it all—it all worked.

But what I then began to do was, the museum across the street from me was called the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, and all of that work was contemporary work. There was only a little bit of it that came from the 1800s, the rest of it was from about the end of the World War Two, 1940s up to the 1960s. And, for five dollars, you could become a member, and so you had limitless entrance, and then you also could go to their library, and you could research anything you wanted to learn about. And the only condition was, "Do not put anything back on the shelf, because we don't want it to get mixed up." So when you finish reading whatever you're reading, leave it right there on the table. And look at whatever you want; catalogues, books, you know, anything that they had. And the woman was pretty friendly to me, you know, that worked there. And so, I began to educate myself beyond what I was learning, to the point where I could take my friends and give them a tour of the museum and tell them about the work in there, because I had studied these artists, you know. And again, I said, like, I have this photographic memory, so I could remember other work by them, and whatever I read about them, and I started teaching my fellow students. And putting, like, more demands on my teachers, making them have to tell me—teach me more. And now I started thinking, either I'm going to go to graduate school and continue my art, and I don't know what I'll do, whether I'll teach eventually or whatever I'll do, maybe I'll just be a professional artist or something, because I realized there were professional artists, but—so that was my college experience.

And it took me five years, but I managed to graduate with a degree in—as a Bachelor of Science in art education. And I'm going to maybe end it at this point, but I did not get into the college, or the university that I wanted to go to for graduate work, which was Yale. And the reason I wanted to go to Yale was because I had a professor now, who was young, and who had just graduated from there, and he was going to help me get in. But there were two of us going together; my friend got in and I didn't get in. And I decided then I was going to move to New York City and become a—an artist. I always also say I was going to move to New York City and become a famous artist, which is kind of a joke, you know. And I just—I had no idea what I was doing, I just knew that if I couldn't get into the graduate school, I might as well go and become an artist in the place that was the center of the art world at the time.

This was before I really learned who I was. You know, this is before, this is in 1967, so I'm just still not really knowing what it meant to be Seneca. I hadn't met all my relatives yet, I hadn't met those that were the preservers of our traditions. So I was following this path of the white art world, and going to the center of the art world, and I was going to try to make it there. And I—and I had in this—this idea in my head that you went and you starved, you went and you struggled.

[00:05:04]

And you made enough money somehow to be able to feed yourself, but you had to accept the idea that you had to struggle and live and deprive yourself of things, because you were going to get your art, you were going to do your art. And almost like, somehow or other, that gave you some special, you know, whatever it was, meaning, or you knew more by that struggle that you would go through, I don't know.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: But it was rough, you know, it was really rough.

And about middle of—mid-way of me being there and thinking that way, I had read some quote by Picasso, which said, "You have to, kind of, go out into the city, or into the bars, or wherever the artists hang out. If you're going to become known, you have to put yourself out there so that people know who you are, and meet people, and meet the right people, and make your way, you know. Staying in your studio by yourself, you're not going to be able to accomplish what you want to do, so you've got to put—you've got to step outside of yourself and go out there." And I took that to heart, and I did it.

You know, I—when I was 23, I had a chance encounter with a well-known gallery owner, and he came to my studio, looked at my work, and included me in a show with other professional artists, you know, and some artists that were really—had a big name; they were established, and I was showing with them. Oh, boy, the smoke's blowing in. When the wind switches directions, this—this smoke will blow back into the studio. We'll see how that goes; if it gets bad, we may have to end this.

NICOLE SCOTT: Evacuate? [Laughs.]

G. PETER JEMISON: What's that?

NICOLE SCOTT: Evacuate?

G. PETER JEMISON: Evacuate—[laughs]—exactly. I don't know, it's kind of a lot I'm hanging here, you know, but we do have that, and then this.

NICOLE SCOTT: No, I think this is good.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah?

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah. You were talking about the gallery owner showing your artwork, yeah?

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: So you—by this point, you've moved to New York City.

G. PETER JEMISON: I was living in New York City—

NICOLE SCOTT: Did you—

G. PETER JEMISON: —for my first—

NICOLE SCOTT: —move alone?

G. PETER JEMISON: —time.

NICOLE SCOTT: Okay, first time.

G. PETER JEMISON: First time there. I moved there in the fall of 1967, and I think it was during that winter that I met this gallery owner named Tibor de Nagy. And I was between jobs, I was really living rough because I didn't have any money, and my next-door neighbor was keeping me going by feeding me TV dinners, and he was very supportive of me, and yet, he was a big redneck. He was from Alabama, and he was—you know, he—I just want to say he was a redneck, and that's—I'll leave it at that—

[They laugh.]

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah, you leave—yes.

G. PETER JEMISON: —without going into it, you know. But he was an artist, he was trying to be an artist. He was a lot older than me, friendly though, you know, and compassionate to the point where he would, you know, think of feeding me. So, what had happened was he and I would go to these gallery openings on Madison Avenue, and you would go to—up to the top of Madison Avenue, into the 80s, and work your way down because every art gallery

would be having an opening the same night. And there would be free wine and free snacks on the tables, and you could go and eat and drink for nothing, right, just walking down this street.

And so, he had had enough money at some point to join this museum called the Whitney Museum. And on this particular night when we were coming down Madison Avenue, there was an opening taking place at the Whitney Museum, and so he had one ticket to that opening. So we went to the museum, we went in the door, he showed his ticket to the guy taking the tickets, and then he walked behind his back and he passed me the ticket; I took it, and I walked in to this opening. Seriously, every man in there was in black tie and, like, a tuxedo, right, and the women were in evening gowns, right?

[00:10:03]

I am in a brown motorcycle jacket. I hadn't had a haircut in quite a while, and at that time, I had hair, so my hair was blowing in the wind, it was like stuck out to here, probably. I might have had a pair of jeans on, maybe a sweater under my jacket, and I was a little drunk, because we had been drinking on our way down.

And I overheard this conversation, and I heard this man called Tibor, and I knew he was having this invitational exhibit. So I walked over, and I butted into the conversation, and I said to him, "Tibor," you know, introduced myself, and I said, "I think I have some work that you might be interested in seeing," and he said, "Okay, give me your phone number." I didn't have a phone—[laughs]—but my neighbor had a phone.

NICOLE SCOTT: The one that went with you to the party?

G. PETER JEMISON: The one that went with me that got me in. So I went over to him, and I said, "Give me your phone number."

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: I wrote it down, took it over, handed it to Tibor, he said, "I'll give you a call." And I honestly believed I will never hear from this man. You know, I mean, he doesn't know me from Adam and probably tells a lot of people that, because people want to get in his gallery.

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah.

G. PETER JEMISON: Lo and behold, the guy called me and set up an appointment to come and visit my studio. Now, this is what my studio looked like. In the front room, I slept on a mattress on the floor. I had a bathroom. The room that I used as my studio, all the furniture was made out of things I found on the street: crates—[laughs]—boards, whatever I could find. [Laughs.] And I worked in the art supply store selling art supplies, so that's how I got my art supplies to make things. And I pretended when they came that I lived next door, but this was my studio, right? I don't know what—how I explained the mattress on the floor, but anyway, the mattress was still there.

And they came in, two of them, a young guy, younger than me, and Tibor, and, you know, Tibor was always dressed in—very dressed—very well-dressed; tie, you know, suit, you know, that kind of thing, and this young guy. And the young guy comes in, and he sees a painting on a wall, and he goes, "Oh, I love that," and I was like, wow, you know, right away, they like the work. I didn't have many things, I had maybe three things that I was showing them. And before I knew it, they said to me, "Besides that one, which other one do you want to show?" I was like, whoa, I'm in the show.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: And I had been in New York City about nine months at the most, and now, I was showing on The Street, 57th Street, where the biggest galleries were, where the biggest artists got their shows.

And to top that off, when we were walking back to our apartment—we had walked all the way down to Madison, now we're walking across 57th Street, we walked by this store which had a sign in the window saying they were hiring a display artist, and my friend said to me, "You should apply for that job." I said, "I don't know anything about display art." He goes,

"You're an artist, you went to college for art, right, and you took this and that," and he goes, "You can do it." I took down the phone number, and I called them, and they give me an interview, and I got the job!

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: So from that night, I got a gallery exhibit and I got a job, and I just could stop eating his TV dinners.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: And then, he knew this Japanese artist who had a studio uptown, and he was going to go away for the summer, and he wanted somebody to live in that apartment and take care of it, a sublet. And so he said—he came and got me and helped me to move up to that apartment with his car and leave my apartment, right? It was a storefront that he had with, you know, living area in the back. And so now I had a nice place too, much nicer than where I was in. It got very hot in the summer because of the way the sun came in the front door and front windows, but still, you know, I had a place, and—you know, and I was in this art gallery. And my friends, the same ones that had invited me in, when I came back from Italy, used to come and visit me in the city, and they felt so bad for me because I was living so poorly, you know. But now, all of a sudden, I had—

[00:14:59]

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G. PETER JEMISON: —made it, you know? I was on 57th Street, I was in a very prestigious gallery, and I had done something. They had gone to graduate school, and I had managed to do something that they had not managed to do yet, you know, which was make it in New York City. And like I said, I was—I think I turned 23 that winter in January, and—but, my head. [Laughs.]

NICOLE SCOTT: Explode any more?

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes, please.

NICOLE SCOTT: Your head did what?

G. PETER JEMISON: My head got so wide, I could barely get it through the door. That's great, thank you. It was a mixture, Nicole, of—I'm still, you know, just making it hand-to-mouth, really, because even the job that I had got didn't pay a lot of money, and I didn't have a permanent apartment, I was just subletting from this guy who was away for the summer, you know? I knew he was coming home, and we had to turn the apartment back over to him. And somehow or other—and I know, kind of, the causes, but I was like I was on a rocket ride. I went to the top, and all of a sudden, I went *poof*, down the other side. Again, because of being me and not being able to ask for help, and not being able to really figure out what was the next move that I should make, I slipped into this depression, and couldn't figure out, quote, unquote, once you've "made it," now what? Now what are you supposed to do?

What I did not realize at the time, and only came to understand later, was Tibor didn't see me as a one-shot thing. He thought I should become a part of his gallery, and that he would continue to show my work because he thought he could sell it, and I didn't even realize that there was a real opportunity there, you know. And at that point is when I should've looked for somebody to give me just enough money to make it over the hump,.

NICOLE SCOTT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

G. PETER JEMISON: But the reality was I was just drinking too much, and not showing up for work when I was supposed to. And the crazy part about this job was it was really loose, it was really loose, and people came and went, you know, like, display artists. That's why they always had me—I mean, like the—why they could hire me, because the people would come and stay three months, two months, whatever, and move on to another job wherever they could go. Most of the display artists were gay, and they were connected with other artists in the town, so they always knew where opportunities were. I was not gay and I was not a display artist initially, I became one. So because people leaving, I literally—

NICOLE SCOTT: What are you looking at?

G. PETER JEMISON: Oh, just this bubble wrap.

NICOLE SCOTT: Okay. [Laughs.]

G. PETER JEMISON: I'm sorry. Sorry, not a mouse, no, don't worry. There's no—that's why you're sitting with your feet up?

NICOLE SCOTT: Yes.

G. PETER JEMISON: No—

NICOLE SCOTT: You keep looking at the—

G. PETER JEMISON: —there's no mice—

NICOLE SCOTT: —ground

G. PETER JEMISON: I'm sorry.

NICOLE SCOTT: Okay.

G. PETER JEMISON: I didn't mean to distract you. No, there's no mice. Anyway, I became the head of the display department. I became the big guy, you know, and it was all on me. I mean, I had to get the merchandise unloaded from trucks that came and get it down into the basement, then I had to get it from the basement up into the store and get it out on the shelves and wherever it went. And then my biggest responsibility was I had to create a display for the front window of the store. And this is, like, really upscale, everything we had was the best; the best fabric, the best rugs, the best kind of kitchenware, the best cooking ware, I mean, everything was like top shelf, right?

NICOLE SCOTT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

G. PETER JEMISON: And that's what its distinction was, those—that this store carry things that other stores didn't have, because they had exclusive access to it. Like fabrics that came from Finland that were silkscreened by the women who designed them, you know. It's called Marimekko, and we were the only store in town that carried it. And so I had that to work with, and it was this high, beautifully designed fabrics and old patterns, and that's probably where I got—my work started getting more and more bold because of working with them.

NICOLE SCOTT: Is there anything in here that was inspired, or—

G. PETER JEMISON: By Marimekko?

NICOLE SCOTT: —maybe not in here, but, that you can remember being inspired about in this timeline?

G. PETER JEMISON: Probably that painting that's up there would be kind of that, is—it's actually looking at the cantaloupe, but looking at the lines that are on a cantaloupe, you know?

[00:05:13]

NICOLE SCOTT: Huh.

G. PETER JEMISON: And that's—that's what I was seeing. I mean, it would—the colors, you know, that just—really because they would use like really bold colors and put them together, and big designs, you know. So there—I mean, even something like this, because this is painted in 1972, that I had been in New York the first time—excuse me—the first time from 1967 to 1968. I only lasted a year the first time I went there. So this kind of—and this comes along about 1972, so it's only, you know, three years after my experience there.

NICOLE SCOTT: You lasted a year, you said?

G. PETER JEMISON: I lasted a year, yeah, and so then I went back to—I moved back to Buffalo and started teaching in a high school, in a high school called Lafayette High School.

Nicole, I have to take a toilet break.

NICOLE SCOTT: All right, I do, too.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay, let's go.

[Audio break.]

NICOLE SCOTT: Get started.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay.

NICOLE SCOTT: Okay. We're good.

G. PETER JEMISON: So while we were on break, I started thinking to myself, I don't know where that bravery came from, where I was brave enough to hitchhike by myself to Florida, where I was brave enough to, you know, go to Italy and live in a family that did not speak the language I spoke; or how I was brave enough to move to New York City by myself, you know, and believe that I could somehow take care of myself, and survive in a great big city like that when I had been there many times, but I never lived there, you know? I didn't really have any experience with doing that. So it just occurred to me, I don't know where that bravery came from, or that self-confidence, if you want to call it that. I don't know where that exactly came from. But I—at that time, I had this belief that I could do these things, you know, that I was—if I set my mind to it, I could do it and—oh, my mic fell off. Hard to see—okay, that time, I think I got it open enough. But that was—

NICOLE SCOTT: Hold on.

G. PETER JEMISON: Is that all right?

NICOLE SCOTT: Close the shirt, it's covering the microphone.

G. PETER JEMISON: Is it?

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah. That, that should work, sure.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay, can you hear me?

NICOLE SCOTT: Yes.

G. PETER JEMISON: Testing one, two?

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah.

G. PETER JEMISON: Anyway, I had this self-confidence, this belief that I could do things, and that I would try it, you know, if it was within the possibility. And really that kind—it has remained with me my whole life, you know, that I—if I think I can do it, I will do it, you know? I will keep trying and I'll work at it and attempt to accomplish that idea. And, you know, when I think about where I came from, you know, as a small—from a very small community, you know, and a pretty sheltered life, you know, really, and in a—you know, in an environment which was not really accepting of Indians, you know, at the time. I was one of the very lucky ones, I think, where I was given opportunities by people to do the things I've done. I feel like I—well, I've always had this other feeling, which is that, whether they're my ancestors or who they are, are looking after me, looking out for me and have helped me through difficult times, you know.

[00:10:01]

That's something that has remained with me, and it—and I didn't really come to fully understand that until I began to focus on my traditional way of life, that I began to really think of those that had gone before me, you know, and want to learn more. And yet, even before I knew these things, I still had some kind of belief.

I had this one experience that really stuck in my mind. Around 1972, about the time that I had done—this isn't the original, this is a copy of the original one. Around 1972, my grandmother passed away, and at the time I was staying in the gallery in New York City where I was going to—where I had some work on exhibit, and this was a gallery focusing on

Native artists. It was called American Art, but it was run by a Native American, and it was show—we were showing only Native artists, and I was volunteering there during this particular summer. And my grandmother passed away, and I had a dream that she came to me and kissed me on the lips. And I didn't remember my grandmother ever doing that, so I felt, like, her spirit came to me and kissed me on the lips, you know. And I immediately, when I woke up, called home to find out what was going on, and I learned that my grandmother had passed. And so I made every effort to get home and go and see my grandmother, you know.

And it sort of was that, kind of, beginning of this connection that, you know, I really felt closer, I guess, to those ancestors that had come before me. And this was what was happening, like, you know, I was beginning—I was really beginning to think about being an Indian, you know, and really beginning to think about the things I would learn later, like, what does that mean, you know, what does it mean to say I'm a Seneca? And I knew that, if anything, I wanted to be knowledgeable about that. I really wanted to understand it; not just words, you know, not just I'm a Seneca.

And in the whole first year that I lived there, I met one other Indian, only one, and she was from, they call it the Sault Ste. Marie up in Canada. Georgetta, her name was, and she and I just sat together once and drank a couple of beers, and we just talked, you know. But it was—it was good to meet somebody, you know, that—because I hadn't seen anyone, you know, until I would go home, like that.

NICOLE SCOTT: This was in New York City?

G. PETER JEMISON: This is in New York City, yeah, I'm living in New York City, yeah. And this is still the first time, you know, that time period between '67 and '68. And my friends, you know, those two guys, they moved to New York City, and they bought themselves a loft. They bought a—yeah, a loft, and then they divided it and they each had half, and they probably bought it pretty cheap. And when they came around to selling it, they sold it for about a quarter million dollars apiece at least, maybe more, their halves, you know, after they renovated it and all. But they moved to New York City because I had shown the way, you know, and I had some success, and they—they never quite achieved what I did, which was really surprising to me, because I always thought they were a better artist than I was when I was—especially when I was younger. I thought they had natural talent, you know, and I had to work at my talent.

But one of things I had been taught was—by one of my teachers—that art is a long game. That it isn't who finishes the race first, it's who has the longevity to stay in the race, or in the—in the act of being an artist, you know. That it may take you a long time to achieve what you set out to do. But if you have the—

[00:14:59]

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G. PETER JEMISON: —willingness to stick with it, a reward may come, you know. And that—that kind of thing just—it stuck with me, that him—him telling me that. And he was one of the very first ones that I said organized that little exhibit that I had, when I first discovered that I had an idea to create—a way to create paintings about the landscape, just seeing the landscape. Some of the paintings I showed in that very first time, which was about 1964, were paintings that I had done—done in the Bahamas of, you know, the ocean and of a rowboat sitting out in harbor and, you know, that kind of thing. That was a long time ago.

So I returned to New York—let's talk about that for just a minute. I returned to New York; after teaching in Buffalo, I moved to San Francisco, I lived there for a while, I married my first wife, Ellen. She came from Schenectady, New York. I had met her in college, I moved to her city Schenectady from California, and this is when I began to connect with other Native artists. And I saw myself going in one direction, and I knew she couldn't go with me that whole way that I was heading because she wasn't Native, you know. And it really became a source of conflict between us, you know, and we wound up going through a divorce. And in a way, I could've done better the way I handled it, but again, I just—it was the way I was thinking at the time that that's what I wanted to learn, and it was what I wanted to know. And, in order for me to do that, I had to go home, I had to go back to the reservation and live there, you know, and go through that whole experience and ground myself, you know. I

guess I—it put all that—that's the way I would put it.

And then, moved back to New York City in 1978 after having done several other things. I was offered a job to run the gallery for the American Indian Community House, and because I had the experience of working with that art gallery that I spoke about where I—my grandmother came—her spirit came to me, and because I had organized a few exhibits of Native artists, I, kind of, thought I could do it, that job in New York. And I was, kind of, thinking it was a way to get my art career going again, because my art career had sort of gone to the side while I was ironworking and being an administrator and doing that kind of stuff.

And there been a fire on my grandmother's property where a lot of my art burned up, a lot of the art I had first created in New York, and some of the work I had done in California, and some of the work I did in Schenectady. When I moved back to the reservation, moved back home, it all burned up, and it was devastating for a while. For a couple years, I just—I didn't do any art, I couldn't—I couldn't bring myself to do it. And finally, I got back to it, but it really was after I moved to New York City the second time, in 1978, that a couple of opportunities opened up to me, and I really started to create art again and think of myself as an artist and think of my art career.

And I think about this man, his name was Robert Davidson—he's a Haida from the northwest coast of British Columbia—and he—when we met he said to me, "Peter, what happened to your art career? Where's your art?"

[00:05:10]

And I told him, "Well, you know, I kind of set it aside while I run this art gallery," but he, kind of, implied that I should get back to it, you know, I should start working again on my own art. And it was—he was right, and I wanted to, but I had to have a space where I could work. And eventually, you know, by the time I met him I had an apartment in Brooklyn, and there was a room that I could use as a studio to do some artwork, and so I kind of gradually eased my way back in. And an opportunity came my way because of paper bags, of all things, an opportunity to show paper bags. And they kind of opened the door to the art world again. [Laughs.]

NICOLE SCOTT: So, if you don't mind going more into those feelings of losing your art, how did you get out of it, how did you—?

G. PETER JEMISON: Well, you know, when—what happened was somebody had set fire deliberately to this building where my art was stored. I assumed it was a guy that I had caught on my property, who was driving a pickup truck. I kind of convinced myself that it was him that did it, and he was white. But kids on the Rez were also destructive, you know, some of them that were unsupervised, they would, you know, do all kinds of stuff, and so I didn't know if they had done it. And then while I was teaching on the Rez, and we had set up an art area, an art studio, someone had come in and really vandalized one of my paintings, you know, that I had there, and I kind of knew who the kids were. And so, I was like, they don't understand what my art is about, they don't really appreciate that, and somebody burned my paintings up, they didn't even know they were in there probably, they probably didn't get inside. And all those thoughts went through my head that, yeah, I'm home, but my work is so different that people don't really understand what I'm doing, you know. My work doesn't look like the classic, very naturalistic, very, you know, like, Indian subject matter, whatever, you know. It didn't have those characteristics, and so I thought, you know, what do I have to share with people, what can I tell them? Maybe the only thing I can do is be the administrator and get the—hire the artist that I want to teach others. That's what they want to learn, they want to learn how to do what they know, what those people I've hired know, and so it was tough, you know.

And then there was one artist who really, right away, everybody accepted, because he could do that very realistic type of work, and he could paint the things that kind of embodied our stories. And he got some commissions to do murals in our community buildings, and all of that kind of opened things up for him, you know, whereas I didn't have those opportunities. I was still struggling to figure out what I was going to do. Now that I was learning more about who I was and what it meant, how did that work in—with something like that, you know, how did the—what's the in-between, the very abstract and the very realistic and naturalistic type of work, which is very oriented toward our being Seneca or Haudenosaunee, what's the in-between of those two. And I was still struggling to figure that out, you know.

And so that, I was in that dilemma, and that's when I created that painting you saw at MAG [Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester] of the horse and that, kind of, depressed a little bit, again. You know, I had gotten out of that depression I was in when I left New York the first time after I was telling you about this, you know.

[00:10:00]

And then now, I was, kind of, back into it, mainly as a result of drinking, you know, just becoming an alcoholic. And I knew I had to change—either change my scenery and get out of there, or change my life. And if I stayed there, it was going to be pretty hard to change my life, because my friends were all alcoholics, and—or like to drink, let's put it that way, you know. I hate to brand them as anything; they're their own human beings. But it—I finally won the battle with alcohol, but it took me till 1982 when I was able to finally get sober, put the bottle down, stopped drinking, stopped, you know, carrying on.

And, you know, I was—there were a lot of things I was learning, you know, the power of the Good Mind, the message of—that Handsome Lake imparted, which was that alcohol was very destructive to us. It had really cost us our land, and had cost us our—you know, nearly cost us our way of life, and—because the settlers used that alcohol to gain control of us. And, you know, it would take me a while before I really, kind of, sorted all that out and saw the historical picture. Before that, you're just a, you know, an individual who is struggling with your own feelings and your own, you know, addictions or whatever they may be, or your methods of coping, you know. And like as I say, you know, being brave enough to go someplace and frankly know almost nobody, you know and—or have to meet a whole new group of people and start over again making your way.

And then, you know, I always take on the high-pressure job. I mean, whatever I'm doing, it's like nobody's done this before, and now you're going to do it, you know, and you're going to figure it all out, you know. And that's my inclination is to take on the challenges, and again, I don't know where that comes from exactly. I mean, my father was, you know, for what he did, he was good at it, you know, and he was successful in being able to support his family, but he didn't take on the kind of things that I've done, you know. He didn't need to, but I do; I guess I have that.

And then I think about me as a—I like to work, you know, I get pleasure from working, but on the other hand, you also have to learn to relax. You have to learn to enjoy yourself, you know, enjoy life and not think of life as just work. And I've really sacrificed a lot to just, you know, run Ganondagan a lot of time, you know. And that's why I'm at the point where I'm thinking in terms of retirement. I want to do some things that I want to do before I can't do them, or I—maybe I can't get around, or whatever.

So, you know, all of those thoughts are in my mind now, you know, like how did I—how did I come to have that attitude that I could do it no matter, you know? And now, and it was—I was reinforced by people, you know, supported by people who believed in me, you know, that you can do that. If you say you're going to do it and you set out to do it, you'll do it, you know. And I was like—I had that kind of support that, you know, I had to learn how to do it and figure things out. And luckily, along the way, though, obviously along the way, I've had people who were a big help, you know, people who did what they do well, and that made it possible for me to accomplish what I was doing.

[00:14:59]

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G. PETER JEMISON: And the great thing was to meet Jeanette [Miller Jemison] who, you know, supported what I was doing and wanted to be a part of it, you know, and that really—that really made a big difference of me being successful. Our board in MAG, you know, all those kinds of people really—those things really make me—that's how I managed to do things. And some of my state supervisors, you know, or regional directors, even when they didn't believe me, they didn't really shoot me down. But one of them had the courage to say to me, "I was one of those who didn't believe you," he said, "I didn't believe you could do it, this building."

NICOLE SCOTT: Oh.

G. PETER JEMISON: And he said, "And you did it," and I said, "I didn't know that. [Laughs.] I

didn't know you didn't believe in me, I didn't." But anybody that kind of, like, made it harder for me, or wanted to make it harder for me, I was like that same thing, was that—when the guidance counselor told me, "You'll never get into college," I was like, I'll show you. [Laughs.] I laugh about it, but it can be obnoxious too.

[They laugh.]

NICOLE SCOTT: I understand.

G. PETER JEMISON: Do you?

NICOLE SCOTT: I do feel—I felt the same way sometimes—

G. PETER JEMISON: Do you?

NICOLE SCOTT: —where—yes, but this isn't about me. [Laughs.]

G. PETER JEMISON: I know, but it is, too, because I like to hear that, because you've come out from Arizona, and you didn't know people out here; Nizhoni [Chow-Garcia] maybe, or you got to know her here. And you took on a job that you had never done before, and you figured it out, and you made it into something, you know, and—and, you know, you made new friends, and you did all those things, and—you know? So that's brave, I think. Do you feel that way?

NICOLE SCOTT: Oh, yes, definitely.

G. PETER JEMISON: Good.

NICOLE SCOTT: I think that what I'm finding by listening to you is, I'm just curious of how do you continue to choose—do you continue to choose to be brave? Like, is that something that just—like, it comes naturally, or do you feel like sometimes you have to make that choice? Because, right now, I am definitely, like, going—going back home, I feel like that, like how you did too, that brave choice of I'm going to return home, even though I have no idea of what I'm going to do when I get there.

G. PETER JEMISON: Right.

NICOLE SCOTT: But it seems for you, it worked out. You got connected to your community, you got to learn from the leaders within the community, the ones who held that knowledge and who shared their wisdom with you. And eventually you made it to Ganondagan, where you currently hold the title of—

G. PETER JEMISON: —historic site manager.

NICOLE SCOTT: —historic site manager. But on that, I guess, the journey to this turn—to this point is, you come to this point and you just—you mentioned that you're looking into retiring, and I'm assuming that you're going to continue into the art. You're not going to retire fully, but you're going to retire—

G. PETER JEMISON: No.

NICOLE SCOTT: —and—?

G. PETER JEMISON: Well, my plan now is, yes, to—to really devote myself to my art, which I have always put on the—or not really the—completely the backburner, but I've always had to make that, sort of, the secondary thing, because the primary thing was the job that I had, you know. And every once in a while, they kind of supported each other or, you know, I could find a way that I could give more to my art in spite of the fact that I had a full-time job, but, yes, that's my plan, is—and so what has just happened to me is, I started thinking I'm—when I retire, I'm really going to kick my art into high gear, and then, all of a sudden, my art went into high gear and I hadn't yet retired. So all of a sudden now, like, oh, my God, how am I going to keep up with the demand, you know? Like, I'm—I have a show opening this Friday, I had to have the work for that show—you know, to be in that show, all right?

NICOLE SCOTT: Where is this?

G. PETER JEMISON: In Buffalo, at the K Art gallery. And I'd like you to see it, just so that you

can see what I'm talking about, you know, to take a ride over there. And, well, I had an idea what I was going to put in the show, and the curator came and chose an altogether different work, but I had the work.

[00:05:08]

So, my thinking has always been, "Don't stop working on the art." Even if you are doing only some of it, or even if you haven't got the time to do it all, you have to work continuously, because opportunities will come, and you can't stand there explaining to somebody what you would do, you have to show them what you have done. And in order to show them what you have done, you would have had to do the work, okay? I understood that at an early age, that—just keep working. And when I had no support, I didn't know—you know, I had no idea a gallery would take my work, or Memorial Art Gallery would want to give me an exhibit, or—you know? I mean, I might've wanted it, but I just didn't think it was going to happen and I would—people would offer me things, and I would say, "Oh, I'm not ready," or, "I don't have enough work for it," or whatever. I'd make up some excuse, just not respond when they asked and—so now, yeah, I have that thought that—and I want to get to it, you know. I want to make sure that I leave myself enough time to make that happen.

And fame and success can come and go very quickly, you know, in this world that we live in. You know, what's hot today is cold tomorrow, and, you know, so you have to take advantage. As they say, "Strike while the iron is hot," you know. And that's like right now, when I'm having opportunity, I have to go with it and make it—and go as far as I can with it, you know. And so that's something I understand too, you know; I've come to understand.

But along the way, you know, I've evaluated choices. You know, choice, do I go back to ironworking because my boss had come to me right when I was deciding, am I going to move to New York City for the second time and run that art gallery? My boss that I had ironworked for said to me, "I'm going to try you to estimate jobs, so you won't have to climb on the iron anymore, you won't have to do that. You'll go out and price jobs, and then we'll take those jobs, and the company would keep, you know, growing." And I—was it that, you know, which I liked, and I liked the people and everything, or was it my art? And I said, "I think it's time for me to work on my art and focus on my art," so I said, "I'm going to go to New York and bring my art career along somehow." I wasn't even sure how yet, but I went.

And then when it was time, John Mohawk came to me, and he said—I had invited him to New York to speak, and he said to me, "Are you sick of New York yet?" And I said, "As a matter of fact, I am, I'm kind of getting sick of it." He said, "Well, there's a job opening up in Victor, New York," and then explained this. You know, at that time it was called Gannagaro. He said, "There's a historic site that needs a manager, we're just getting it started, how would you think about taking that job, you know, what would you think about that?" And I thought, hmm, maybe there's an opportunity there. I'd come back home again, get back in touch with all these things that I would like to be learning, or like to be closer to, but when I live in New York City, you know, six hours away, it's hard to come home, or hard to do it on a regular basis. So, I made up my mind it's time to leave New York again and come home, and—a big turkey vulture flying overhead—and take this job, you know? And that's what I've done for 35 years now.

For some reason, this time I didn't think about taking off again and going someplace else, and doing something else. I somehow got so involved with this that, before I knew it, all this time passed, you know, and I was continuing to learn from it. I was close enough to get home for ceremonies, and I had Jeanette as a support for me, you know, and as I said, the organization of friends and all that.

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And I could bring people here still that I really like to be with, you know, like the singers, or the dancers, or the speakers, or whoever, craftspeople, artists, you know, so I had that touch with them still, you know?

NICOLE SCOTT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

G. PETER JEMISON: And I got the opportunity to do exhibits. The Fenimore Art Museum would have me do one every two years, and then some of the other colleges.

[00:10:35]

I've done, you know Rockport, Nazareth College, I've done exhibits for them and MCC [Monroe Community College]. So kind of—

NICOLE SCOTT: So—

G. PETER JEMISON: —you know, and kept my artwork going. And then, all of a sudden, like I say, just, you know, late—lately, a few bigger opportunities came along, you know, back to New York City again.

[They laugh.]

NICOLE SCOTT: For people who aren't familiar with Ganondagan, will you share a little bit about the site, the history? Because I know that big, beautiful, white building out there is only seven years old.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes.

NICOLE SCOTT: But what was it before then, and how did it become what it is now, in a condensed version?

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah, a condensed version, huh? Well, let me say, I arrived here in 1985, and the Ganondagan we see today was a field of weeds, a tumbling-down barn, some other broken-down outbuildings. The place that would become our first visitor center was just a hodgepodge of expanded little sheds. The house was unlivable, literally unlivable, and —I'm glad you don't mind sharing.

NICOLE SCOTT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

G. PETER JEMISON: And—

NICOLE SCOTT: [whispers] Back to you

G. PETER JEMISON: —there were all these things to do; signs to get made, a book to get written, and a film to get finished, trails to be created that I would do, you know?

NICOLE SCOTT: Well, there weren't even trails here?

G. PETER JEMISON: No, there weren't even trails; there were deer trails.

NICOLE SCOTT: Oh, wow.

G. PETER JEMISON: No, I made the trails following deer paths, and making other ones. There were no signs, of course; they hadn't been made yet. Two books had be written and, you know, had to get those published. And so, again, it was like there was a plan, but I was the one to have to execute the plan, you know, how to figure it out. And I—and the thing that was also good, though, was that I had these people that I had known from before as my advisors, and I could go to them, you know. Some of them my elders, I could go to them, some of them my contemporaries, and pick their brain, you know, with, "How should we do this?" But I still had to do it. I mean, even if they told me, that was all, you know, I still had to do it. And again, I just didn't lack confidence, I believed that I could figure it out, I could do it. And as far as—well, then, I decided—I made up my mind that we needed a real Bark Longhouse, that a fully—full-sized Bark Longhouse would be the best way to tell young children how we lived and let them experience what it was like. And so I had to find people who knew how to build one. I found a floor plan for one that was dug by archeologists, and then I had to raise money, you know, and raise about, oh, over $300,000. And find people that would give us the money, you know?

[They laugh.]

NICOLE SCOTT: Sounds so easy.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah, and I never forget, I opened up a check one time, and the check was for over $80,000. I never held a check that big.

[00:14:59]

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G. PETER JEMISON: And I thought, oh, my God, you know, these people are really going to make it happen, you know? And then, I had a commissioner who was so supportive. I went to her and told her I needed money to hire an architect, and then I said, "And I need a million dollars toward the building," and she got it, she got the money together for me, you know, and it was just like, wow, you know, our—this was when I was building the building.

NICOLE SCOTT: That's the building, or the longhouse?

G. PETER JEMISON: That's the building. Yeah, the longhouse, I had the same commissioner, and she understood the idea of the Bark Longhouse, because the people under her did not understand it. They didn't want me to do it. They are into preserving old structures, not building old structures.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: And I was like, "No, we have to recreate this one, because there's none left."

NICOLE SCOTT: Because you burned it all down.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes, you burned them all down, twice, and so. But they—and so their—their methodology was, here, you write papers about this, and then we'll read the papers, and then we'll decide, and we'll give you advice on how to do it. And basically, I said, "No, I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to write, you know, volumes of paperwork that you could wind up rejecting, and I'm wasting all this time doing that when I could be either raising the money, or figuring out how I'm going to do this, instead of wasting time writing about it." I wouldn't do it that way, you know, and then I would prove that they were wrong, you know, because I would do it, and they would see how successful. People would come and schools would book their tours and, you know, whatever, and I would—I never could say, see, I told you so, I just got the satisfaction of knowing that it works, you know? This one works.

And then my commissioner—I decided now I wanted to build the building, the new building, the new visitor center, and my commissioner had forced me to take on the role of serving under the federal government, like I had to be vetted by the White House and sit on this committee on historic preservation nationally. And I was the representative for the Seneca, or for the Native American, the Alaskan, Hawaiian—excuse me, the Alaskan and the Hawaiians. I had to represent these three groups of people and be their representative, you know, in these national meetings. And I was like, oh, man, I—you know, this—I got to have people that tell me stuff that, you know, live it wherever they live, like, a Native Hawaiian and a person from the Northwest Coast, and a person from the Pueblo country, and a person from Dakotas and wherever. And so we created this subcommittee and, like, these are my advisors, you know, they'll tell me what I'm going to tell the federal government. But I'll go to the meetings and I'll sit there and—you know, with the people that are delegated by the—the ones that are the head of the Department of the Interior, or the one that's a head of the Department of Defense, the one that's the head of the Department of Transportation and the Environmental Protection Agency. They would send their representatives, and those are the people I'd sit there with, you know?

NICOLE SCOTT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

G. PETER JEMISON: So when I got around to where I wanted to build the new building, I said to my commissioner, without saying it, "You owe me one. I did that for you, so now here's what I need." And we were sitting on a bus, and we were north of Chicago, and she was sitting toward the window, and I was sitting on the aisle. And I said, "Commissioner," I said, "I want to build a new building at Ganondagan." "That sounds good." And I said, "I need $800—$800,000 to pay the architect, right, that's what his fee is, roughly, for the design and whatever the work is going to be beyond that."

[00:05:02]

"Okay." "And I need a million dollars as the seed money to get the project started, you know," and she said yes. She picked up the phone and called the woman who held the money and told her what I needed, they were—they're basically going to make it happen, you know? And I—she said, "This is going to be the most expensive bus ride I've ever been on."

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: And we laughed, you know.

And she was hard, she was—if she didn't like you, she would make your life hell, but if she liked you, she couldn't be better as a friend if you looked, you know, she was like—but you had to prove what you were doing was going to be successful. You know, if you could prove that, then she would support you, you know. And by the Bark Longhouse, I had shown her, when she had confidence in me that time, that I could do it. And she told me, she said, "You're the only one I trust," you know, when she put me on that federal advisory council.

And then I found, you know, that friends that I had made by doing those art shows in Cooperstown, I had made a friend of a man named Eugene Thaw, and he owned a jet. He was—I think he's a part owner, or he owned the jet, I'm not sure, but he lived in Santa Fe. And he flew from Santa Fe to New Jersey to pick up this wealthy couple and bring them here to hear my idea about this building.

NICOLE SCOTT: Oh, wow.

G. PETER JEMISON: But he knew that the man already wanted to do something here because he had this big Seneca collection of artifacts that were stored over at the Rochester Museum & Science Center; he knew that part. And I had met the man and I had met his wife, but at the time, I didn't really know who they were, I didn't know really what his connection was. And so he came to a dinner with them, a lunch, and he pledged a million dollars at that lunch. And I invited the president of the Seneca Nation, and a person who was working under him and connected to the treasurer's office, and they pledged $2 million at that lunch. So, at lunch, we raised $3 million.

And the woman fell in love with Jeanette's soup, the wife of the man who had the idea, and who had the collection. He formed that collection with his wife's money, but she fell in love with Jeanette's soup. And by accident, or on purpose, left her shawl behind, and so she had to come back to the house the next day to retrieve her shawl, and we had a whole different conversation, you know, where it was like—it wasn't about money, it was about, she wanted the recipe for the soup.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: And then she wanted to invite us later to meet her brother, and have me consider whether or not her brother could be the architect for the building. But when they—when she asked me, we had already gone through a process where I had interviewed—

NICOLE SCOTT: Oh.

G. PETER JEMISON: —like—or met 20 architects, narrowed it down to five, and they had all, you know, submitted a request for proposal, and they had done that, they had done all the other things they were supposed to do. And this guy hadn't done any of that, and all of a sudden, we were going to put him at the head, we're going to make him the lead architect? And I had to call up my agency, Parks, and I said, "They just offered me $5 million and the money to pay the architect if he can be the lead architect on the project," and I said, "And I kind of said yes."

[They laugh.]

[00:10:09]

G. PETER JEMISON: Because I didn't believe they were going to give me $5 million when I asked for it, and they said yes, and so—

NICOLE SCOTT: Art of negotiating, right here.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes. So anyway, the guy said—I said, "What do I do about these other architects, you know, they did all the work, and now they're not going to get the job?" He said, "Don't worry about it," he says, "They will understand, they will understand that you got to go with the money." He says, "If the money is there; you're not going to get it built without it. So you—they—you just tell them that we've had to hire an architect. If they ask

questions, we've had to hire the architect that connected us to the funds to be able to build it." It makes sense to me. And Jeanette and I, we were riding in the cab, and she was the only one that had witnessed it all, and she said, "You're good, you really are good."

NICOLE SCOTT: No, your soup is good.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: No, yeah, and it—so we had taken a thermos of her soup on the plane with us, and when we arrived at this woman's apartment, she called her cook in, and she said, "I want you to serve this soup for lunch." And so I said, "Oh, no, we can—you can have that later." She goes, "No, we're going to have it for lunch." So her cook brought up plates and bowls and whatever, and that's what we had, part of the—you know, the pre-lunch, we had that, Jeanette's soup. And then I met her brother, and, you know, we had this whole conversation.

NICOLE SCOTT: So that's how you got the building.

G. PETER JEMISON: That's how we got the building.

NICOLE SCOTT: It's awesome.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: So I can hear your stomach growling.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes, is yours?

NICOLE SCOTT: Not yet, I had a big lunch but—or breakfast.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay.

NICOLE SCOTT: But we can stop.

G. PETER JEMISON: Let's stop.

NICOLE SCOTT: And then, I was thinking, maybe next Monday we can finish it?

G. PETER JEMISON: All right.

NICOLE SCOTT: Because I think they wanted a couple of hours.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah.

[00:12:12]

[END OF TRACK jemiso21_2of3_sd_track07_m.]

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NICOLE SCOTT: Okay, I'm recording.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay.

NICOLE SCOTT: All righty. So what is today's date? Today is Monday, May—no, May third. [Laughs.]

G. PETER JEMISON: Is it May third?

NICOLE SCOTT: I was going to say it's May thirteen. It's May third.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah, Monday, May third.

NICOLE SCOTT: This is part two. We are here. My name is Nicole Scott, and I am here with G. Peter Jemison. We are recording at a new location in his basement that's filled with art.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes, this is my second studio, the studio in the house [. . . -Ed.].

NICOLE SCOTT: Okay, well, let's begin where—well, not necessarily where we left off, but we

had just ended talking about bravery, and doing things.

G. PETER JEMISON: So, what I want to talk about first, on Friday night, this past Friday night, May first, we had an in-person opening at K Art gallery in Buffalo, and this is the first in-person opening they've been able to have. And they had an exhibit on the first floor that relates to missing and murdered indigenous women, and there were four women artists who contributed work to that. And then the second floor of the gallery was given over to me, and I was exhibiting drawings—I am exhibiting drawings, which are—they're older drawings, they really—some of them date from as early as 2002, and then come up to maybe 2007, roughly, something like that. But they were selected by the curator, and it was her choice.

But the evening was something that I really wanted to talk about. As the evening sort of got going, the owner of the gallery, David Kimelberg and Brooke Leboeuf, both wanted to make a few statements. And David welcomed people and, you know, explained that, you know, this was his idea to open the gallery and to encourage, as much as he can, contemporary Indian artists, and he is very committed to doing that. And then Brooke spoke a bit about the show and some of the women that were in the show and about their work, and then she spoke about me. And she mentioned that, among other things, I was—I am the first artist that they've selected to represent in the gallery, and she also mentioned exhibits. She mentioned the Memorial Art Gallery exhibit that's going on in Rochester right now, then she mentioned that the Whitney Museum had collected some of my work, and then she mentioned the upcoming exhibit at the PS1 Museum of Modern Art in Queens, New York, this fall.

And it really, kind of, later sort of settled in in my mind that I have never been more fortunate in my life to have so much opportunity with my art as I do right now. I always thought that other people were going—were getting greater opportunities, and were really taking advantage of those opportunities, and I did not really get, say, the full recognition of my work. And now suddenly, that is really coming, and it is a little bit overwhelming, and at the same time, it is also very gratifying to have this opportunity. And it has come, I want to say, late in my life.

[00:05:00]

And, at times, I think about how long will I actually enjoy this, because I'm an older artist, I'm in my 70s, I'm well into my 70s, but not to focus on the negative. I just—you know, it's kind of a—an interesting fact that it has taken a long time for this, I would call, full recognition to come, and as always, you have to be ready to seize that opportunity when it comes. I've always thought that, that I had to keep working, even if there were not people waiting for my art, or asking for it. I had to keep working because opportunities would come.

[cell phone rings]

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay, I'm going to shut this thing right off, apologies.

NICOLE SCOTT: Do you want to restate that, seizing opportunities?

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah. So I've always felt that you had to be ready to seize the opportunity when it came, and in order to do that, you have to keep producing art, even at times when there isn't a lot of interest that is really apparent. You just have to assume that an opportunity is probably coming, and if you don't have the work ready, you will not be able to take advantage of that opportunity, so it's best to keep on working, and so that has really guided me. And there were times when I would say I was pretty obsessive about that, that I gave a lot of free time to doing art, and as a consequence, I have a lot of art, you know, that is from different time periods that is basically sitting in my studios. But now this opportunity is here, and so, you know, will I be able to, kind of, gradually let it out and, you know, let people see it and purchase it if they wish, or who knows what other things may come about?

But it is so real, that it is like—you know, it's like you dream about something happening, or you wish for something to happen and then it happens, really happens. And you are, okay, now that that's happened, are you ready for it, are you actually ready to deal with it? It's one of those. And so, I'm in that position, and again just figuring out how to deal with it.

And this kind of brings me back around to a conversation we were starting, which is my exposure to my elders and to my teachers. I had one teacher who I got to spend quite a bit of time with, and his name was Johnson Jimerson. Johnson was a very good singer, and also a

—very knowledgeable about our ceremonial way of life, and about our way of life beyond that. And he was one of those who really talked to me about, what does it mean to call yourself a Seneca, what does that entail? So I got to spend time with him quite a bit. He didn't have a car at the time we first met, and so I often was his transportation for things, and so I kind of watched, while I was with him, what was going on, what he was asked to do. And I learned songs from him and some language, some *Onöndowa'ga: Gawë:nö.* And we became friends in the sense of more than, you know, him being my mentor, he was a friend, and I really—and I was pleased to learn that he thought of me that way. And his sons, when he passed away, his sons contacted me to make sure that I was able to get home for his funeral. And they said they knew—one of them said he knew that he—that Johnson and I were friends, we were close friends.

And so he was one who originally came from Allegany, and when I met him, he was working in Buffalo at the Buffalo North American Indian Culture Center, and that's where I met him.

[00:10:12]

And that eventually, I went to work there running the Buffalo North American Indian Culture Center, and so I had opportunities to travel with him and to learn from him. But some of my other teachers that I—that come to my mind, there was one man named Milton Lay. And Milton Lay was an extraordinary carver, a woodcarver, and he made sacred objects, and other kinds of objects as well, but his ability was really outstanding. And just to watch him work and to learn from him, how he would go about making a lacrosse stick, for example, it was really a treat. And to be able to go to the woods and select a tree, and then take it through the process of making it into a lacrosse stick, watching the steps that were involved, I had that opportunity. When I first met him I was a little bit divided, because I was still working as an ironworker and managing the Seneca Nation Organization for the Visual Arts, but eventually I was working full-time for SNOVA, which was what we called it, and I had a little more time to spend with him. I also learned from a—and he was from Newtown; Seneca, as was Johnson, a Seneca, and then I learned also from a man named Avery Jimerson. Avery Jimerson was another carver, and he was really extraordinary. He really gave expression to the work that he created, and he was a really good singer. He liked to teach, he liked to teach people to sing and to dance and share what he knew.

And the interesting thing about some of these men was their first language had been Onodowaga, so they were not really a fully fluent English speaker, some a little less than others. And so one of the things that happened was they began to ask me to introduce the program. If we were doing a program together, they began to push me to the front to be the speaker, and I told them, "Well, you have to teach me what you want me to say, and then I can do it, but you have to teach me," and so they started doing that. They started teaching me how they wanted me to say whatever it was that was related to the songs we were going to sing, or how we opened up a program and all that sort of thing. And so, gradually, I became that person who helped out the ones that were not fluent in English, or were not comfortable standing in front of a group and talking. They knew—they had all kinds of knowledge, but they just didn't particularly need to stand up in front of people. So that was a great, good fortune.

And then, eventually, one of my really great teachers was a woman, and her name was Geraldine Green, but everyone know—knew her as Sid-Tah. And she was really a very knowledgeable person, and she was willing to teach me. I learned that the way in which people decided whether or not to teach me was I earned—

[00:14:59]

[END OF TRACK jemiso21_3of3_sd_track02_m.]

G. PETER JEMISON: —their respect by what I did, by showing I cared, by my—the seriousness of my commitment made them more willing to teach me what they knew. And I was very intent on learning what I had never been exposed to when I was younger, and I was in my—like, I was 30 years old when I began to really learn from them. But they didn't mind, you know, that I was an older person, they just wanted to share with me, and they wanted me to pick, make a choice of which longhouse I was going to represent, because I had an opportunity. My mother had come from Allegany, and my father came from Cattaraugus, I could have gone to either one of those two, but it was the one that I felt the most comfortable at that I would wind up choosing. And it was the way the people treated me,

they were so good to me, and I, you know, I had the opportunity to learn so much.

Geraldine's husband was—his name was Worthington, and he was very strict. People were afraid of him, he could be very harsh, but he also was a very kind man. And he also shared with me a lot and made me feel comfortable coming to the longhouse and going to his home to learn from him and from his wife Geraldine, Sid-Tah.

One other friend I made along the way was Clayton Logan, and Clayton and I have been friends for years now. He's in his 80s, but we are very close, and whenever we see each other, we just pick right up from where we last saw each other and talk about whatever. I like to make him laugh, and he likes to tell me stories too, but it's—he's a good friend, and he's taught me a lot. He is very knowledgeable. I listen to him, and he doesn't get along with everybody, but he—I believe what he tells me, and I—so I go with what he's—the way he says it, the way we should do things. And then, sometimes, I have to convince others to listen to him because they—he actually knows more than them, but they find it hard to—they find it hard if he's critical of them. Some people don't handle criticism well. I don't know, I just—it comes with the territory if you're—if you don't know, you know, how can you not be criticized at times? I wouldn't say so much criticized as corrected. You have to accept that you could be corrected. You don't know it all, so you got to be corrected by someone who knows more than you. I always thought that that was—I don't know—everybody understands that, but not everyone does.

So these are the kinds of people, you know, that I learned from, and some of them had titles and some of them had no title of any particular sort. They're—and that was one of the things that, right from the start, I really liked about coming home. When I first went to work for the education program for the Seneca Nation, and this was about 1975, I found that it didn't matter what you did. Like, in the building where we worked, people were just as decent and respectful of the janitor as they were of the president, and they actually could be sometimes more respectful of the janitor depending on who he was than the president—[laughs]—of the Seneca Nation, because everyone was equal.

I had lived in the white world where there's real distinction made between, you know, the kind of job you have and what kind of respect you might be shown, but that didn't hold true, does not hold true really in my nation.

[00:05:10]

And I really found that to be something I could embrace and really appreciate. I mean, the janitor might be the best dancer you've ever seen and a good singer, and a very kind person and, you know, so you—naturally you just want to be nice to them. You want to get a chance to talk with them, or whatever.

You know, I'm—I know I'm mentioning many men, but there were also many women who taught me along the way. Myrtle Peterson, an herbalist who is Seneca, medicine woman; Cece [Cecelia] Mitchell, Mohawk, medicine woman, wonderful person; Hazel Dean-John, extremely knowledgeable, educated. She's a linguist with a PhD in linguistics and a, you know, real knowledge of Seneca language, and a great friend and teacher. So I've had, you know, probably more opportunity than some people, and I feel—I mean, I can only feel blessed when you have that happen, that people will teach you.

NICOLE SCOTT: So, I know you can't share everything that they've taught you.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: But can you share ways that it has shown up in your art?

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah. It—it's kind of interesting how it has affected my art, because this is the part that's sort of hard to explain. The people I have talked about, although, you know, they appreciate being recognized, and they have done things that have given them recognition, it isn't for them completely the foremost thing they'd care about, you know. They are not—they don't have a huge ego; many of them, many of them didn't. In fact, one of them, Johnson, couldn't believe when I one time said to him, "I want to become famous," and this was quite a long time ago. And I guess I was still thinking in terms of my art, you know, I needed to—in the art world, you have to become famous, you have to become known. In order to do that, you really have to put yourself out there, and then you have to be able to deal with what might come as a result of you putting yourself out there, and that's

where we began talking. Okay, now that I have done that, and now that it has come, how do you handle it? Okay?

So for a long time, I really kept my ego down, I did a lot of work that helped other people in terms of their art recognition, managing community organizations, running Ganondagan. Like, yes, you are the leader, but you are not the one—I mean, you might get a lot of recognition because of that, but it doesn't require you to be quite an egomaniac where artists can get carried away with this, kind of need to be recognized, and one is driving the other. I mean, the art can be driving—you know, you have to get that art out there to—if you want it to be recognized and be successful as an artist. Particularly, of course, if you're trying to make a living from your art, you would really have to push. So since I had a job, I didn't have to push quite that hard, but I had to keep working. Am I making sense, this—

NICOLE SCOTT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

G. PETER JEMISON: —you know? So, in a sense it kind of—on the one level, I held back and then on the other level, I pushed by doing the work and then opportunities came.

[00:10:13]

I had—I guess I had a reading one time, and the reading told me that I would—my life and my career would be filled with peaks and some low parts, but I would have a number of peaks that I would have—I would achieve, and that's been true. That's the way my life is, that if things are not really going real great, it's coming, and it will be, you know, a peak. And so finding that middle ground where—that middle emotion, where you're not, like, carried away by the emotion of the recognition and able to function as everybody else in spite of getting lauded, or placed up high somehow. And that's what happened the other night, you know?

NICOLE SCOTT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

G. PETER JEMISON: So that has really been—but okay, the good thing about my way of life is it really did help me to stop drinking, for example, and get ahold of my life. I stopped, you know, being a nut and got ahold of my life. My teachings help me do that, and that also then led to me being more productive with my art. My subject matter, I kind of choose that, but, for example, the Creation Story, that was introduced to me by one of my mentors, John Mohawk. He introduced me to the Iroquois Creation Story, and it became my subject matter. Probably my treaty work came from my Confederacy, and I—and from those who were maintaining the treaty, and I picked that up and that then worked—it became a part of my art.

One other person that I haven't mentioned so far, Chief Jake Thomas, Chief Jacob Thomas. Jake was Cayuga. He was a real master of our oral tradition, he really could recite the Great Law, for example, and he probably could have recited Gai'wiio', although I never heard him do that as much as I heard him do Great Law, *Kaianere'kó:wa*. But I—I got to spend a fair amount of time with him, and learned from him and listened to him; just, just listen. He came to Ganondagan for our Youth and Elders Gathering, and he recited the Great Law.

NICOLE SCOTT: For people not familiar with the Great Law, can you provide some context?

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay, so the Great Law is the law which united our five Nations into a Confederacy. At a time when we were at war with one another, constantly fighting, in constant conflict, a man came among us that we referred to as the Peacemaker with a message of peace, power, and righteousness. And what he wanted us to do was put aside killing, replace killing with thinking, using the power of the Good Mind to resolve our differences versus fighting and killing each other. And there are principles that are connected with that as to how, you know, we are to extend justice to women, to children, to elders, to people, how we're supposed to conduct ourself as a human being, you know, treating others with respect and using the Good Mind too, at all times, in relation with others. And also recognizing that as we—

[00:14:59]

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G. PETER JEMISON: —exercise and use this, this way of life, this power of the Great Law, it

gets bigger, it grows, it has more meaning, and it influences others, the fact that we advance it and teach it, and that's something I was given to understand.

I had another reading—I believe in readings. I had a reading that told me that one of the things I was supposed to do was help the Confederacy hold together, remain together, and so I've done that. I've had some really powerful dreams at times. I had—I've had some recently. I'll just tell you about one that is unrelated to what we're talking about right now, but it really makes me wonder. I had this dream. I went to a place where there were a lot of people living on the edge of the Himalayan Mountains, and they were, kind of, involved in the spiritual side of life, I could say worshiping, and there were some incredible things. For example, in one case, there were tigers that were basically free, walking around but not harming anyone. They were kind of in a confined space, but it wasn't really like they were in a cage. There were people eating very simple parts of food, like maybe just a tea. And then I was able to travel, almost like without walking; I could almost, like, fly, or just move just above the ground somehow, without touching.

And last night, I started watching this series by an Indian filmmaker, an East Indian filmmaker, and his name is Satyajit Ray. And Satyajit Ray did these films about a man called Apu, from his childhood up through his teenage years I've seen so far. At one point, there was an image of a place on the edge of the Ganges, which is to them their sacred river, that looked like the place that I traveled to in my dream. I saw it in the movie last night, and I watched it again this morning. How do your account for that, that—you know? And they were doing the things I was talking about. They were worshiping, they were drinking small things like teas, and they were seated on these stairs at different levels, or walking up them. I swear it looked like the dream that I'd had, maybe over a week ago or more. And so, you know, I'm left wondering, what does it mean? I mean, like India is the last place on earth you can go to right now because they have this fierce COVID outbreak, right?

NICOLE SCOTT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

G. PETER JEMISON: And I never really particularly had a desire to go to India. I might have more interest in the Himalayas, but again, just to learn something about the—their belief. I really enjoy some of the films I've seen about people who—that live there, anyway.

One time—one time I had a reading by my good friend Cece [ph], and she told me she saw that I was working on a project. I was working on something, which was going to require a lot of money.

[00:05:01]

And she reads tea leaves, and she saw me pulling shut a huge bag that was holding the money that I would need. She said, "You've got it," and then she saw—she said, "I don't know what it is, but you've got it." And then she saw an eagle land on a branch of a tree overlooking a place. She didn't know exactly where that place was, but the way she described it, before the building got built, an eagle came, landed on that branch looking out to where the building is today. And the way it came about, there was a guy who was Zuni who used to stay with us, and his grandfather used to perform at the site. He was a silversmith, like, a very fine silversmith, a good singer. He passed away, his son was in and out of trouble, but he got himself cleaned up for a while in a shock camp. And while he came to stay with us, one day, he decided to take a run, and he ran down from where our house was on top of the hill toward Fort Hill, and then he ran back. And as he was running back, an eagle swooped him and then went and landed in the street. He continued running up the hill to the house and came flying in the door and told me, "I just got swooped by an eagle." The very first thing in my mind was his grandfather, that was the very first thing I saw. And they used to dance the Eagle Dance. He—his grandfather sang it, other ones were trained by him to dance the Eagle Dance, and that eagle is the one that landed and looked out to where the building is built right now.

Again, so when people were—like, we went through really time periods in the process of getting things together to build the building when everybody else gave up hope; I never gave up hope.

NICOLE SCOTT: And the building you're referring to is the—

G. PETER JEMISON: Seneca Art—

NICOLE SCOTT: —Culture Center?

G. PETER JEMISON: —& Culture Center at Ganondagan. When others lost hope, I never lost hope because I said, it's already been seen, it's already going to happen. I mean, it's just—this will be the hard part right here, whatever's going on, I'll have to figure out how to overcome that, but I'll have to have the faith that it's going to happen. And I did have that faith, and somehow, I knew what to do. And that goes back to the conversation we were having last week, how do—how do you know these things, how do I know these things? I don't have ready answers. I have—I guess I think certain things, but—

So, I guess to sum it up, I believe in a higher power, and I'm not even sure what it should be called, or I don't even think it's worth thinking about what it should be called.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: It just exists, and it has manifested itself to me in some ways that I don't know if I'll ever come to understand it. I don't really know, but there's something to it. I don't know where to go now in terms—

NICOLE SCOTT: No, that's okay. I agree with you, and I don't know what to call it either, sometimes.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay.

NICOLE SCOTT: But I want to—

G. PETER JEMISON: Well, I'm glad you understand.

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah. Well, basically, it's just having that—like you said, it's faith in uncertainty, faith in knowing that something is going to happen.

[00:10:08]

And I—it goes back to—I keep hearing this—I keep hearing this word quite a bit, of just contentment. And you kind of touched on that a little bit when you were talking about the eagle part of being an artist, but also remaining humble. And working even though you weren't getting that recognition, it's, you know, you could be sad, upset, you know, maybe even angry that you're not getting this recognition.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: But, you know, that at some point, or maybe you didn't, or maybe you did know that you would be getting recognition at some point. Or even if you didn't get it, you were still making art, you were—you still found that, that piece of—you know, I'm going to create art because I love it. And I'm just going to continue to create it because, at some point, maybe it'll mean something to other people. And I think through life not—if you're not an artist, whatever that creative outlet could be, I think a lot of people can relate to, where does my happiness come from? Does this come from this recognition that people are speaking, or does it come from just, you know, keeping my hands busy and creating because I enjoy it? So I think—I know what you're talking about because I also feel that same way about a lot of things, but I enjoyed that, that part of what you were just saying. But also going back to when you mentioned Clay and Logan, there's a—visually, what automatically comes to my mind, is this picture I took. I think it had to be one of the first Canandaigua Treaty Days that I attended with students. And you both were at the front, and I love that picture so much, because it's both of you just laughing with each other, just like a big childish grin.

G. PETER JEMISON: Really?

NICOLE SCOTT: And that's exactly what comes to mind, and you said that you both like to make each other laugh.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah—

NICOLE SCOTT: And I can see that.

G. PETER JEMISON: —we do, yeah, we do, we just—I can think of something, you know, that

happened to me, you know, that I know you'll find funny. I'd just love to tell them about it, you know, it's just—

NICOLE SCOTT: But I think—yeah, you've said you've had a lot of teachers then.

G. PETER JEMISON: I've had, I've had a lot of teachers and they were—you know. And it's not that I didn't have teachers that were not Seneca or not Native; I had other teachers. I had a good artist who was a teacher of mine, and I happened to mention him the other night to someone who knew him. His name was Frank Eckmair, and he was a printmaker, a woodcarver and a printmaker, or a woodblock carver. That's the kind of printing he did, from cutting wood blocks, and he—he made a couple of prints for me. I worked with him, and I did the cutting and then he did the printing, and—but he—very young, when I was very young, and I may have mentioned him last week, he was really helpful to give me some direction and some recognition and, you know, encouragement at a time when I was really young, maybe 19, 20 years old. So I've had those people too.

And then different ones that I had just for a short period of time, when I was learning to do one thing or another that I needed to understand from somebody who knew how to do it. Like, hanging an art exhibit, or setting up a display in the store; there were people that were there to teach me, to show me how to do things and—but, you know? I remember this other guy, he—the very first store I worked in in New York City where I sold art supplies, there was a Black guy who—he lived in Harlem, and he knew where everything in the store was. He knew where everything was better than anybody in the store including his boss, whose store was just a jumble of stuff, but he had great art supplies. But everything was jumbled up—

NICOLE SCOTT: Hold on.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah, sorry.

NICOLE SCOTT: You're—fix that, the mic.

G. PETER JEMISON: Is that better now, or did I—?

[00:14:59]

[END OF TRACK jemiso21_3of3_sd_track04_m.]

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah, there you go.

G. PETER JEMISON: —pull it off? Okay. So, yeah, it was a—place called Fine Art Materials, and it was owned by David Davis. And this guy's name was Milt Green, and Milt really knew where everything in the store was, could explain it, and endless patience. I was working with him when Martin Luther King was killed, and I did not know what to say. I felt horrible, and words seemed meaningless and, you know, he—I mean, obviously, he was not related to Martin Luther King, but if anybody knew how important that man was, certainly Milt did, and like I said, I had to go work the next day, and work with him again. I don't know how he thought, because I couldn't really figure out how to have a conversation about it. In the meantime, Harlem was burning; Newark, New Jersey, was on fire; all major cities, you know, around the United States were burning, but Harlem was right there in New York, you know, and that's where he lived.

That was a really difficult year living in New York City by myself, because not only was he killed, Robert Kennedy was killed, and I thought people in this country have really lost their minds. I mean, this is like—is this how we solve when we don't believe somebody, or agree with somebody, we kill them, you know, in a public way? And of course, in my lifetime, JFK had been killed in the '60s, and now, you know, I'm going through the end of the '60s, and now we're still seeing these things happen. And then John Lennon would get killed while I was working there in New York City; this was the second time around. But just—those are things that were hard to—kind of hard to take. Probably made more so by the fact, that I have spoken about the fact, that my neighbor who pulled me through the time when I had no money was from Alabama. He was from Birmingham, and he was a racist, and yet, he was taking care of me, he was keeping me going by feeding me. And he could not really—he couldn't really figure out what he thought about Martin Luther King. On the one hand, being from Alabama and being a racist, he felt one way, but on the other hand, I think he thought it was wrong, and he blamed himself even. It was really strange. He—he had a mental problem to begin with, but I—you know just in passing, this was a very—you know. I was 23

years old and, you know, all these kinds of things were happening, and I was like, what am I supposed to think?

So I did a lot of growing up, you know, just got out of college, went to New York City on my own, brave, and we go back to bravery, and then hard things happen, you know, in the—in the world. And I didn't necessarily have somebody I could turn to and say, "Tell me what the heck is going on, what does this mean?" You know, or—not that I couldn't tell you what happened, but—I mean, what are we supposed to do now? Anyway—

NICOLE SCOTT: But you've said you've had many influences in your life.

[00:05:02]

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: But going back to your artwork, did—do you have any favorite artists? Do you have a particular favorite type of art medium?

G. PETER JEMISON: You know, when I was younger, I did have artists that I looked at, and I'll tell you about some of it. So I had discovered this one artist, he became very well known, his name was—his name is Robert Rauschenberg. And someplace along the line, I learned that he was part Indian, part—I don't know what nation, but—and he came from Texas, so it's hard to say, people move to Texas, who knows, you know, where he came from, where his family was from. But anyway, he didn't make too much of it, but I knew that fact. When I moved to New York City, I used to hang out at this bar, and the bar was called Max's Kansas City, and there was another one on the opposite corner of Park Avenue South that was also owned by the same owner that owned Max's. Well, Rauschenberg used to drink at Max's Kansas City, and my, quote—I don't want to say—hero, but my influencer, I saw him so drunk that he was just kind of like, wandering around in a stupor, you know?

NICOLE SCOTT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

G. PETER JEMISON: And, it certainly had an impact on how I thought of him afterward. And then I met another artist who was kind of a well-known sculptor, and I admired his work. Because of being an ironworker, this man worked with some of the materials and things I worked with as an ironworker. I'm talking about heavy equipment; iron, cables, you know, big tools, heavy tools that you have to use. And so I asked—I had an opportunity through a friend of mine to meet him, and I asked about being introduced to him by her. And she took me over to talk to him, and he was so strange and arrogant that I really was turned off by him. I just didn't want anything to do with him when I—after I met him. And that goes to that thing I was talking about earlier about your ego. Kind of, you know, if you're an artist, in some people, that brings out a really negative quality, and I would say that that happened to him.

I want to mention one other situation. When I was teaching at Lafayette High School, in Buffalo, I was asked to do an exhibit at the University of Buffalo. I don't remember the connections exactly how that came about, but I agreed to do it, and I wanted to work with a material that I had never worked with, but I had an idea for. I had done these drawings, created these drawings where I was making sculpture using foam rubber, and I had a thought about how I would put it together, and I had these ideas. And so this curator at the University of Buffalo was willing to allow me to do it, and they were really quite simple, because they were sheets of foam rubber that I bought, but they were large, and then I bolted them down to a plywood sheet to make them form different forms, to make—to have different forms made by the foam rubber by the way I bolted them down to the plywood. Difficult to explain, but that's what it amounted to. So it was quite simple, really.

Well, the university in that case handles public relations, handles publicity, and they decided to, you know, kind of give me the max in terms of publicity. So I wound up in the Buffalo Sunday paper, and I got like a good-sized photo of myself seated near this foam rubber stuff, and an article written about me, and then there were some articles written that were totally wrong.

[00:10:17]

They just completely missed what I was doing, but this other one kind of, like, gave me this big recognition, the first time in a newspaper that I got that much. And again, I was 24 years

old, and so I had a bar that I used to go to, and I was there by myself having a couple drinks. And this artist came in who was older than me and who had really gotten really big recognition in the *New York Times*; not in the Buffalo paper, but in the *New York Times*, by a very well-respected critic. He had gotten what I would consider to be, like, a golden review. He came up to me in the bar and wanted to fight me, wanted to start a fight over the recognition I had got in that newspaper article. It really made him angry. And I had never really had a conversation with this guy that I can recall; I knew who he was, and I had seen his show at one point in New York, I believe. It was quite impressive, he was a really good draftsman, he could draw unbelievably well, and yet, he wanted to get into a fight with me over the article that was in the newspaper. And I just thought he was out of his mind, and I was, like, I don't to get in a fight, you know, I got to go and teach school tomorrow, I don't want to walk in there with a big, fat lip or something, you know, in case he gets a punch in on me. I could handle myself, but I just thought this is stupid, you know, this guy is drunk, so what. [Laughs.]

And then I got another one, and a woman that was a fellow teacher was giving me a hard time about that newspaper article again. "Who do you think you are?" "I'm just an artist, I'm just a—I was asked to do a show, I did the show, they did the publicity, I didn't have anything to do with them; what they wrote, they wrote." I couldn't explain that, nobody was—they didn't want to hear it. So that's where—you know what I'm saying, you know what I'm saying, it's just—it's weird that—how people react to somebody getting recognition, yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: So, you don't have a favorite artist?

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay. So the other night at the gallery, this guy asked me, he said, "Not that your work isn't good, but do you know Charles Burchfield?" "Do I know Charles Burchfield? Jesus, I went to Buffalo State, right, isn't there a whole gallery devoted for him, a museum at Buffalo State," you know, I said. And then he completely missed it when I said to him, "I knew him."

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: He—it went right over his head. I wanted to say I wrote him a letter and he responded; that's how much I, you know, knew him, so. And he came to a class when I was a kid teaching, you know; he was teaching the class.

Anyway, so Charles Burchfield, I admire him. When I got to know him he was my age now, and he said one time that he had gotten a piece of his art purchased by the Boston Museum of Fine Art. And he was in the museum, and he saw it, and he said to himself, I need to fix that part, I need to fix that, and so he tried to explain it to the museum director. The museum director was like, "Oh, no, oh, no, we're not letting you take that, you know, you can't take it," and he goes, "Well—" His answer—his story to us when he was speaking was, he might be the director of a very important museum, but that doesn't mean he knows anything about art. [Laughs.]

[00:14:59]

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And I love that comment from a man my age, you know. And he didn't—he looked like just a librarian or something, you might say, a very low-key guy. I thought that was great when he said that. I—he gained so much of my admiration anyway, by that comment.

So I—the other artist that I occasionally like to look at—Picasso is a fascinating artist; a terrible human being—[laughs]—but a fascinating artist. He was so terrible to women, and not good to his children, and he was truly an egomaniac, but his art, still, he was just—it's like he had a gift, and what he could do with that gift at any point, sort of, in his life, was amazing. And some of it is good, some of it is just "eh," you know? But I like some of the things that are not such a big deal, with like these guitars made out of found objects or metal or, you know, just simple things, but found pieces of wood. But they're really—for some reason, they just really—they stick out in my mind as something really nice.

When it comes to Native artists, there's one guy whose name is escape—escaping me right now. If it comes back to me, I'll mention it. I—Native artists to me are in a class by

themselves. The best ones are just unbelievable, they have the skill level that—you don't find in other artists, the skill level that they have, the—the—and the aesthetic. Their work is just flawless in that way, and usually it just really, *boom*, it's right there, just has incredible impact. And I—you know, I can't help but admiring their work, and it might be a very traditional type of work; pottery, it might be basketry, it might be jewelry, or it might be, you know, some kind of a beadwork, or something like that that—I mean, it might be a traditional art form, but they are—the work is just, like, outstanding. Some Northwest Coast carvers that I got to know, Robert Davidson, and, uh, he really—his work really impressed me.

NICOLE SCOTT: We had talked about this before, about being labeled a Native artist rather than just an artist.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah. You want to talk about that again?

NICOLE SCOTT: I think it would be nice just to touch on it.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay.

NICOLE SCOTT: Because I think for one, people might think, ah, no I just want to be an artist, I don't want to be a Native artist. I think—I want just—it's like the phrase, "girl boss." Like, I don't want to be a girl boss, I want to just be a boss.

G. PETER JEMISON: Right.

NICOLE SCOTT: But what you're saying is you have a deeper admiration for people who are Native artists, but you still see them as artists.

G. PETER JEMISON: I do.

NICOLE SCOTT: But—

G. PETER JEMISON: —I really do.

NICOLE SCOTT: —go—yeah, go, into that a little bit more of—

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay, so yeah, that—we have talked about this, and it really was a conscious choice on my part. And this conscious choice took place quite a while back now, because it would've been as far back as 1973, '72, when I made a conscious choice to show with other Native artists and to be considered as a Native artist, as an Indian artist, as a Native American artist, as an Indigenous artist, whatever label you want to put on it.

[00:05:00]

I made the choice that that's what I wanted to do, and I recall saying to you I was advised not to do that by a Black artist that I knew, who warned me that I was pigeonholing myself, and I would wind up limiting my opportunities by acknowledging that I was an Indian artist, or a Native artist. And my thought was, yes, but I am. I mean, my parents are both Senecas, I grew up in a Seneca community, I—you know, my being is as a Seneca, okay? Yes, it took me a while to understand what that meant, but that is who I am, okay. So then, yes, I'm an artist, and I started being an artist—in my mind, I guess, I started being an artist when I was about 18 or 19 years old. Nineteen years old, let's say, I started thinking about myself as an artist, and, you know, I didn't really fully know what that all meant, I just thought of myself that way, and I wanted to develop that ability. If I had that ability, I wanted to develop that ability as an artist.

And so, this man who was telling me that it wasn't a good idea, I want to say his name was Jack Whitten. Now Jack is—was Black, and he was from Bessemer, Alabama. He left Alabama due to racism, and he moved to New York City and went to a school called Cooper Union and developed as an artist. But along the way, he made a decision that he would not call himself a Black artist, he would only refer to himself as an artist. And he would work in an abstract manner, and really work to develop his ideas and paint according to what he was thinking, his thoughts and his emotions and his ideas. And for a—for quite a long time, Jack worked as I did without real recognition, and then as he got older, and I'm—I forget the year he passed away, but he was getting toward the end of his life when he suddenly got major recognition. I'm saying—I think I've got recognition, he was really—in the white art world being in New

York City, he got the full treatment. And I went to see one of his shows sponsored by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and he was showing all of his work, even the works that I liked that he was not ready to show when I saw them, these carvings in wood. So Jack made it, and today, Jack Whitten is, like, a blue-chip artist in the art world. He's gone, so I assume his wife is getting some benefit, and I believe they had one child, so there's finally probably some financial benefit, because, you know, what you would call the blue chip gallery is selling his work, right, and at auction, it probably sells for a lot of money. It's weird, because that's the art world. The art world will profit from Jack Whitten for decades because they've given him the recognition, he did a lot of work and his work is selling; I don't know, I'm not sure who's buying, but—so, he made it the way he wanted to do it, is what I'm getting at. It is a way to do it.

But now, ironically, Black artists are, like, really embraced big. You know, it's like diversity and inclusion, they were first, and they're now like big, and they have had the collectors and the gallery directors and the museum people and the writers, they've had the people in the right places to—and to have that support, the level of support they need from their community that has helped them.

[00:10:23]

And now the white community is embracing them, or I didn't even want to say the white community; the art world, quote, is embracing them. So if that's what we work toward, is when will the art world embrace us, me, it's beginning. It is as close as it can be right now to the art world embracing Pete Jemison, but I did it my way. I said I'm a Native artist, I'm an Indian artist, I'm Seneca, my subject matter comes from my heritage, and sometimes it doesn't look like it. People wouldn't know for sure that that's what's behind it, but I know what it is about. I understand why I'm doing those things and how they relate—

NICOLE SCOTT: Do you think you can find success both ways?

G. PETER JEMISON: Jack is proof you can.

NICOLE SCOTT: Do you feel that—does it ever go across your mind wondering, you know, if I had taken this other route, if success would have found me sooner?

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay, so let me tell you that quick story.

NICOLE SCOTT: Okay.

G. PETER JEMISON: I want to grab my water.

NICOLE SCOTT: Water? Okay.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay. Just going to get that.

NICOLE SCOTT: A lot, let’s let you sit back down before you start talking. Take a sip. I can hold it over here.

G. PETER JEMISON: So this goes back to, could I have found success any other way? Okay, so this goes back to—

NICOLE SCOTT: Success sooner.

G. PETER JEMISON: Sooner, sooner. So, this goes back to the 1968 time period when I was—the first time I was living in New York, when I did this show with the Tibor de Nagy Gallery on 57th Street, when I had one painting in that show. And my friends thought I was like—you know, I had really made it, and I had gone to the Whitney Museum. The Whitney Museum holds what they call a Biennial. In other words, every two years, they do a show, and when they do that show, they find new talent. And so I went to see the Biennial, and some of the people in that show were in the show I was in, and so that convinced my friends that I had really made it, because these guys were in the show where you—here's all the new talent, and I'm with them in another show; obviously, I've been embraced, okay?

So I—imagine, again, I'm 23 years old, I have been in New York City about nine months, and I'm showing in a very prestigious gallery on *the* street in New York City with these artists. If I could have held it together then, I imagine I could have been successful, but that is when I went into this—you know, I talked—we were talking earlier about, I went up and then all of a

sudden I went, *voop*, down the other side, in part due to my partying too much. And so, I hit depression, because I couldn't really—I didn't know what I was supposed to do. Now that I've gotten to here, where am I going? You know, I—I couldn't figure it out. So I hadn't figured it out.

Instead of asking for help, which I should have done, or advice, which I should have done, I decided to take my own route and exit from the place that was causing—I thought causing the depression, which was New York City, and go back to Buffalo, where I kind of knew the place, and thought I could probably manage myself there better. Only later did I find out that the gallery owner, who had given me the opportunity, actually wanted to see me succeed. He wanted to give me the opportunity, beyond what he had first given me—

[00:14:59]

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G. PETER JEMISON: —by continuing to show my work, and handle my work. And he was like—the first question he had for me is, "Where did you go? Why did you disappear?" And then I had explained that, and he gave me one more chance to show him some more work, and he didn't like the work I was doing at the time when I was living in Buffalo. He didn't happen to like that particular work, and it wasn't my best, but it was heading in the right direction, it just hadn't gotten there yet. But I—whether he would have embraced that new work when it finally hit the—when it finally became the good stuff, I don't know. Anyway, so I say I could have, but then here's the whole thing that would've been missing, or what I was afraid of, and I—this is how I look at it from this perspective. I didn't know who I was yet; I had not had that opportunity to learn about my Seneca heritage yet, that would come later, to really understand. If I had gotten that success really intensely when I was 23 years old, what the heck would I have done with it, you know? Would it have eaten me up?

Some of those guys that were in that show with me who got that success, they were a little bit older than me, got into some heavy drug use I found out later from somebody who knew them. And I didn't know them, I told the person I was talking to, I said, "I didn't know them, I never hung out with them, I just was in a show with them." And he said he—you know, that that's the—that's what happened with them, but—

So I tend to think I made the right choice because of not having my shit together, okay, if you don't mind me saying so. And being as young as I was at the time, I'm kind of glad I didn't get all of that recognition then. Now, would it have—there were—but since that time, of course, in the interim, there were periods where I got good recognition, and I showed with good galleries. In Santa Fe, I had a good representative. I had one in Seattle that showed some of my good work, one in New York City too. So there were opportunities along the way that were pretty good opportunities, and then it started picking up a little bit more. Some German curators became interested in my work and took my work to Germany a couple of times, three times at least, for some, you know, pretty good opportunities, really.

The other thing that I have mentioned briefly before is my Māori friends. They—I really like what I've been able—when I've been able to work with them. I would go back in a minute to work with them again. They're good, and they're good artists, and so—

NICOLE SCOTT: But you had said you wish you had asked for help?

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: So for anyone who might be struggling, what advice would you give individuals who either can't ask for help, or who are struggling to find out which path to take? If they're young, Native artists, what advice would you have for them?

G. PETER JEMISON: Well, my advice would be if you can find an artist who has sort of settled in their career, whose career is doing—they're doing well, and they seem to have their act together, just talk to them about the path that they have taken and how they've come to the place where they are then.

[00:05:04]

And what that involves, you know, what it involves to maintain a career and hold yourself together, because you have to have some restraint, you have to have some control over

your life. You can't—I don't think you can do it when you're, you know, just like partying all the time, and out there. I don't think that that's—I don't think it's the way to go.

Okay, so beyond that, if you're a Native person, I would really—and I've always said this to other artists, if you're not living at home, go home, go home for a while and reconnect with the people at home. Find out, you know, what they know. Attend to your ceremonial way of life if that's open to you; that's an opportunity you can take advantage of, do that. Connect with the spiritual reality of our people and embrace it, and, you know, just—you know, in the beginning, you're not the one who knows, you're the one who's trying to learn. You're the one who is trying to be helped by this way of life we've been given, which has brought us to this point, and we're still here. So it has validity, and you just have to—you have to embrace it, though. And to embrace it, it's more than you kind of like sail past it. You really, kind of, have to engage, and you have to take the time to learn. This is if this—this is the only route I know. Now, I know other artists do it their way, and they don't do this part that I'm describing. I can only describe this part because that's what I have done, is that I have found strength in our traditional way of life, and in—and from the traditional people who know it better than I and who are willing to teach me.

So, my advice would be to seek that out if you are at, sort of, loose ends and don't know which way you should go. I think the city life is a difficult one. It's not for everyone, but if you enjoy it, I think enjoy it but also take time to go home to reconnect with your own people, your own relatives, your own, you know, clan members, your own way of life. Try to reconnect with that and allow them to help you. And then, then you can go back and do whatever you want, or go wherever you want, as long as you have established some kind of a—the thought that comes to mind is a base for yourself, a strength for yourself.

NICOLE SCOTT: A good foundation?

G. PETER JEMISON: A good foundation, yes, that's a good way to put it.

NICOLE SCOTT: So what's next, Pete? You've had success, you're in museums, you're opening galleries.

G. PETER JEMISON: I know. Let me have another drink of water. Boy, what's next? I guess it is, keep working. I've got some pieces that I'm working on. Try to resolve this question about the book—what kind of a book are we working on here, what kind of a story do we need to tell, where do we find the publisher, the financial support to make it happen, what is it that has to happen to make that push, to get it done?

[00:10:07]

Boy, that's—that's a biggie, you know, and it takes a lot of time to do that stuff. So right now, I guess I just have to do the art still, because the opportunities are right there, so I got to do that. But I can't completely neglect the possibility of the—of the publication, especially because of my age, I don't know how much time I have to get things done I think I should do. And I want to—at the same time, I want to be able to give my family the time that I want to spend with them. You know, I want my grandchildren to know me and spend time with me. My son Ansley found a house over here in Fairport, so they're going to move over here, and that will put them closer to us. And so I want to, you know, help provide for them if I can, and I want to keep on working. You know, I still enjoy the art, still enjoy doing it. I have a painting in my studio I'm working on, and I worked on it yesterday. I work slowly, though; it takes a long time to do the work, so.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: It takes a long time.

NICOLE SCOTT: It's like I—I drink slowly, you work slowly.

[They laugh.]

NICOLE SCOTT: I'm still working on this coffee.

G. PETER JEMISON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So let's wrap this up, and I will try to at least say something, kind of as a closing.

NICOLE SCOTT: But do you have—do you have something after this?

G. PETER JEMISON: I need a lunch.

NICOLE SCOTT: Okay. Well, because I was going to say—

G. PETER JEMISON: What do you want to do?

NICOLE SCOTT: —I have to meet with Keith, so I'll do that, and then we can do one more hour?

G. PETER JEMISON: Do one more hour after this?

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah, and then that should be—I think that should be good.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay.

NICOLE SCOTT: I'll pause it.

G. PETER JEMISON: All right, pause it and leave everything—mm-hmm [affirmative].

[Audio break.]

NICOLE SCOTT: You're ready?

G. PETER JEMISON: Oh, you're being real.

NICOLE SCOTT: [Laughs.] So, there we go.

G. PETER JEMISON: So, testing one two, sounds good?

NICOLE SCOTT: It sounds great.

G. PETER JEMISON: All right, here we go.

NICOLE SCOTT: Okay. So we're at the end, we're going to do one more hour.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes.

NICOLE SCOTT: And we're going to leave it with—

G. PETER JEMISON: Presuming I can—

NICOLE SCOTT: —all the wisdom that you have on the recording.

[They laugh.]

NICOLE SCOTT: Okay. So, the last thing we talked about was—

G. PETER JEMISON: —what's next.

NICOLE SCOTT: What's next. There was a question that I had earlier, and I—

G. PETER JEMISON: All right, if you can think of it, that'd be good.

NICOLE SCOTT: I should've looked at this before we started. But in some ways, we kind of did talk about, you know, not necessarily, but you touched on it a little bit, of would you have done anything differently?

G. PETER JEMISON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NICOLE SCOTT: You—you shared that, while you could've maybe found success earlier, you would've had been able to get that teaching again, become the artist that you are now without it.

G. PETER JEMISON: Right.

NICOLE SCOTT: But besides that, would you have done anything else differently?

G. PETER JEMISON: Oh, boy. Would I have done anything else differently? I'm just giving a quick thought to that.

NICOLE SCOTT: Okay.

G. PETER JEMISON: I guess if there was anything that I would've done differently, I would've given more time to learning my language, and taken more responsibilities for the speaking parts that are part of our ceremonial way of life. It's hard, because I'm two hours removed from home. I don't really want to make excuses for myself, but if I had had a way to spend more time with my language that would've been one thing—

[00:14:59]

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G. PETER JEMISON: —I would've done. The—you know, I think I—with Ganondagan, and I think I did really what I wanted to do. I don't think that I could have seen the new building built sooner. That took time to pull that all together and, you know, get everybody on board to—with the idea of doing it, so I don't think that could've changed much. You know, I—there are things, personal things that I—you think about, you know; could I have been a better father, could I have, you know, been a better husband, I mean those kind of things. Certainly, there were mistakes I made, that I think about those. You can't undo them, you've done them and so you just have to learn to live with it. And, you know, I think maybe one—only one other thing that I can think of, and that is, you know, I kind of held off on travel, like international travel. I—one thing I wanted to really do was see as much of the United States as possible and because of different organizations I was involved with, I got the chance to go to different communities, I'm talking about Native communities. That part I liked and enjoyed and—but I for—I decided to forgo traveling, like, for example, back to Italy. That's something I would still like to do. I did get to see France a second time, I did get to England a second time, I've been to New Zealand three times.

And I guess that would be the other thing, is just maybe having made time to—I would've had to give up time for Ganondagan, and that is one thing that, it took a lot of time. I mean, Jeanette and I got into the routine of the festivals and the events, and so we were at it, you know, constantly. I mean, you might as well say for 30 years, and that's a long time. So we for—we decided to forgo other things that we might have done, but we took a lot of satisfaction from managing Ganondagan and having those festivals and doing the various things we did. So that, I guess I'm satisfied with that.

NICOLE SCOTT: You did a lot, you did a lot.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: So I do want to in this hour talk more about you as an artist, then, your process, or what inspires you when you're creating art, what goes through your mind, is there a ritual, or like, take us into what it's like to—to be Pete Jemison, the artist?

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay. I'll start at the back and work—you know, I'll start at the front and work backwards, let's do it that way. So, right now, I'm working on this oil painting, which is kind of just a landscape of Ganondagan, with the Bark Longhouse sitting in the center pretty much of the—of the image. And what I really was attracted to were the really strong colors. I started—I began with a photograph taken in the fall, and then I added another photo image with these very bright red oranges, and then very bright sunflower plants and their very green leaves, sort of some browns in the foreground in this woven fence that goes around it. And now I've worked into that, birds. A lot of the birds that I'm seeing outside of my window, I'm working them into the composition.

[00:05:05]

So it's just a kind of exploration of color, and of course, something iconographic like the Longhouse. And so when I'm working on it, I'm really—I work so slowly, I kind of have to block it out, lay in the things that—I literally created a grid on the surface of the canvas, and then I—from the photograph I started with, I blew that up quite a lot and then I started figuring out the individual grids, what goes into where, so that I had a control of the whole area. But I don't like to get too tight. Right now, I'm just having to get—lay it in and block it in, I guess you could say, then I want to loosen that up and really start painting, because I

love oil paint and I love working with it.

So for me, it's kind of a process, but it's also fun. And I finally broke down, and I went out and bought a new CD player, which has a FM radio in it, could play tapes, and started listening to some CDs that I haven't listened to lately. Because my other one has been broken for years, and I've been allowing that to, you know—I've been just dealing with it, letting it play once in a while.

NICOLE SCOTT: What kind of tapes? What's your favorite?

G. PETER JEMISON: The tapes that I'm playing right now, there are two jazz tapes. One is Miles Davis, "Sketches of Spain," and the other one is a Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington tape of them playing together, but it's Louis Armstrong that I really, really like. And it's funny, because there's a song on it that I remember hearing in my cousin's home. They came from Tonawanda, and I remember that playing probably back in the '60s, the first time I heard that song by Louis Armstrong, I guess. And at the moment, I can't think of the name of it, I can think of the sound. Anyway, I used to—when I lived in New York by myself, I went to jazz concerts, they were free, and I had a few jazz tapes that I would listen to. And I had kind of gotten into jazz when I was in college, because I was a bar—I was a waiter in a bar, and he had a really good jazz jukebox, and I used to listen to those recordings while I was working there. And so I kind of got interested in it—into it and listened to it along with a lot of other kind of music, you know, in time, but that was it.

Take the Creation Story drawings that we can see, there's five of them, and of course, the subject matter in the center two are the twins, the right-handed and the left-handed twin and their personalities, and what they did. And the drawing is actually of a Māori man that I met on my last trip to New Zealand, and I just really liked his real strong features. Here, he doesn't look as—he's a good-looking man, and this is kind of exaggerated the way he appears here in these drawings, but that's what's in the center. And then there's Comet, who is part like a panther, or a jaguar, let's say, and then part human. He's a cat and a human, and I really like doing those kind of drawings every once in a while, of something that is not natural but sort of superhuman or something. The one on the far left is of a dancer, one of Garth Fagan's dancers, and I—this was the mask I designed for them. We later designed a mask that sits on top of the head versus in front of the face, and it worked, it works better. And then the conflict between the two twins on the far right.

I've always loved drawing, and I really like to do drawings.

[00:10:01]

I strived to learn to draw, and so I really worked at it. And then I can do something that is not a hundred percent, you know, naturalistic; it's just the idea of this conflict between the two brothers, imagining how they fought.

The treaty cloth piece is about my grandmother and myself, the first time we went to pick up treaty cloth, which is a memory from when I was maybe five years old, I couldn't have been too much older, and waiting in line for her to collect the treaty cloth. And this is a—it's done on a piece of treaty cloth. She referred to it as annuity goods, and as I said, the kids, like myself, we called it "nudie goods." And it's something we still get as a result of the Canandaigua Treaty, and so there's images of the 200th anniversary of the Canandaigua Treaty, images of the Hiawatha belt, an image of my grandmother, her sister Julia, and my cousin Mike, and then something about the sunflower being the first light on earth according to our Creation Story. And, yeah, I just talk about, and I have lettered on it things that I want to say, like "U.S. Honor," "Our Earth Honor," "The Treaties," just direct.

And so when I was doing—this is done by creating iron-ons, and then I ironed them on, although I had—I used to also go to a little shop that was off 96th, and I would take them photos that I wanted them to create the iron-ons with. They had a machine that could do it quickly, and they're really tricky to work with, the iron-ons. They don't always work, but there's some pretty clear ones here that did transfer well. I'm trying to do some new ones, iron-ons, on another treaty cloth piece I'm doing now.

And then up one, on the far left, I began a series on the journey of the Peacemaker, and the first one was just the Peacemaker by himself. The figure on the left represents the Peacemaker. He doesn't—we don't see his face, he's more of a spirit. And then on the right, I used Jeanette as my model for the woman for—

NICOLE SCOTT: She's your muse?

G. PETER JEMISON: —Mother of Nations. What's that?

NICOLE SCOTT: I said, she's your muse?

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes, she is my muse there, yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: Mother of Nations?

G. PETER JEMISON: Mother of Nations, yeah, and the two of them are wearing like a similar top. She's accepted his message, so somehow that transformed her in the way her—she's looking at the—at—from the waist up, anyway. And then she's wearing sort of a traditional woman's outfit, and they're sharing food from a big pot. She used to cook, that's what she used to do, was make food for the lawyers and share it with them. And it's all made of handmade paper.

When I injured my leg, I couldn't really come down the stairs here, I literally couldn't walk downstairs, I could barely walk. And I got a bunch of paper, and I started working on a piece using the handmade paper, and actually, I have an image of that, and it sold, it sold right away.

NICOLE SCOTT: Wow.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah, it was over at, you know, K Art. And then I have another one. I have the—so I did it in three parts. There's one more that has to be done yet, and I haven't done that one yet. I haven't worked on it; I have the idea for it, but—so, yeah, I did this piece with handmade paper. And it was funny because when I was doing this piece, I was watching on television this—

[00:14:59]

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G. PETER JEMISON: —documentary about Cuban singers, Cuban musicians, and they make music that just tells the story of whatever's going on in their life right at the moment. They create on the spot, kind of, their music. They have some older songs that they like to do, but they also are able to just make a song. And so I—that was in the background while I was listening, and I was taking a chance doing a real departure from the other work I had been doing previously, which was the Creation Story stuff and just trying something new with paper, and it turned out that people liked it. So I did these other two, now I've got to do one more, I'll make the time.

And I love the story of the Peacemaker. It's just—I was talking about earlier when I was talking about the Great Law, I love that story of his journey. And I loved hearing it in person from a person who knew it, and I loved going to it when it was being recited and hearing it again. And so it's—it's a beautiful story, and it has such a powerful message of stopping killing, and killing is such a horrible thing that's going on in our country right now, in this country. There was just a shooting in a casino on the Oneida territory in Wisconsin over the weekend. I think three people were killed, and that I know just sent a chill through the Oneida community, through the people that were their patrons, and probably through Green Bay where they're located. And they're usually these just senseless acts by somebody who is angry about something, and it really speaks to mental health—people's mental—lack of mental health, and then the lack of care for them.

I did another piece, it's not here, about the time period when our communities, Akwesasne and Cattaraugus, fights broke out over casinos, over gaming. Before it came to us, or when it was just beginning, at the very beginning of it, people got into shooting, I mean gunplay and fight—you know, shooting at each other, in direct violation of all of the teachings about the Great Law and using the Good Mind and resolving your differences by talking to your enemy. We just didn't do it, and five men in total died as a result of it, three at Cattaraugus and two at Akwesasne. And at one point, friends of mine called me up, and they were pinned down by men who were calling themselves warriors who were firing automatic weapons at them. And all they had to protect themselves was they were lying on the ground with a railroad tie kind of in front of them. And these warriors were—they said they were drunk and high, and luckily they didn't hit them. There was a friend of mine who called me and said,

"You know, we really need—we need law enforcement," and so I did make a phone call. I've done that a couple times to try to calm down situations. You know, I had a little bit of a way of going through the people that I worked with to maybe get as far as the governor's office, or wherever.

Anyway that—you know, my art has—goes from the kind of political to the cultural and then sometimes just to the—almost abstract, or abstract.

[00:05:05]

I—it depends on how I'm feeling and thinking. On the one hand, I have a desire to simplify the work I do, but then I often wind up finding that when I'm trying to use my art to make a statement of some sort, it gets more complicated than I really want it to, but it seems necessary to get the point across, so I have to balance it out. Those are the thoughts I have at the moment looking at this.

NICOLE SCOTT: I'm trying to think of—I'm not out of questions, but I know our time is limited.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes. They're closing down.

NICOLE SCOTT: They're closing down. But there's just—there's something about, I think, just knowing you for seven years.

G. PETER JEMISON: Wow, is it that long?

NICOLE SCOTT: It's been seven years, yeah.

G. PETER JEMISON: Well, that's unbelievable.

NICOLE SCOTT: And seeing that creativity come about in a variety of different manners whether it's, you know, seeing the vision for Ganondagan and the Cultural Center, the Art and Cultural center.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: The exhibits that are in there, I'm sure you had a part to play in with every—where everything is placed. And then being able to be at both your home and in your studio, and seeing your visions there, where it's a bit of everything, honestly. I think it would be very difficult for me to pinpoint you as one type of artist.

G. PETER JEMISON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NICOLE SCOTT: Which then gets me to wondering, for people who probably don't see themselves as artists. I work with students who are mostly in the STEM fields, and I like to try to get that creativity out of them at least once a year and, you know, having them do some sort of project for Native American Heritage Month. And they don't like me for that, most of the time, because they find it challenging and they don't see what the point is. And I'm like, "You have to, just do something with your hands that's not mechanical, and just get into that other part of your brain." But so, my question is, do you believe a—there's a—that creativity, do you believe there's a bit of creativity in all of us? And for people who might struggle with that, what are your thoughts on whether or not people have this inherent ability to just create?

G. PETER JEMISON: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. My first thought is, I don't think everyone does. I think some people, it is just so removed from them that they don't—they don't even know how to approach it, you know, to when you ask them to create something or to make something, you know. Of course, there's the challenge of overcoming the media, whatever the media might be, even something as simple as crayons or Magic Markers or something, you know, making them do what you want. But then there's the idea—it's like trying to come up with the idea is a stumbling block. I think people can be helped to find that, sort of, you know, beginning point in the creative process. And I know sometimes people use it in a therapeutic manner, and they find some way of, you know, describing an emotion that they can't do verbally, but they can do it visually somehow, this emotion.

I saw an exhibit—just occurred to me, I saw an exhibit in Cooperstown of people who are really mentally handicapped, and I don't know that it was much physical, I think it was

mostly mentally handicapped, and I really, really enjoyed it.

[00:10:09]

There was something about it that was so raw and so direct in the way in which they described or expressed their feeling about something, that it just—it was just really—I spent a lot of time looking closely at the work that they had done, and it was just in passing I happened to find it. Anyway, so, you know, the thing with—that I love with children is they don't feel that first—like, I can't do it. They don't start from "I can't do it;" they just start doing it. And then, you know, they do the best they can with what they have to do it, and there can be some beautiful results. And then of course, as they get older, they get more inhibited and they are less likely to be free, as completely free as they were when they were younger. And that—I guess that's—I don't think of my work as childlike, I mean, that I have to go back to that place where there's no inhibitions. Because I know so much that, about the process of doing the art, it is really hard to do something completely different, but like that's—that was our challenge with these pieces there, were done with handmade paper, was I haven't really worked with handmade paper, I mean in the way that I did it here.

So it was trying to start from a different—you know, an unknown, and figure out how to show something, how to simplify it and show it. And we are talking about this, and I just—this thought comes back to my mind. Pop music, when they—one of the things about pop music is that there's one or two lines that express exactly what the song is about, you know, exactly what they're thinking, and it's refrained and it's repeated, and you get the message because it's so direct. And that's the challenge, is to try and do something artistically that may have more complicated means, but it is able to communicate that direct message that you want, and it still allows for people to read it the way they might, because you don't know. I'll have people look at a piece of my work and see something and tell me something, and I'm like—I don't tell them, but I never thought of that, you know. I never had that, that was not part of my intention, but if you see it that way, I'm not going to tell you you're wrong, it's just, I hadn't thought of that.

NICOLE SCOTT: Have you listened to *folklore* by Taylor Swift?

G. PETER JEMISON: No, I haven't.

NICOLE SCOTT: You should listen to it.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah? It's good?

NICOLE SCOTT: She's a great storyteller.

G. PETER JEMISON: Oh, God, I'd love to. I'll get—maybe I can find a CD of that that I've got.

NICOLE SCOTT: I have a CD.

G. PETER JEMISON: Do you?

NICOLE SCOTT: You can put it in your CD player.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay.

NICOLE SCOTT: You don't have Spotify?

G. PETER JEMISON: Ah, not on that little thing I've got there.

NICOLE SCOTT: I have a CD, I will bring it the next time I see you.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay, okay, Nicole, I—

NICOLE SCOTT: You can borrow it.

G. PETER JEMISON: All right.

[They laugh.]

NICOLE SCOTT: But going back to—there was something earlier, and that was on my mind before I started thinking of Taylor Swift. Oh, like present day.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes.

NICOLE SCOTT: Because we spent quite a bit, I think, like the first two SD cards on your past —

G. PETER JEMISON: My past.

NICOLE SCOTT: —growing up, you know, finding that pathway to becoming an artist, the struggle, then finding—just finding, I would say, your first calling of going back to your community, learning from the elders. And then now, we're at this point where you're emerging as this artist and your work is being shown at different places and being highlighted, and you had said, like, are you ready for it when the time comes, are you ready for it? And you—you—you spent the time preparing for this moment.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: And now that it's here, one, what does that feel like?

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How does it feel when you're going to these openings, and you're being featured? Now, take us through what you're thinking, but also, it'd be good to have just—is there anything else that you're hoping to accomplish?

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay. I used to find it difficult to go to openings because, even if I had the anticipation up for it, like, I was excited about the idea, when I got there, I found it difficult to talk with people, to make small talk with people that I really didn't know. And when people start handing me compliments, especially if it gets really, like, on and on, I don't have the words or the way to know what to do with those kind of things. They're—I mean, I know they mean it, and I am, like, trying to figure out what am I supposed to say, or how do I react to that? Other than thank you—you know, how many times can you just say thank you, whatever.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: So, I—

NICOLE SCOTT: You're asking me. I also struggle with that.

G. PETER JEMISON: So that's really—and fortunately in this last opening, the other night, I was a little less tongue-tied when it came to talking to the people who wanted to talk to me. You know, not everyone did, but those few that did, I wasn't—I didn't feel quite as—it's kind of that combination of embarrassed and just don't know what to say. So it wasn't too bad. But so, here's what happened. So, Gabrielle and I were walking around the gallery and we were just—in fact, we spent some time on the roof, because there was a fire outside in a fire pit, you know, and we were standing out there, and it got warm inside, so it was nice to be able to step out in the fresh air, even though it was chilly. And then we wound up back downstairs, and we're kind of standing at the foot of the stairs. And when the gallery owner and the gallery curator decided to speak, they walked up the stairs so the people could see them. They had a microphone and they were speaking. And then there I was, standing right below them, which I hadn't, you know, just really hadn't thought of that would be. [Laughs.] Anyway, so now, then she turns the attention to me, completely, for this one segment, and I kept seeing people all of a sudden, like, look at me, you know; they would just really look at me when she was telling them something about what was going on with me. And it was intense. I just felt this intense, like, attention from the people in the room looking at me. And all I could do was, like this; I could just raise my hands, and I didn't know what else to do. They were applauding and stuff, and I just went like this. That's all I could think of do to.

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: I don't know if I was looking goofy, but—Nicole had also suggested that I wear a ribbon shirt. So, I had a ribbon shirt on, you know, so it wasn't hard to find me. I was the only male with a ribbon shirt on.

[Sound of machinery.]

I don't know what that is. Oh, it might be the water softener being loaded. This might be the end of our quiet time.

NICOLE SCOTT: Oh, it's okay.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay.

NICOLE SCOTT: I think you're fine.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay. You mean, as far as being able to be heard, or as far as, we're done?

NICOLE SCOTT: I think being heard, yeah. Yeah, you should keep talking.

G. PETER JEMISON: All right. So, that in the end, the feeling was one of—I was not so uncomfortable that I just wanted to get out of the room. I was okay. Whereas other times, I've kind of just, like, drifted away and, you know, didn't stand around my work or anything like that, because I didn't know what to talk about, or something. In the present, you know—again, I am so blessed by all the things that are happening. I am just trying to kind of keep it in sort of an order. Like, I've got to do this now in order to get this done for here, and I've got this thing coming up, but I've got to keep feeding that, so that it doesn't stall out. Like, to get the mural put up downtown, I'm working with the city.

[00:05:00]

And when you're working with the government and you're working with a number of people, it can get bogged down any number of ways. So, I have to just keep kind of prodding a little bit, without being—becoming too annoying, to try and get that mural put up. But I think the will is there, it's just, how do we finally get it done? So, there's that. And then, the PS1 in New York, which is a big deal, the woman has been very busy, the curator. And I—at one point, I got a little annoyed because communications have kind of broken down, and I felt like I was just—I said, jumping through hoops, trying to get things done. And then, finally, she got back to me and things sort of straightened out again. And I invited her to come up, come up and visit. And she said she'd like to, but right now, the museum is not allowing them to do travel for business. So, if things improve, she would like to come up and visit. And I think it would help her to see my work in my environment, to really understand what I'm doing and how we could create the show using my stuff. So, that's kind of where that one is at. And the other shows are up. The show at MAG is up, and the show in New York, in Buffalo, is up. And so, now it'll just be whatever happens. I'm hoping some work sells for the show in Buffalo, just so that the gallery, having shown confidence in my work, might get some kind of a financial reimbursement for that confidence they've shown. And there's a show way off into next fall, and now I just have to wait and see how that all works out. But that big painting I'm working on in my studio right now, if everything goes well, that will go there. I'm giving myself a year to do it, so that might work. It might be ready. It usually takes me quite a while.

NICOLE SCOTT: So, the downtown mural, what's going on—oh, water?

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah, is there any in there?

NICOLE SCOTT: Just a little bit.

G. PETER JEMISON: That's fine.

NICOLE SCOTT: Where's this mural at? You said downtown?

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah. I've been trying for two years to get a mural up in downtown Rochester. And it has gone nowhere. And it's been very hard to figure out who is it that I should be talking to, to make it happen. Well, finally, through some friends, I got to talk to this guy who's a city councilor, his name is Mitch Gruber. Mitch Gruber runs FoodLink, for one thing. But he's a politician. And he knew the Commissioner of Parks, Commissioner Jones. And so, through Mitch Gruber, I got Commissioner Jones to come to a meeting with me, and actually take a tour of locations where murals—where the mural could go. And we went to see one location which was not workable, really, and then we went to the next location which the—which was the convention center. And there's a wall that faces the river on the convention center that has a big open space right now. There used to be a photo

mural there, I guess. And so, they asked me what I thought about that space, and I was like, "Really?" I said, "I love it." It's in a great location. But there are some issues about the material that is on the wall now, and how the mural would be put on top of that. And then, we began to think of it in another way, which was, we would transfer the image, not—we wouldn't use the canvas that I created, but we would actually take that, a good—a really good representation of that, a really good photograph, and transfer that to a more durable material for exterior use.

[00:10:01]

And they had identified some material, which is a kind of a—oh, what the heck do they call that now? Well, it's kind of like a Lucite, but it's pretty thick, and pretty strong, this particular one. Because I've seen some that didn't last very long that we had used at Ganondagan, so I told them that. I said, "I'm in favor of trying it, but I—I mean, looking at it, but I want to find a material that's different than what we used, which failed. It began to peel around the edges." So, approval has to come from the convention center, and the mayor. And those are two big, you know, not easy jumps. So, if it comes together, then it will be on the wall, on Main Street, right at the river.

NICOLE SCOTT: And there aren't many—well, I don't even think there are any murals by—maybe there's one, by Indigenous artists?

G. PETER JEMISON: Not a single one.

NICOLE SCOTT: I think there might be just one.

G. PETER JEMISON: And where is it?

NICOLE SCOTT: Right across Swillburger?

G. PETER JEMISON: Where is that?

NICOLE SCOTT: And she was part of WALL\THERAPY, though, because I looked her up.

G. PETER JEMISON: Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm not aware of it.

NICOLE SCOTT: You probably have seen it. But anyways, all that—my point being that

there—for a city that is located on Seneca Territory, there isn't much representation within the city.

G. PETER JEMISON: No. And that was the whole conversation. That is exactly what Commissioner Jones and I talked about the entire time we were walking around, was that lack of representation, that lack of the history, the whole story is not available. And it needs to be. And so, in addition to the mural, we're talking about some additional signage that would be in appropriate places to help tell the story that's invisible. And so—and the good thing about that is that one of the—the woman who has been kind of helping me make these connections, she's involved with a group that is trying to get an Indigenous Day, as opposed to Columbus Day; Indigenous Peoples Day, I think it's called.

NICOLE SCOTT: She works with the city?

G. PETER JEMISON: No, she's just a citizen. Her name is Kathy Castania.

NICOLE SCOTT: Got you. That's cool.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: That's exciting. I'm trying to find the picture for you. Oh, here. So, it's called, "Look Towards 'The North Star,'" and Nanibah [Nani Chacon] is her name.

G. PETER JEMISON: Nanibah.

NICOLE SCOTT: Have you seen that?

G. PETER JEMISON: No, I haven't.

NICOLE SCOTT: So, you might be the second. I think that's the only one that I'm familiar with.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay. Yeah, because the other people that I've been talking to—and the one person I haven't been talking to is the guy that's in charge of WALL\THERAPY. I started with him, and it didn't go anywhere. I mean, I had a conversation with him, and he was supposed to get ahold of me, and he was going to come out here and blah, blah, blah, but nothing happened. And then there was another guy, and the—that didn't go anywhere, either. So, anyway, this connection with the actual city, you know, is stronger. And I'm also trying to connect with people that live in Rochester, you know, not just like a one-off thing, I come in and just leave. I'm really trying to figure out how to work with what's kind of going on, which is the initiative towards the Indigenous Peoples Day, and then neighborhoods that really want to have something, a cultural piece near their neighborhood. So, I'm trying to connect with them, too.

NICOLE SCOTT: You had said it earlier, where you're finding that this is the time that—oh, do you need more water? Are you okay?

G. PETER JEMISON: I'm going to set this over here. I think we've got to wrap up soon, though. I'm losing my voice.

NICOLE SCOTT: You have 10 minutes. Do you need more water?

G. PETER JEMISON: No, I don't think so.

NICOLE SCOTT: Okay. But you were saying that there's this time where it seems that Indigenous artists, even Indigenous culture and knowledge is being more embraced.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: How can places better partner with these artists to have that incorporated—

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NICOLE SCOTT: —in their cities?

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah, well, the first one that jumps to my mind is visiting artists programs, where the artist is brought into town. Maybe it would be ideal if he left behind some artwork, but that's one of the results. But I would also like to see a result where maybe he works with students. I don't—it doesn't necessarily have to be high school students, or elementary school students. Maybe it's even university-level students that this artist makes a connection with. And they look for some kind of a program, project, idea that they all feel, you know, sort of, strongly about, or would like to work together on. So, the artist-in-residence piece. The second one, other thing would be, obviously, exhibits of artists in the city, contemporary Native artists, like—okay, I have a show at MAG, They were asking me to work on a show that was kind of a traveling show that's coming from, I don't think it's IAIA [Museum of Contemporary Native Arts], I forget where it's coming from, but they wanted me to think about doing that, curating that show and then having a show of my own at the same time as that one. But that was off until 19 or 20—I don’t want to say 2025. I don't know if it was that far away, but it was pretty far away. It was like this—we started talking about this in 2020, it might've been 2023 that this was going to happen, and I said, "Well, I'd rather do something sooner than later," so we wound up doing the show we have—I have.

NICOLE SCOTT: Those are good.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah, those things I'd like to do. And right now Rochester Contemporary Art [Center] is begging me for something that they can connect with.

NICOLE SCOTT: Like, on their hands and knees? Just kidding.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah—

[They laugh.]

G. PETER JEMISON: —almost that much, I mean not quite, but it's every time he sees me, "Do you have a project in mind, do you have an artist that you want to recommend to me? I'd like to work with you, we want to work with you, what can we do?" So finally I gave them

a name, and I said, "This—she's interested in an idea of putting some kind of a neon piece, maybe, in the city," so he's interested. She actually wants to show the neon piece first at the Fenimore Art Museum; I've invited her to that show, and the next one maybe we'd do something else. Maybe if this worked successfully, we'd look at the city.

NICOLE SCOTT: And as we are wrapping up, because it is 3:30, and I do also have somewhere else to be.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay.

NICOLE SCOTT: How—one, how did this even come about? Like, first, it's a great opportunity, thank you for thinking of me.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes.

NICOLE SCOTT: This has been fun, I always enjoy hearing your story. But how did you get connected with the Smithsonian?

G. PETER JEMISON: They called me. I don't—I know I'm in that show, which is called something Canvas. [*Stretching the Canvas: Eight Decades of Native Painting.*] It's at the National Museum of the American Indian. It's a show of Native artists, and I think they saw that show and then decided to call me. But anyway, one day I got a call from them, and asked me if I would be willing to do an interview, and now since you and I were already started doing one, I thought, you know, let's you and I continue it. I think we have a, you know, good relationship.

NICOLE SCOTT: We're friends.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes. It's very good. So that's how it got going.

NICOLE SCOTT: Oh, so.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: And if anyone was to listen to this 50 years now, when hopefully I'm still here—

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes, let's hope you're still here.

NICOLE SCOTT: —it would be really weird if you were still here, but that would be kind of cool at the same time. Your wisdom, and you've had quite a while to think about this, any parting words?

G. PETER JEMISON: Parting words. I predict that Native American art is going to become extremely important.

[00:05:02]

It is beginning, and it has always had a life, but I see Native art as just kind of really getting to the place where it is more nationally accepted and recognized. And I really think that's going to grow exponentially, it's going to get bigger and bigger. And I think the message that we have to impart—and when I say we, I'm talking about all Native Americans from their—from our cultural traditions, as varied as they are, is a—is something that this country needs to hear. I feel that there is a lack of a spiritual underpinning in a way, that is—what would I call it? Real and deep. Because I see the—I see some of the people who get a lot of attention because they have an active church, but the—when I hear the message, it kind of scares me more than it makes me feel comfort. Because it's sort of a—it just doesn't feel real. It feels almost phony, and I—I'm generalizing and, you know, you can tell me I'm full of nuts or whatever, but that's what I see. I wish I read it differently than that, anyway.

NICOLE SCOTT: So those are your last words?

G. PETER JEMISON: Those are my last words.

[They laugh.]

NICOLE SCOTT: We're full of nuts?

[They laugh.]

NICOLE SCOTT: I hear you, it's not a lie. I'm just kidding. But there are some really good nuts in this world. I'm just kidding.

G. PETER JEMISON: Good nuts.

[They laugh.]

NICOLE SCOTT: No.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah, and I hope so.

NICOLE SCOTT: This is good. I think if anyone were to listen to this 50 years from now, or if I get to listen to this 50 years from now, and just remembering—

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes, our conversation.

NICOLE SCOTT: —our conversations, all your stories, finding our similarities, even our differences, I think, can draw us together. And knowing that we come from two different cultures—

G. PETER JEMISON: Really do.

NICOLE SCOTT: —but at the same time, there are things that connect us.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah.

NICOLE SCOTT: We have, in some ways, two different value sets, but those together in my mind have only allowed me to go to find the strength to like keep going in this world and knowing that there's always something better ahead. And even being here in Rochester, like literally knowing nothing about the city, not really being familiar with Haudenosaunee culture and tradition, stories. I grew up Navajo, and the world was about me, and I think that's a shame. I feel really privileged to have been able to step out of who I am to only discover the beauty of other cultures. When you're so inundated with your own history, you kind of—you do get that big ego or that big head of like, yeah, we did this and you did this, and you forget that there is just—there is more to just you. And so I hope 50 years from—wah, 50 years from now that there's more conversations like this.

In some ways, I feel a bit of—you know, there's a little part of me that thinks there could be someone better telling your story, someone who's not Navajo who—because I feel like in some ways it's like, well, why isn't another Navajo having—getting this opportunity. But I don't know. I—I—I'll take that, because that's who I am, there's no shame in that. But I think being able to learn about another culture, another person; I have learned so much from you, and I'm—as you know—we know that I'm leaving, I'm moving back home. But even with this conversation, when you're talking about returning home, returning to your people, learning from your elders, like, those things, I honestly—I—that's what I moved away from.

[00:10:03]

I didn't want to grow up and just, like, not have opportunities, thinking that there was nothing back home, and coming here to only have the message be that there is so much back home, and there's so much to learn, and there is beauty in—there literally is beauty in nothing. You—you can create—you have the ability to create the—something out of nothing, yet the—all things can be made new again. And I'm excited, I'm sad because I do love it here. I—seeing this, sunflowers to me, I—they never were really my favorite flower, I'll be quite honest. But since moving here, I have a whole new appreciation for sunflowers.

G. PETER JEMISON: Do you?

NICOLE SCOTT: I see—I think they're one of the most beautiful flowers. I don't know, I think that because everyone thought—loves sunflowers, and I always had to be different. But then, hearing the stories about them being the first flower; being that, like you said, the first —

G. PETER JEMISON: —light.

NICOLE SCOTT: —light in the world, them and dahlias, because dahlias can—they grow under the most—heat makes them grow. They make their blooms better, and I think sunflowers are the same. And—

G. PETER JEMISON: Yeah, they can really you know, take a lot of heat.

NICOLE SCOTT: Yeah, so those things, I think I found—I really was able to understand myself better just by learning from you, and—

G. PETER JEMISON: Oh.

NICOLE SCOTT: —this has been fun. Thanks for chatting with me, and—

G. PETER JEMISON: Well, you know, one of the things you said to me, and I don't know if you—what you meant, but you said—about your job at RIT. You said, I really learned what my job was from you, and I was like, wow, I just really—you know, when you ask me questions, I always wanted to help you if I could or give you an answer. Even if I wasn't sure, I still wanted to give you feedback and work with you, you know, on doing things. And when you said that, well, it made me feel really good, I have to tell you that, you know, and I just have to say I think you've done a good job. You know, you—I think you've created what it is. It was sort of sketched out, but, you know, it wasn't really—I didn't think it had fully evolved, and I know it hadn't. So you had that opportunity to make it more, you know, and now, I hope we find a good replacement for you, you know, seriously, so that it does continue, and that maybe Native students will come here to RIT.

NICOLE SCOTT: That's the hope. So if you're listening, go to RIT.

G. PETER JEMISON: Yes.

[They laugh.]

NICOLE SCOTT: I'm kidding. No.

G. PETER JEMISON: I know, it's—I mean, it's academically challenging when you're going and talking about the STEM. You know, it's not everybody's cup of tea, really.

NICOLE SCOTT: But I think—so if anyone is listening to this, hopefully you are, in some ways, I wasn't sure what the structure would be, because I—I've always just let you talk, and I—I've always said, every time I'm with Pete, I learn something new, and I never know what's going to come out of your mouth. And there were a few instances where I'm like, you didn't answer my question, but—

[They laugh.]

NICOLE SCOTT: —but there's always something that you're going to say, and I'm, like, whatever he wants to say. It—there's comes a point where I need to ask questions, okay. But other than that, I think no matter what you're talking about, people can learn something from, so that's—I think that's all we got.

G. PETER JEMISON: Okay.

NICOLE SCOTT: This is—

G. PETER JEMISON: That's great.

NICOLE SCOTT: —this is Nicole Scott, and—

G. PETER JEMISON: —and this is Peter Jemison, and it's been my pleasure to have this opportunity to do this interview with Nicole Scott.

NICOLE SCOTT: Yes, and thank you to the Smithsonian of the—Archives—say it again—Smithsonian—I got to make sure I say this—

G. PETER JEMISON: Smithsonian Institute.

NICOLE SCOTT: I'm so sorry guys. Where is my notebook? I always get it wrong. Okay. Yes. Thank you to the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, and we are wrapping up—

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NICOLE SCOTT: —in the basement of Pete's home here in Victor, New York, located on the land of the Onodowaga.

G. PETER JEMISON: Thank you.

NICOLE SCOTT: Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]