Northern Lights Episode 3
Healing and the Alaska Native Heritage Centre

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Interviewees:  
Emily Edenshaw, President and CEO, Alaska Native Heritage Center

Yaari Walker, Unguwat: Resilience and Connection program

Introduced by:  Sarah Mackie

Sarah Mackie
Hello and welcome to Northern Lights, the Harvard Arctic Initiative Student Podcast. Today we are going to hear from Presley West, an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer at the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage, Alaska.

In this episode Presley talks to The Alaska Native Heritage Center President and a Traditional Healer about how the Center is working to utilize Indigenous methods of healing to address mental health issues within the Alaska Native community.

This episode deals with difficult issues such as domestic violence and suicide. If you are affected by these issues and need support, Alaskans can reach out to the Alaska Careline 1-877-266-4357 (HELP) or online at www.carelinealaska.com and people located elsewhere in the USA can contact the National Suicide Prevention Helpline at 800-273-8255 or online at https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/. If you are not in the USA, you should be able to find your local phone line at www.suicidestop.com.

This is Presley West with ‘Healing and the Alaska Native Heritage Centre’.
Presley West
Welcome to the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage, Alaska. On a typical summer day at the center, you can listen to live storytelling:

(background speaking) you can tell the rest, go ahead, go ahead and go. I'll go into that sod house.

Watch Carver's in action: (machine noise)
Go on a guided tour of authentic life sized dwellings

(background speaking) you can see our Yup’ik village site and watch a Yup’ik style song and dance performance.

Presley West
The Heritage Center is one of Anchorage’s top rated attractions, and it is renowned for its vibrant, lively atmosphere that brings culture out from behind a glass case—but it is so much more than a cultural museum or even a tourist destination. The Alaska Native Heritage Center is a living, breathing community center for Alaska Natives statewide, a place where they can gather together, discover the whole truth of their misrepresented history, embrace their whole selves, and heal from intergenerational trauma that has been passed down for centuries.

Presley West
I'm Presley West, an AmeriCorps VISTA—or a volunteer in Service to America—at the Alaska Native Heritage Center. Today, I'll be sitting down with two of my co-workers to share a little bit more about the ways in which the Heritage Center is creating meaningful lasting change statewide by utilizing indigenous perspectives, practices and methods to create new spaces for healing and telling untold truths. First, I sat down with President and CEO Emily Edenshaw.

Emily Edenshaw
My name is Emily Edenshaw. I am Yup’ik and Iñupiaq, and my family is from Emmonnak, Alaska. I live and work on the Dena’ina lands as the President and CEO of the Alaska Native Heritage Center. Over 21 years ago at the Alaska Native Federation's convention, which is the largest
gathering of indigenous peoples in the state, the community said we need to have a place of healing and a place of community that represents all cultures and all communities. And we were born with the vision to have this statewide scope, but over the years, our programming has evolved from just being a place of community to really being a change agent with these hard issues like suicide and missing and murdered indigenous woman and these issues and topics that really impact and shape our community today.

**Presley West**

As Emily mentioned, the Heritage Center is working to address some of the biggest issues facing the Alaska Native communities today. Right now, one of those issues is suicide. Suicide is an issue across the state of Alaska for natives and non-natives alike. In 2017, intentional self-harm was Alaska's fifth leading cause of death, compared with 10th in the US as a whole. Alaska his age adjusted suicide mortality rate was 26.9 per 100,000 people in 2017, nearly twice the national rate. But Alaska Natives and American Indians living in Alaska age adjusted suicide mortality rate for the same year was 51.9 per 100,000 people more than twice the statewide average—but statistics don't tell the whole story.

**Emily Edenshaw**

I feel like when we talk about issues like domestic violence or suicide rates, the onus is often put on the backs of indigenous peoples. Meaning: Why are native people killing themselves? Why are they dropping out of school? When, rather than putting the blame on the native community, we need to be looking at the systems which are not designed for us to succeed.

**Presley West**

Recognizing the critical need to create systemic change, The Heritage Center created a program called Unguwat: Resilience and Connection funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Unguwat is a Suqpiaq word that communicates how people are strengthened by a common purpose, that their lives are changed through increased opportunity and self-actualization. The program utilizes culturally reflective interventions to prevent suicide and reduce the impact of mental health and substance use disorders amongst Alaska Native and American Indian youth of all genders living in Anchorage.
Emily Edenshaw
So Unguwat is our Native Connections grant that's funded by SAHMSA. And really the idea behind this grant is that it is really grounded in the understanding that our arts and ways of knowing and ways of doing are healing, and when you couple that with the understanding that as Native people, we live in work and systems that are not designed for us to succeed. It's important to note that, you know, we've had a way of healing, a way of being in community for thousands of years. Our people have been here for thousands of years. We're going to continue to be here, and so it really is grounded in the understanding, like I said, that our culture is first and foremost healing and the western way of treating… whether if it's suicide, domestic violence… it's not getting to the root cause.

Presley West
The Unguwat program is led by Yaari Walker, a longtime Heritage Center employee and a traditional healer.

Yaari Walker (speaking in St. Lawrence Island Yupik)

Yaari Walker
My Yupik name is Yaari, I am from St. Lawrence Island from the village of Savoonga. And my clan is Aymaaramka, it means strong people and my sub-clan is Sanighmelnguq, we are people of the reindeer. That's who I am. I manage the Unguwat: Resilience and Connection program. I want to help our youth heal their spirit, there are so many broken spirits out here. While I was once depressed myself, I contemplated suicide more than once, I have attempted once. It has crossed my mind so many times. And when I think about mental health, the homeless shelter, all these different programs that serve our population… I was telling my husband, you know, these are these are great programs, they do help a lot. But to me, those are band aids. They just cover the wound. Traditional healing focuses on the spirit, the broken spirit. If we were to use traditional healing, and put it in every mental health program and use both Western and traditional, traditional coping
skills, oh my gosh, people would be so much healthier today with traditional healing because you would focus on the entire being. And that's what we need. That's what we need where our population is served no matter where they're served.

**Presley West**

For our listeners, can you just expand a little more on what traditional healing is and isn't?

**Yaari Walker**

Traditional healing is through spirituality. You're born with these gifts, they’re God given gifts. When the church first arrived, they stigmatized that practice; they made our ancestors believe what they were practicing was evil. They didn't understand that these are God given gifts. And when I was growing up when I was 12 years old, one of my uncle's told me that if we were still practicing Shamanism, right, that that I would have been one. Today, the word Shaman comes from the Tungus people, a group of reindeer herders from Siberia. And traditionally, the word is pronounced “saman” without the H. And the translation of that word is the one who knows. People who are spiritually gifted will understand what that means. We just know, that's a part of what traditional healing is. So when I do traditional Healing Sessions, I don't want to do them in the office setting. I'm not going to take notes in front of the people I work with, like a traditional concert doing an assessment, I'm not going to do that. My assessment is going to be doing a reading on the individual. When I do sessions with the youth, I want to meet them where you're at, you know, we could do a healing session, maybe we can go berry picking together. Or maybe we could go fishing or I can teach you how to cut fish. Or I could teach you how to remove excess fat from the seal skins. And we can do a traditional healing session while we're doing this. And just getting to know each other and building a relationship. They don't have to tell me anything, unless they want to tell me themselves. Because Western Counseling Psychology doesn't always work for all people. It didn't work for me because I come from a different worldview, a different culture, different traditions. And so if I went to a counselor who understand my worldviews, maybe the outcome would be different, it would be more successful. So if Indigenous and non-Indigenous people could work together as researchers and evaluators to the system…mental health, education…all these systems would start to change because then we're going to start integrating Alaskan Native worldviews into these systems. How amazing that would be.
**Presley West**

This year, the Unguwat program co-hosted a socially distanced suicide remembrance event with Native Peoples’ Action and Native Movement on the grounds of the Heritage Center. Loved ones of those lost a suicide painted remembrance rocks in their name and released lotus flower lanterns into a lake. The event was livestreamed on Facebook to reach those unable to attend in person, and it reached hundreds of people online. So, the Unguwat program is focused on moments like this in which those affected by suicide or mental health can come together in community and heal. It was also created with another purpose in mind— to generate awareness surrounding the root causes of modern issues faced by Indigenous people today: centuries of oppression and erasure.

**Emily Edenshaw**

We're constantly having to educate and inform, you know, settlers, non-Native people here that this is really the Indigenous homelands of the Alaska Native peoples. And, you know, I think for us, yes, we're going to be working with youth, we're going to be, you know, creating a space for them to be culturally connected to who they are as Indigenous peoples. But there is a larger meaning and purpose behind our work and that really is educating the public that, you know, our culture's…our ways of knowing…our ways of doing…were ripped away from us. Not only were they ripped away from us; it was illegal to practice our songs and dance, they were stolen. Like my grandparents, if they were caught speaking our languages, they would have been punished. And so when we think of how it translates today, that still walks with us. And so there is this larger purpose and goal to really elevate and raise awareness that the issue of suicide is just a symptom of a root cause.

**Presley West**

Though the Unguwat program is focused on Anchorage based young adults, the Heritage Center is working to create change statewide and recognizes that it's not possible to do so alone. Both Emily and Yaari have been inspired by the resiliency and initiative taken by youth fighting for change across the state, including in Yaari’s home village of Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island. Youth in Savoonga recently led a march to inspire change and raise awareness of mental health issues and suicide in their community.
Yaari Walker
The people, especially the..the youth in the community that a march and they want to change they want, they're crying for help. One of my great nieces had a picture of a loved one who committed suicide, they want something to change in the community so that we don't have these, these suicides in the village.

Emily Edenshaw
I think it's really powerful. What the youth did, you know, there are so many different issues that are very paralyzing: suicide, domestic violence, murder. One of the biggest messages that I took away from that march, and their advocacy efforts is that, you know, there are these issues throughout the entire globe. But even if it's the smallest change of you know, organizing a march or, you know, reaching out to organizations to draft policy, we have it within ourselves to create that change that we want for our communities.

Given the time that we're in right now, with COVID, our world needs a little bit more healing. But the reality is, from an Indigenous standpoint, we've needed it. It's overdue. And I would encourage, you know, people who are listening to this podcast, when you work with indigenous communities, when you meet with them, don't come with an agenda, ask them questions like: how can I be in service? How can I be a better ally to the work that you or your community are advancing? You know, always feel free to reach out to the Alaska Native Heritage Center. We may not, you know… I may not have the answer. But I guarantee, you know, my network does. And although we have, you know, indigenous peoples all across the country, and the globe, you know, our network is really tight. And like I said, I would just really encourage, if you don't know, then ask and know that the Heritage Center is here and we want to see.. we want to see it done right. We really want to utilize our space and our time on this earth to really right—right wrongs.

Presley West
When the time is right and traveling in person gatherings are safe once more, the team at the Alaska Native Heritage Center would love for you to visit and experience Alaska's Native cultures, languages and histories firsthand. And if you don't have a chance to make it up to Anchorage, the
team here at the Heritage Center encourages everyone listening to educate yourselves, reach out to Indigenous communities, and do the necessary work to right long-standing wrongs so that we can move forward and heal together.

Presley West
Thank you to the entire Alaska Native Heritage Center board and staff, including my incredible guests Emily Edenshaw, and Yaari Walker, as well as Sarah Mackie; my Arctic podcast team; Joshua Cannon; The Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs; and the Harvard Kennedy School for making this podcast possible.