Season 3, Episode 1 | Uncle John

Full transcript

Act 1

John: The old way of breaking a horse, through fear and control…none of these horses are trained that way. Or if they were, they're retrained. So we, we will start all over again.

Nancy: You have to be able to be an indigenous person first, and be an indigenous journalist second.

Josue: The story is happening silently within the youth.

Nancy: No, he will not bite you. He loves you. See, look, he nuzzles.

Desi: It's a feeling you can't explain, but you can see it. You can see it in these kids. You can see it on their faces.

Nancy: You can pet him. Yeah, pet him.

Josue: There is these very basic things that we think are primitive, that are actually the guide to survival on this planet.

Nancy: No, he can tell you're the baby. That's true. This is true. Yeah. Pretty big, huh? Yeah. Aw.

Beulah: As your grandma, as your auntie, I'm related to all of you in some way. I'm not just here to be here. I'm here for a purpose.

Julie: Welcome to Elders, Season 3 of Gray Area. I'm Julie Reynolds.

This season, we're hearing from elder survivors of systemic injustice and historical trauma. They're showing *newer* generations what they've *learned* about how to address and *prevent* those kinds of harm.

Our first episode for this season is titled Uncle John, and it's part of the multimedia project Healing the Children of Horse Nations.

Jim: We would get together and we'd smudge and then, uh…

Kid: Can someone get that bumblebee on that?

Josue: They are shaping the new visions for the future, the transformation it's happening.

John: So we, we start all over again sometimes with a horse. With a horse that doesn't trust people, humans. We'll start all over, from the ground. Establishing the trust. Sometimes it takes time.

Josue: When these youth see themselves, hopefully they'll remember their sacredness.

Julie: This story began as a collaboration with my colleague, Nancy Spears. She's been interviewing Native American social worker Dr. John Spence ever since they met at a conference in Reno last year. Nancy's writing about his work for The Imprint, a nonprofit news site that focuses on child welfare, where I'm also an associate editor.

Our subject, John, is developing a horse therapy program for Indigenous youth here at a ranch in Beaverton, Oregon. The kids are sent here for 90 days as part of their treatment by a Portland based nonprofit called NARA, the Native American Rehabilitation Association.

John has worked with NARA since his earliest guerrilla social work days — but we'll get to *that* later.

John: See, they're attracted to your story. That's what happens. They hear your story and they want to be around you. So they hear my story right away or I tell them.

You know, I'm 82. I'm from the Fort Belknap Reservation. I rodeoed for 14 years. I'm sober for 40 years. If they just hear that little bit, a lot of these guys right away, right away they want to kind of hang out with you.

Julie: Here's our co-reporter, Nancy.

Nancy: If you're around Indigenous communities and you hear someone introducing themselves and where they come from, the first thing they're going to say is where their tribe is now.

And then the second story they're going to tell you is where that tribe came from. So, for example, when I, when I'm introducing myself, I say, I'm an enrolled member of Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. My family line comes from the Overhill Band of Cherokee, which no longer is in existence, and we originated from the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee.

Julie: We're joined on this reporting project by documentary photographer Josué Rivas. He's a renowned visual storyteller who spent seven months documenting the early resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline at Standing Rock. He's photographing John's work today for an online gallery that accompanies Nancy's story and this podcast.

Josue: I grew up in Guanajuato and in Mexico City, and then also grew up in the LA area when we migrated here. As we migrated, as we went up north, you start realizing this diaspora of indigenous peoples that, not by choice, but sometimes out of necessity, have to migrate to another part of their continent.

So, for me, When I came here, Indigeneity was so interesting because it was something that I knew, but it was like a different version of it.

Julie: John Spence is a slim man with a straight back, an energetic stride, and a gentle demeanor. I'm kind of surprised — he's in his early 80s, but he seems much younger.

John: The horse stuff came in, hell, I was a little over 20 years sober, and I started dreaming about horses. And right away I started volunteering. A few months and we started getting grants and conferences. So I've been doing this since then, you know, part time.

Julie: The ranch is run by a nonprofit called Forward Stride, a local hub for the movement known as Equine Assisted Psychotherapy. John has been leading these programs for the past 12 years.

We gather in a gravel parking lot surrounded by huge stables and arenas, the whine of small aircraft occasionally drowning our chatter.

A white van pulls up and a dozen gangly teenage boys emerge. They cling to their earbuds and hoodies for a few more moments of privacy. They're all indigenous youth up to age 16. Today, the group is all boys, and later this week, it'll be an all girls group. They're here because they've had substance use issues, and I'm stunned that one of them is only ten.

Today, they'll practice caring for and riding horses, learning about their different breeds, markings, and temperaments. But more importantly, they'll get a taste of how the healing presence of horses can support them in overcoming trauma and addiction.

John: These boys here. You know, I love it because I know that they've been taught to be macho.

They've been raised with a lot of dishonesty. And, uh, they come here and they're forced to be honest. And forced to get that toxicity out of their brain. But they sort of don't know how to cope. And we're teaching them how to cope, but we're teaching them with example. I wasn't strong enough or knowledgeable enough or honest enough to quit drinking on my own.

That's why I believe in this treatment stuff. Needed other people.

Julie: The group splits into two. One follows lead instructor Shannon Tabal Haider to the stables. The rest of us follow John out to the pastures.

Shannon: You guys are going to be with Uncle John, and learn about the markings of horses for those two barns, okay?

Julie: As John walks around the ranch with several young men, he shares his understanding of Horse Nations and the horse's connection to various Native cultures. He knows that the hours he'll spend with these kids are barely enough to plant the seeds for something bigger.

John: You know, all your relatives, your ancestors knew this about horses.

We're trying to get that back. You know, our land, we lost our land through all the wars and everything. Things got taken away from us. And we lost our land, therefore we lost horses. We lost that connection. You know, we can all give you a taste here. You know, the few months that you're here with NARA.

Julie: Between lessons on grooming, hide markings, and moving around such large animals safely, John reminds them that this is not just about horsemanship.

John: Our ancestors developed a relationship with horses. Riding a horse, they say you're a herd of two. And so you need to be the leader. Now, that doesn't mean you need to be real rough with them, right?

The old way was relating to a horse as an equal, as a spirit. So therefore you had to be respectful. In the old days, we didn't have fences. Yet, our ancestors, they had hundreds of horses. You see, they didn't need to be fenced in.

Julie: We walk back to the arena, where anyone who wants to ride gets paired with a horse. As the kids get ready, they chat about their lives after this program ends.

Kids: Yeah, I came straight from jail. I'm excited to get out. Yeah, yeah.

Just like, go to school, be with my family and stuff, you know. Is this it? What grade are you in? I'll be a junior when I get out. Alright, time that right. Oh, okay. Perfect.

Yeah, horses are cool.

John: So like the kids that we've had in the past really like Tigo. He's one of the biggest, he's just beautiful, beautiful horse too. Have any of you guys ridden Tigo yet?

Oh a helmet?

Shannon: Oh yeah you need a helmet. Rocky, remember your helmet please.

Julie: John's mission is to help the nine tribes across Oregon develop their own horse therapy programs, so the kids in today's activities can continue this path when they return home.

And it's catching on.

John: Warm Springs has a horse program now. Grand Ronde Tribe, they have a horse program now. And the Klamath Tribe, Klamath Modoc, down south, they're starting a horse program.

Julie: Tomorrow, John and Nancy will travel to the Burns Paiute Reservation, where John will help the tribe test a pilot version of this therapy.

John is quick to credit his equine therapy mentor, Jon Eagle of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, who also honors those who taught him.

Here's Jon Eagle. He's speaking in 2021 to a group gathered in an indoor arena.

Jon Eagle: What I'm going to share with you isn't my wisdom. What I'm going to share with you is the wisdom and teachings of the people I had in my life who loved me, the people that I had in my life that I love.

Julie: Also among Jon Eagle's teachers are the land and the grandfather or creator, whose Lakota name is Tunkashila.

Jon Eagle: Tunkashila talks in the smile of a child, a bird sitting on a fence, in a summer storm, sometimes through each other, Tunkashila talks. So then our challenge is really is to listen, to learn to listen. Because if all you can see with are your eyes, you're always gonna be limited in what you perceive in this world. But if you can learn to see with your mind, then you're gonna be able to look all the way out into the universe, and acknowledge your relationship with everything within creation.

Julie: The restoration of Native horse nations and their spiritual practices is at the heart of John Spence and Jon Eagle's personal recoveries. And now it's the basis of their intertribal social work.

John: The growth or revitalization of the concept of horse nations, it's a big part of our empowerment. Huge, I think.

There were always horses here.

Julie: Here's Jon Eagle again.

Jon Eagle: So maybe the opposite of addiction isn't necessarily healing, maybe it's connection.

John: Culture is prevention and culture is treatment and we totally believe that and we practice that.

Julie: As they trot around the arena, a boy tells the trainer there's something wrong with his horse.

Kid and trainer: He's sick of it. He's what? He's just sick of it. It's the heat. He's sick of, uh, it's the heat, it's kind of muggy.

Julie: He gently walks the animal away from the group as a wave of sympathy and concern sweeps across the barn.

Trainer to kid: I'm really proud of you for riding through it.

Julie: After an hour or so of practicing commands, turns, and light trotting, the boys walk with their horses to the stalls. We gather in a circle holding hands, a mix of teenage boys and adults.

John: I know you guys don't like to join hands, some guys don't. Remember, uh, we talked a couple weeks ago about the energy, right?

And it's obviously that, you know, there's some good stuff where those horses wouldn't let you do the things that you're You know, they came right up to you this morning, didn't they? They knew you were a safe herd. They came up to you. One of you guys would like to, uh, lead us in prayer? Open prayer?

Kid: Uh, Pray that we all have a good day. Have a good meal. Get along with each other. And, uh, Pray for my peers, their friends and their family. My friends and my family, and the staff and their friends and family. Everyone here has a good day, and the horses get better. Aho.

John: Thank you, we do appreciate that.

Julie: John asks everyone to rate their day from 1 to 10. How we started in the morning, and how we feel now. We're all feeling better than when we got here.

Kids: I got a 4. And, I believe I got an 8. I'm kind of sad that Rune didn't feel good. Hopefully she, he gets better. So does his girlfriend. Yeah. They're both my best friends. Aww.

I came here at a 5. Leaving at an 8.

It was a good day. Just thought it was a bad day. Connecting with the horse that I rode today.

Rocky: Uh, I'm a 637 out of 12. Uh, one thing I liked about today. Uh, I liked …being in existence.

Julie: John invokes a final prayer before we break the circle.

John: Again, if you're not at a place yet in your recovery, you know, or your, uh, cultural, spiritual growth, uh, to believe in a higher power, a creator, um, just remember that, that there's energy here, and that's part of, like, prayer, why we say that that heal, that's healing, and why we say these horses are healing, that good energy that they give us, and we give them back and forth.

So again, let's close in a good way. Can we ask, um, would one of you other young folks like to close us off in a good way? Do you want to?

Kid: Um, I hope we all have a good day. Get to go home, take a day off, and don't have to do anything for the rest of the day. Um, the horses do too. For the vacation.

Julie: As the afternoon wraps up, Nancy and John prepare for a long day on the road. On their way to Burns, Oregon, they'll stop at Chemawa, one of the few Indian boarding schools that's still operating. It's a place that holds profound meaning for both John and Nancy. The elder and the young journalist.

The kids' van drives off and we reporters are still gathering our impressions of the day.

I sit down in a barn with Josue, the photographer. He shares a thought that he must have been chewing on behind his camera all afternoon.

Josue: What would it look like if maybe we didn't have to do this anymore? You know, like, what if we didn't have to deal with the trauma because there's no trauma there?

And I think that the work that they're doing is, it's setting a foundation for a potential future that looks like that, where those young kids, you know, can just come and ride for fun.

Julie: He gently invites me to consider the light in which we frame this story — in which we frame all our stories.

Josue: If we focus on the trauma so much, then that doesn't allow space for receiving those stories of, of joy, or of triumph, or those stories of just, you know, just plain silliness.

Act 2

Nancy: So how are you feeling about today?

John: I'm a little bit anxious. I mean, it's good. I'm really, number one, really honored, you know. It's like my anxiety, hoping everything goes alright, you know.

Julie: John and Nancy are on their 12 hour road trip to Burns. On the way, they'll stop at Chemawa Boarding School in Salem. John's parents met at the school — a fact he didn't know until decades later, when he worked there as a substance use counselor.

John: There's jokes around here in the country, like, a government agent or somebody accompanied the Indian out to the city, and by the time the agent got back, they knew they had already beaten him back to the reservation. So I mean, it's just the homesickness, the culture shock.

Maybe you don't even have a place to stay, you know, or what you find is going to be in the poverty area of any city, and that's where we were. In many cases, still today, that's where we stayed. So relocation really, it was, a government effort to get us off, and hopefully get rid of us. Get us away from the reservation, get us totally assimilated into the, this mainstream culture, the white man's culture.

Julie: John's path was similar to roughly a million Native Americans who lost their tribal connections by coercion or force during the government's Indian termination programs from the 1940s through the 70s. Here's author Louise

Erdrich of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians speaking at the Prose and Politics Bookstore in Washington, D.C.

Louise: Nobody saw it coming. I mean, it was in the works a long time, we know now from studying it. The Commissioner of American Indian Affairs was the person who was in charge of incarcerating the Japanese American people during World War II. He had already practiced.

The termination bill was the result of the post war housing boom.

The tribes slated for termination were tribes who had immense stands of timber.

Julie: On the surface, the 1953 Indian Termination and Relocation Policy aimed to assimilate Indigenous Americans into mainstream society.

In reality, it meant those children who survived boarding schools and foster care often no longer had land, homes or communities to return to.

John: So, unilaterally, the government just terminated these tribes. One day you're an Indian, the next day you're not. Your federal recognition is taken away. Your land is taken away. The meager health care we got through Indian Health Service, that's gone. The Bureau of Indian Affairs, any kind of assistance, like general assistance or emergency assistance, that's gone.

Julie: By 1964, more than 13,000 Natives lost their tribal status. Of the scores of tribes and bands terminated nationwide, 62 were in Oregon. 44 were in California. Roughly two and a half million acres of native lands were removed from protected status — an area larger than Yellowstone. Much of the land was sold to white developers.

John: And in the eyes of government, you're no longer an Indian.

So, man, the economic and the culture shock, you just imagine how devastating it must have been.

Julie: Louise Erdrich's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, The Night Watchman, centers around the fight to keep Native lands in the face of this policy. In the book, she describes her own grandfather's reaction to reading the new law.

Louise: So it comes down to this, Thomas thought, staring at the neutral strings of sentences in the termination bill. We have survived smallpox, the Winchester repeating rifle, the Hotchkiss gun, and tuberculosis. We have survived the flu epidemic of 1918 and fought in four or five deadly United States wars. But at last, we will be destroyed by a collection of tedious words.

For the disposition of, for the intensification of, for the termination of, to provide for, et cetera, et cetera…

(pause)

Julie: John and Nancy have arrived at Chemawa Boarding School, where John worked as a counselor from 1988 to 1995.

John (driving): Okay, well, we'll go for it.

Julie: They're going to visit the school's cemetery, where Native children have been buried since the 1870s. Nancy didn't record this part of their journey, but she later wrote down her impressions.

Nancy: It's so overgrown, the names of the dead are barely legible through the moss and crabgrass snaking its way across the gravestones. The resting entrance gate is chained and padlocked, an arched entryway now closed.

Its sign proclaims 1886 Chemawa Cemetery, and a Christian cross divides those two words. On the gate is a single piece of wood with a baby's photo glued to it. Tethered onto the chain links by thin rope. John told me he considers himself a sort of product of the school, given his parents had met there, and generations before them and his family had been forced to attend other schools.

John: My grandmother, who raised us, was fearful to teach us our language, and she didn't. Only when she was drinking with her friends. She would speak fluent Gros Ventre, and my grandpa, he would teach us much Lakota, and we'd just pick a few words, because whatever happened to them, or the racial prejudice toward them, it's in you.

Nancy: His grandmother, who raised him after his mother tragically died when he was three years old, had also attended a Catholic boarding school in Hays, Montana. As a child, John's grandmother had run away from the school so many times that the agency authorities gave up trying to bring her back.

John: We sent our mother to, way over here to Chemawa boarding school. That's like 800 miles away. We couldn't understand why she would send our mother to a boarding school after what happened to her.

Nancy: It is, unfortunately, not a novelty for boarding schools to have cemeteries. This was not the first time I had seen the graves of school children. Boarding school stories are extremely prominent in indigenous communities across my home state of Oklahoma, simply because of the sheer number of schools that were operated by the government during the boarding school era.

John: The boarding school era, you know, is, is mostly gone except for, I guess, there's four or five federal boarding schools. Right. Including Chemawa school. So in an attempt to get rid of Indians, one of the ideas, movements, was well, let's assimilate. It's assimilation.

Nancy: Chemawa Indian School is over 125 years old and is the oldest continuously operated boarding school for Native American students in the United States. In many cases across the country, relatives weren't even notified their children had passed.

Vast improvements have been made to the school since John stopped working there in 1995. Children are encouraged to be connected to and learn their language and tribal customs. Children can leave at any time.

A reminder that this place is no longer a prison, like it became for the children who never made it out alive.

When I explain to people what it is I do for a living, I tell them I highlight the boarding school era of history and everything that happened afterward.

I tell them that I follow the pattern of colonization over time and how the child welfare system was a pivotal tool in the goal of assimilation. And sometimes, if I'm being honest, the act of having to explain this so often is painful and infuriating.

John: After genocide, assimilation seems to be like whatever that form takes to get rid of Indian culture, get Indians away from their heathen, heathen ways, you know.

Nancy: The entire design of the boarding schools, in policy and practice, was that it was viewed as a more economical option for the U. S. government's attempted assimilation compared to continually engaging in three centuries of conflict under the Indian Wars, which officially ended around 1924 by most historians accounts.

The government did the math and realized it would be cheaper to kill the children in school than it would be to fight the adults, the parents, the relatives. Instead of assimilation by brute force and physical violence, It was now, under the umbrella of boarding school policy, assimilation by forced education.

And so, when I have the privilege of being present at these school grounds across the country, it is imperative that I give myself the grace to experience human emotions as a human being in this work. It is important, critical, that I feel the feelings that are needed to swallow this jagged truth.

The sadder reality is that the child welfare system has always had its powers harnessed in a way that prefers and incentivizes the separation of Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ plus families.

Boarding school cemeteries are perhaps the only place where people cannot run from, or ignore, or scapegoat, or minimize, or excuse what has happened.

Children were forced to attend.

Too many of those children died.

Too many parents never knew.

Engraved on the stones are names, mostly first names, of children as young as 16, 4, and 2.

There is a quote from, from John that always sticks with me, and I'll read it now. He said this while we were,, on the cemetery grounds, and his quote is, “These are the kids who never made it home, and every time I come here, I can't believe there are so many graves. My parents had to have known some of these kids, and I'm a product of all this.”

My role in this podcast is not to give some profound wisdom on how we can move past this history, because not only do I not know how to do that, but But that isn't my wisdom to bestow. I will not speak for the elders who, unlike myself, actually lived through this forced assimilation.

But I will speak for myself when I say that I will always pray with those elders when they ask me to, and I will always ask to pray with them when I feel the time is appropriate.

My job is to center their stories and make sure this history and these children's casualties are remembered. My job is to acknowledge that false neutrality is essentially propaganda. It is not to be objective neutral about my opinions on this history.

I am not obligated to anyone to grin and bear this burden alone, nor obligated to keep an unbiased distance from the policies that have inflicted generations of trauma on countless families, including my own.

And so, I must acknowledge my feelings about these cemetery visits for what they are, a recurring act of angry grieving. My job is to stay angry on behalf of those

children, on behalf of all the children whose names I've seen in various cemeteries. I stay angry for them and for their families because behind every name on every headstone are the descendants who live on.

These names that haunt my dreams are the legacy they will leave.

John spoke of his sadness. About how his parents must have known some of these kids and he worried these children may slowly be forgotten We cried and we prayed Speaking directly to the children's spirits in earnest before we pulled off the roadside and back onto the highway towards Burns Paiute Reservation

The grief seemed to be lodged into any given car behind me always following close behind.

(pause)

Julie: Though he was born in the remote Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana, John spent much of his youth in Seattle and its surrounding cities. Before settling in Oregon, he too would become part of the country's urban Native population. His many jobs were as varied as the locations he lived in, roaming between California and the Pacific Northwest.

John: College, ocean lifeguarding, surfing, um, the Marine Corps, rugby and rodeo.

Julie: But the government’s urbanization policies also unintentionally led to a new solidarity across tribes and cultural groups. In tandem with the growing civil rights movement, city life meant connecting with Indigenous people from other tribes.

One of many enduring connections born of that era is John's close friendship with Jim St. Martin.

John: My formal name is James. Most people call me Jim. I'm 77 years old. I'm a Wadatika Paiute from Burns, Oregon. And I'm the director of Tu-Wa-Kii Nobii, which is the helping house or social services department.

Julie: Like John, Jim earned a master's degree in social work. For Jim, the job was intensely personal. He grew up in the foster care system, where he lost all connection to his community.

When Jim was just an infant and his brother was three, the Bureau of Indian Affairs came to their reservation and placed them in an orphanage in Warm Springs, Oregon.

Jim: And I was there till June of the following year and my brother was adopted before and then the family that adopted him came and adopted me. There was no CPS investigation, no 911 call, no hotline, no hearing, no lawyers, no judge.

Nancy: Were they a native family?

Jim: No, they, the bureau and and religious groups placed kids in non native families intentionally to break down the culture and to, uh, destroy that whole Indian thing and get the Indians off the reservation.

Nancy: So, so y'all moved off the rez?

Jim: Well, yeah, so where they could just dissolve the reservation and give it to the white people.

Julie: As a young adult, Jim moved to San Francisco where he joined the Bay Area's Native American Civil Rights Movement, a movement that inspired John and many others.

Jim: I got the opportunity to run a small arts program for the San Francisco Art Commission in the Native community.

Julie: Jim's friend Richard Oakes became well known as a leader of the Indians of All Tribes movement in the 1969 takeover of Alcatraz Island. Here, Oakes is presenting a proclamation to San Francisco officials.

Richard: We, uh, the Native Americans reclaim this land known as Alcatraz Island in the name of all American Indians by right of discovery. We wish to be fair and honorable in our dealings with the Caucasian inhabitants of this land. and hereby offer the following treaty. We will purchase said Alcatraz Island for 24 in glass beads and red cloth, a precedent set by the white man's purchase of a similar island about 300 years ago.

We will give to the inhabitants of this island a portion of that land for their own, to be held in trust by the American Indian government. For as long as the sun shall rise and the rivers go down to the sea, to be administered by the Bureau of Caucasian Affairs. In the name of all Indians, therefore, we reclaim this land for our Indian nations.

Signed, Indians of all tribes, November 1969, San Francisco, California.

Julie: Another rising leader and friend of Jim's was Wilma Mankiller. Like our colleague Nancy, her ancestors had been forced from Tennessee to Oklahoma in the 1820s on the infamous Trail of Tears.

Mankiller described her family's move under the relocation program from Oklahoma to San Francisco as "my own little Trail of Tears." She was 11 years old.

She later became the first female principal chief of the Cherokee Nation. Here she's interviewed at the University of Washington.

Wilma: I made a conscious decision to leave my home and get involved. The group called itself the Indians of All Tribes. And, uh, there were meetings and discussions.

Interviewer: There's always meetings and discussions.

Wilma: That's right, lots of meetings and lots of discussions. And, um, sometimes ceremonies and sometimes dancing and sometimes arguing and it was just a wonderful experience.

But I think more than anything it was like coming home and I felt that I was where I should be. And I, I felt a very strong sense of purpose.

Jim: And she was always going off to some political rally or meeting with people doing planning and stuff like that.

And she'd come over and say, Hey, I gotta have places for my boys. Can you, yeah, bring them in? So I changed a lot of diapers in the movement. That was my big contribution.

Julie: The 18-month-long Alcatraz occupation is credited with ending the government's Indian termination policies. It led Congress to pass the Indian Self Determination and Education Assistance Act of 1975. It helped prompt congressional hearings that culminated in the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, ICWA, which *finally* set limits on the government's ability to separate Indigenous children from families and tribes.

Jim: When we would go to conference, my partner and I, Estella Namahwe, she would stand up and when they were talking about ICWA and she says, "I want you to know that – " and then she'd make me stand up – "and so, we are two statistical reasons that ICWA came about." We were ICWA's children, and we both fought for the same cause, to get kids back in homes.

And so, child welfare became more of a priority, a focal point for me.

Julie: When John and Jim first met in the Pacific Northwest after the Alcatraz occupation, each felt emboldened as social workers and activists to raise the profile of their cause.

Jim: John, if it hadn't have been for him, I wouldn't have finished my Master's. He said, you know, I'm, I'm in charge of this native MSW program at Portland State. You want to come up? And he, he took me down to his, uh, studio apartment. He picked up a rock and he says, there's my key. You ever need a place to stay?

And so, I, get there Sunday night, go look for the key. The key was always gone. I look inside and there'd be a half a dozen Indians on beds and on the floor. And so we've, we've been friends ever since that time.

Julie: John took inspiration from the success of the Bay Area movements and went on to practice what he calls “guerrilla social work.”

They had street teams that took over abandoned houses to use as treatment centers. This group, according to John, evolved into today's NARA.

John: Geeze, we were occupying houses. Because it was the early days of treatment, and there wasn't enough treatment beds. We just took over things. Taking over Alcatraz, and taking over the Bureau of Indian Affairs office…

We did that stuff around here. Taking over Fort Lawton in Seattle. And the thing is, they all worked. But the government will never admit that. They don't want to admit that you can do that. You break the law, and doing something good. So, that's why we called it guerrilla social work. We do things they aren't taught to do in social work school.

Julie: John and Jim were trained to work within the systems that harmed them and their people for centuries. But they Indigenized the work for the communities they served–within and beyond their own tribes. As elders, their collaboration and commitment to teaching continues. At the conference where Nancy met John last year, Jim was inspired to bring equine therapy to his tribe.

And that's why John and Nancy are on their way to Burns Paiute today.

Jim: At the workshop that John did, he was talking about kids who had, suffered from mental disorder, into that gang life and how horse therapy could change all of that. And he was showing us pictures and uh, I thought, Hey, that'd be cool.

That'd be so cool on a reservation.

Julie: John and Nancy have been traveling most of the day, but they're getting close to their final destination, the Burns Paiute Reservation in the arid Eastern Oregon plains.

John: The other four tribes in Oregon that were restored, they're all doing really well now, but still they just have a fraction of the land that they used to, and they're forced to to buy back land. It's, you know…

Nancy: Yeah, it's crazy. Is Burns, uh, where we're going, is that a restoration tribe?

John: It's a remaining tribe. One of the remaining tribes. Nancy: They're the smallest tribe in Oregon, right? Wow….

Nancy: I think the thing about, uh, John's story specifically and the parallels between his life and Jim's. These are two men that have been, you know, friends since 1976 or something, you know, longtime friends.

And so I think the parallels between these two gentlemen's lives that I really took a lot from just that. There is a lot of violence that it takes to become so gentle.

Act 3

Julie: The Burns Paiute reservation is bursting with life. Kids laugh and play along the banks of the Silvies River. Adults are setting up activities for a summer Youth Prevention Camp, open to 5th through 12th graders and the community at large.

Elder Beulah Morgan greets the two dozen young people attending, before John and Jim introduce their horse therapy program.

Beulah: Good morning. How are you? Good morning. My name is Beulah from the Duck Valley Reservation, uh, Unuhu as they call it. It's good that this training is going on because when you're close to horses, it just does something to your heart.

The horse becomes your best friend. You learn how to treat it good, it's going to treat you good back. You can even talk to it. Practice your Paiute on them. Good therapy, being near a horse. And I'm just telling you that from what I've experienced. I just, I just want the very best for you kids. You all come from, all of my relatives standing here.

Julie: Beulah is a Paiute Language Instructor for the Shoshone Paiute Tribes of the Duck Valley Indian Reservation.

Beulah: You see me somewhere? You want to learn some Paiute words? Come to me. Ask me. And I will teach you. I will teach you more than that. I will teach you visions. I will teach you dreams. Because that's what I've been gifted with. It does my heart good.

Julie: Some scholars estimate than only three to four hundred people speak Northern Paiute dialects today, and it’s considered “critically endangered”.

Beulah: And I have no one to pass it on to. We can't be a lost tribe without no language. Learn the language. Take time. It doesn't take that long. Maybe five minutes out of your day, whatever. And it's sad to see that we are at the age where we're at where we can't even speak it, you know?

It's very sad. So put your heart and mind into it. And maybe one day you'll think, Oh, okay, that's what this lady was talking about.

Okay, I'm going to go ahead and pray in Paiute. And, um, it's good that you young people learn your language so we don't have to translate it twice. It's something good to have and be able to teach your own children one day and your grandchildren's.

Julie: Beulah wanted us to include this recording of her so that more people will hear and appreciate the Paiute language.

Beulah: So I'll go ahead and pray right now.

(prayer in Paiute)

English translation by Beulah:

Our Father, see us today and bless this day for us.
Bless the children, both young and older, and us adults as well.
Bless our food and water.
Bless all the people all over this earth.
Bless the parents so that the children will be raised in a most nurturing way, with no alcohol.
Bless all the houses and the families that are in it.
Bless the children's minds, and bless our land, our relatives near and far.
We just ask that you give us a good blessing today, and this is what I ask for them. Amen.

John: Amen. Amen. Okay, then we, uh, want to start out with, um, a lot of you know each other, but just to check it out here first, can we go around the circle and say your names?

And I'll introduce myself, John.

And I know there's gonna be smiles. I know you're gonna feel good after this morning. than if there's been anything.

Not too much experience with horses. Don't worry about that. You're going to feel better.

Kids and adults: My name is Damien and I want to learn more about horses.

I'm Kimora and I'm excited to be here. My name is Keon and I don't know. Something different.

I'm Dez…

(Joke about Des from the Rez)

And I'm really looking forward to see how you guys enjoy this because we went up to North Dakota not too long ago and it was something different.

It's a different than going and talking to a therapist or something. just your feeling with them and they catch your vibes and they have your feeling. So I'm feeling pretty hopeful you guys will catch on to something. Pay attention.

Jim: I'm Jim and we have some papers taped to the corral. Those are Paiute words. Puku is a horse. There are other words there that relate to horses and bridles and ropes and all of that. So if you would, please take a look.

Nancy: You can pet him, you can pet him. A long neck, yeah. No, he will not bite you. He loves you. See, look, he nuzzles. Yo, he can tell you're the baby. That's true. This is true.

She's pretty big, huh?

Julie: Nancy, who's staying in a cabin alongside more than 50 camp participants, chats with Peyton, a 12 year old who's excited to learn about this new horse program.

Nancy: When do you get to visit with horses?

Peyton: There’s some outside the rez I like to go see. Me and my cousin went down there one time. Had no clue about, well, there was a horse, we knew about it. But we didn't know if it was broke or anything when we got on it. I mean, we were fine. We didn't get bucked off or anything, but it was still fun.That was That was fun.

Nancy: You barebacked it?

Peyton: Yep.

Nancy: No idea what those horses they were?

Peyton: It's like almost like someone being there for you. You can trust them, as long as you have something to get out. The horses will take it in and they'll help you a lot.

When my cousin, when she left and I went back to those horses, the other one just like kind of came up and just laid its head on you.

And it felt relieving almost to have everything go away. Like the horse took it away from you. And it just felt really nice just being around them. Makes me happy.

Julie: Besides horse therapy, there's archery, teepee races, beading classes, Paiute language lessons, and time to just explore the riverbank. Or sit by the fire and chat among several generations.

Jim: Five years I, I volunteered at Oregon State Penitentiary with the Lakota Club. It got down to 10 guys. We were, there were no guards, no cameras, and we were just in a room together.

And we would get together and we'd smudge and, and then, uh.

Kids, cross-talk: Can someone get that bumblebee on that? A bee! You be careful… He's right there. Yep.

Jim: We made a friend. And he’s right there.

But I did it for five years and the same guys would come every time. And we'd just, you know, and at the end of each session we'd sing honor songs. Yeah. With a drum and bass.

Kids, cross-talk: Get on it and kill it! Mom, there’s a bumblebee!

Jim: I could see changes in all of it. Yeah, yeah. Especially being in a hard place like that where you couldn't really express yourself, your feelings. But there they got so they would do it. You know, it was a, it was an alternative therapy.

And when I took this job last year, I started thinking about what other ways can we, um, provide therapy to our people.

Coda

Josue: This is just the beginning of the story. One day, hopefully, we'll come back and just document an indigenous joy story instead of indigenous pain.

The transformation, it's, it's happening. When these youth see themselves, even through this story, they'll hopefully remember something and they'll remember their sacredness.

John: So, and it goes in a circle. It starts with, in the east, the child and in which stage of life, the main characteristic is, um, belonging.

Jim: As a young guy, I was embarrassed about being a native. But I never could hide from it because people could see me.

John: Then you go through to the next stage, which is adolescent age, which main thing is mastery. So, you're like developing skills and knowledge.

Nancy: You have to be able to be an indigenous person first, and be an indigenous journalist second.

John: I grew up with fear and shame. We were conquered. I, I mean, our horses were deliberately slaughtered, killed to keep our power down. Killing the buffalo, killing horses.

And then out here, uh, keeping the tribes from fishing and from traveling in their canoes. All these things kept us down..

And we're bringing all those back.

Josue: When I go back to why we need stories of Indigenous peoples, it's because we're relearning, we're deprogramming, and then programming back again on the human consciousness of understanding that we all come from somewhere so that we collectively have to go somewhere as well. So that in a hundred years or a thousand years from now when we're no longer here, that these things that are vital for what's it mean to be a human on earth, that those things are still alive.

Nancy: For indigenous people, it is impossible to mention pride in where you came from without mentioning the shame about what was stolen from us. It's impossible to mention where you ended up. without mentioning the displacement. The question that I'm haunted by is just what if we never had to return? What if there was nothing to return to because we were already all here and nothing had to change?

And so while I think it's amazing and I'm so, I'm very proud and I feel very privileged and honored to be able to, to include these, these folks' perspectives in my story, I'm still left with the question of, well, what if we didn't need to recover from that? What if that never needed to happen? And what would that look like?

Desi: It's a feeling you can't explain, but you can see it. You can see it in these kids. I can see it on their faces.

Jim: I was always the brown kid in a white city. Now I'm a brown guy surrounded by brown people. And they're all related to me. So I'm where I'm supposed to be.

John: And they say the next stage. of life is adult, and that main characteristic is interdependence.

Josue: I think that we're entering a moment that Indigeneity and Indigenous values and ways of life are going to be vital for the survival of society. How do we come back and envision something that will work for the future? And I think the Indigenous knowledge is at the root of that.

John: They say the last stage is elder and they said the most important characteristic there is generosity. How elders share their knowledge.

Beulah: As your grandma, as your auntie, I'm related to all of you in some way. And you are all our children, our grandchildren, my grandchildren. So if you look at it that way, it has a different meaning. I'm not just here to be here. I'm here for a purpose.

Jim: When I got involved with the tribe a couple of years in, as far as ICWA goes, we had 27 kids in the system. Now we're down to three. So we've got three now and we got the mother in treatment with the plan to place those kids with the mother and we'll have ground zero. We won't have any kids in the system.

Nancy: And how long of a timeline did it take for that to happen?

Jim: Took three years.

Nancy: Three years? Just three years?

Julie: As we were getting ready to release this podcast, we learned that the tribe accomplished this goal — there are now *no* Burns Paiute children in the child welfare system.

Josue: There is a path forward when you involve and listen and almost embrace indigeneity for all people throughout the planet. We don't realize how much we need Indigenous knowledge until it's us that have to survive.

John: We didn't have any of that when I was a kid. So Horse Nations, it's part of all that. It's part of that Indian pride and identity…blossoming, just blossoming.

Julie: As the day draws to a close, John again has the group circle up to rate their experiences and say a final prayer together.

Kids and adults: Definitely a 10.

Um, I'd say an eight because I didn't ride.

John: Oh, you didn't ride? How about you, Jim?

Jim: Oh, it's always a ten.

John: I'll go with a ten too, man. What a beautiful day.

Kids and adults: Six thousand. So higher than 10? Mmm. Yes. Nice.

Mine was 48, 000. Definitely a 12 out of 10. Oh, 12 out of 10.

Mine, infinity, you can't even explain it!

John: We'll, uh, close up with a, with a prayer again, you know, in Indian country we do it in a circle and a prayer. Would any of your kids, uh, volunteer to do the prayer? Would you guys feel like it?

Kid: What kind of prayer is it, just?

John: Just any kind of prayer to give thanks for the day. Would you like to do that? Okay, good. Thank you.

Kid: Oh, Lord. Today we join and we are thankful for this day and we are happy to be here.

Thank you for letting me ride these spirit horses and having a nice day, clear, fun, happiness. And thank you.

Julie: And then, an eagle soars above the circle.

John: Thank you so much. Thank you for, Thank you for showing that —

Kids: Oh, look at that! Bald eagle!

John: We're getting rewarded, guys.

Good spirits here. Look at that. Look at that. There's some, there's some good power there.

Look at what you guys brought down to power.

(fades out) Okay, and the last thing is everybody shake hands….

Julie: This episode of Elders was co-produced by Nancy Marie Spears, Mara J. Reynolds, and me. It was co-published by The Imprint and Voices of Monterey Bay as part of The Imprint's multimedia project titled Healing the Children of Horse Nations.

To hear Beulah Morgan read her translation of her Paiute prayer into English, please stay tuned till the end.

The music you heard is by Ketsa, Circus Marcus, Blue Sky Moon, Maarten Schellekens, Daniel Birch, and Crowander.

Please see our show notes at grayareapodcast.com — and that's gray with an "a." You'll learn more about our soundtrack, references, and get links to the full videos of Jon Eagle, Louise Erdrich, and Wilma Mankiller. You can also learn where to find John Spence's autobiography and how you can support some of the programs mentioned.

We'll also have links to The Imprint, where you can read Nancy Marie Spears's reporting for this project and view a photo gallery by Josué Rivas.

Uncle John was produced as a project for the USC Annenberg Center for Health Journalism's 2024 California Health Equity Fellowship.

For Gray Area, I'm Julie Reynolds and this is Season Three, Elders.

Beulah: Our Father, see us today and bless this day for us.
Bless the children, both young and older, and us adults as well.
Bless our food and water.
Bless all the people all over this earth.
Bless the parents so that the children will be raised in a most nurturing way, with no alcohol.

Bless all the houses and the families that are in it.
Bless the children's minds, and bless our land, our relative near and far.
We just ask that you give us a good blessing today, and this is what I ask for them.
Amen.