The Heumann Perspective Podcast
Indigenous Sign Languages with Melanie McKay-Cody
Transcript

Kylie Miller:

Welcome to The Heumann Perspective, a podcast with the internationally recognized badass disability rights activist, Judy Heumann.

Quinn Hodgson:

Hello, I'm Quinn Hodgson. I'm a college student activist and advocate interning with Judy and Kylie, and I've put together today's episode. Today, Judy is talking with Dr. Melanie McKay-Cody, a brilliant Cherokee Deaf woman who is an expert in North American Indian sign language. Prior to colonization, the Americas had many Indigenous sign languages used by hearing and deaf people. However, these languages, like the spoken ones, were forced out. There are now very few signers left, but Melanie is one. She researches these languages and is very involved in preservation efforts as well as encouraging the next generation of deaf Native people to find community. So welcome, and please enjoy this conversation with Judy and Melanie.

Judy Heumann:

Everybody, welcome back to The Heumann Perspective. You know, when we started doing these podcasts, they're always exciting for me because I hope we are bringing people to you who are of interest. Some of them you may know, some of them not, and I typically have known most of the people. But today we're going to be interviewing a woman by the name of Melanie McKay-Cody, who is a deaf woman, and is currently assistant professor at the University of Arizona. And Melanie was brought to our attention by Quinn Hodgson, who is currently an intern with us from Goucher College. And when Quinn brought us Melanie's name, Kylie and I were reading about your background, Melanie, it was really exciting for me because I didn't know of your work and I thought this is going to be really a great discussion. So welcome. Melanie, I'd like to ask you some questions to inform our audience about who you are. Do you want to give us a brief introduction of yourself?

Melanie McKay-Cody:

Hello, I'm Dr. Melanie McKay-Cody. I grew up in Oklahoma. My tribe is the Cherokee tribe, and I grew up with many Indian and Native students within my institute who graduated from the Oklahoma School for the Deaf. I grew up in Sulphur. It's a small town. I'm a small town girl. I have a taste for both the big city and the small town. I appreciate both. I think if I had to pick, I like the slower pace of the small town quite honestly. I had a horse. I rode horses. We had a farm. Anyways, after graduating, I went to Gallaudet University in Washington D.C. and I graduated with an American history and art history and museum studies major. I was really fascinated with architecture and art and all of that. But I did notice that there was something missing. There was no Native faculty, one or two faculty, but they weren't full Native, they were mixed and they were Cherokee like me.

So I said, "Wow, we are not having enough information because of that." So after graduating with a degree, a bachelor degree, I went to Santa Fe in New Mexico and as I was associating with the Indigenous people there, the Native people there, I really felt a quick bond with them. So I worked with the anthropology lab, doing research on Indian and Native things like pottery, and we did archeology and points like arrowheads and things like that. We had different remains and artifacts that we researched and with the archeology, I don't know if I was so comfortable being out in the field. So I said, “You know what? I'm going to leave these things buried.” I didn't feel comfortable digging up these remains, these sacred remains, right? So I didn't like the archeology and the digging, but I did like parts of it. So my friend said, "Why don't you come up here to the canyons?"

In the canyons, one day when we were researching, we saw rock writings on the stones, and I was very fascinated with that. But there was no training, there was no training that I could have. I think it was really a spiritual calling that I had to really analyze these rock writings, and I was really disappointed there wasn't enough training for me to do that. So after a year I left Santa Fe, I went to Oklahoma. Then later I moved to Arizona and I started doing more research on that on the Indian sign language. And in Oklahoma, my deaf school had many Native, well, I 'd say more than half of the enrollment was Native. Some were full, some were mixed. So through all these experiences, you know, growing up, I read a lot of books, I loved to read, and I found one Indian sign. I think when I was 10, I got addicted to learning these Indian signs and reading this book.

So when I went to study at University of Arizona, I graduated with a master's in special education and rehab. But under that, I also minored in sign language studies, really focused on Indian sign language. So then I did different jobs for a while. Then I said, "You know what? No, I need to go back to my roots." So I went to the University of Kansas and studied there more anthropology topics, not really related to Indigenous topics or Native topics. So I said, "You know what? That's not the right place for me." So I transferred to University of Oklahoma. They had more Native things and I felt more of a connection with them. You know, so I came full circle. I was born in Oklahoma. I did my tours and I came all the way back to Oklahoma. And as I was learning and took some classes, I met one professor, the only professor in my entire academic career who could sign Plains Sign Language. One.

I mean that's rare, very rare. And also I started meeting several students who were interested in developing a curriculum for Plains Indian Sign Language. Wonderful experience. So we got together, talked about it, and after a couple of years, I graduated, I had my job at University of Arizona, but was more support of language recognition, documentation, the resurrection of languages. I felt like that's a good fit. And so right now I'm doing that research with 10 tribes. We're hoping to have more people join as time goes on. We'd love to have more people because we really want to preserve those signs from the past.

You know, we see some movies and they're imitating something from one tribe that's not really specific to that tribe, so we really need to document it so that it's accurate. So I'm supporting the intergenerational passing on of the language because that's how language was passed on before. I know two or three new people who are learning sign

language. It's not intergenerational. So did they really pull these signs from their ancestors? There's other people who are learning sign language new, and I think they're just borrowing signs from other tribes. So we're being very careful to document the actual signs, make sure they're very authentic and that they were passed down intergenerational.

Judy Heumann:

Were you born deaf?

Melanie McKay-Cody:

No, I was born hearing, I became deaf at the age of five with spinal meningitis.

Judy Heumann:

So what's your first language?

Melanie McKay-Cody:

English. English was my first language. And then when I went to the deaf school, I became an ASL user, American sign language. So I think that ASL really became my native language, even though it's not my first language, it's my native language.

Judy Heumann:

And did your parents learn sign language?

Melanie McKay-Cody:

My mother, yes. My sister a little bit. My brother and dad learned nothing at all, but my mother did. My dad, he had his own signs that he created himself to communicate with me, but it wasn't American sign language. We called them home signs, but that's okay. My brother, he barely knows any sign language. He knows like 10 signs or less. He gestures mostly. But my sister, she signs okay. But my mother is the best signer of the family.

Judy Heumann:

Could you speak a few minutes about the use of sign language for hundreds of years previously by the tribes and just give the audience some information about how that evolved and the influence of those languages in ASL-- with ASL?

Melanie McKay-Cody:

Okay, absolutely. So Indian sign language shows up at about 1600 B.C.

Judy Heumann:

B.C.?

Melanie McKay-Cody:

B.C. Some people thought as only 300 years ago, no, there was a man who was learning Paiute sign language. It's a tribe in Utah. So he was taken, by the Indians, on a expedition and he learned it. It was a bit like code talking. He went into the military after learning that, and I think that was the beginning of code talking a bit. And he was in the Korean War. My father himself also was involved in the Korean War, so he was studying code breaking. And because he knew sign and he had researched from the military how to break codes, after the military, he went home and was looking around and he noticed on the rock writing that they had a secret code almost, that these drawings actually had meanings in the details.

And that was an important moment. I met his daughter and she showed me all of his documentation. He had two stacks of books of his work. And I said, "Wow." You know when you open that information, I just really felt like a spiritual moment of, I don't know, it was just, it was beyond explanation, the feeling I had reading through his writings, not like many of the archeologists who, you know, the way they described things, the way this man described everything. This is somebody who didn't go to college, so he didn't have a degree. So the language that he used to document it was just coming from his soul! The beliefs of Indians, our thinking in our perspective was really coming out in his writing. So until today, the impact that left on me and the impression that left on me, it's really impacted all of my work.

So my work really has focused on Indigenous Deaf methodologies. Now what that means is I use ASL, Indian sign language, Indian concepts, bring them together in this very visual conglomeration and many hearing people have Indigenous methodologies, but now we've layered that with the deaf perspective, the visuals, and that gives us a whole new take on the work. So from that research that happened from the 1600s until today, some of the signs have been modernized, but those signs still exist from the 1600s. So from the Oaxaca in Mexico, there's old settlements there that developed different symbols and drawings. I mean you can see how those became signs. So the people from there migrated north from Mexico to the USA what is now the USA to Uto-Aztecan. And so those people migrated and they brought those signs with them north to what is now United States.

In the older generation, they'll often sign and speak at the same time. Hearing individuals even they will sign and speak at the same time using this sign language. The younger generation has separated the two languages. They either speak or sign. So I'm doing a video dictionary, we're developing a video dictionary to document all these signs as we find them. And in that, it can be passed on to the next generation authentically because we want to keep that knowledge and tradition for the next generation. So we're trying to put it all in that visual dictionary so we can pass that down. That dictionary is a gift to the younger generation to keep that language so they can learn it. For example, K to 12, it could be used there, it could be used in colleges to preserve it. So it's going to be a resource and if someone's in a particular tribe, they can learn their own tribe's language. So that's the work we're doing.

Judy Heumann:

I have so many questions that in my head I'm trying to line them up, 1, 2, 3, making sure that we can fit this all in. So one question I have is, are there some tribes today that

continue to use both voice and signs as a normal part of their communication or has that pretty much died out?

Melanie McKay-Cody:

There's a very small percent of people who still use it. The rest has died out. In my tribe, no one signs anymore. I know they did use it in the past, but it was from the tradition of the boarding school. It kind of destroyed that part of the language, it destroyed the spoken language and with it the sign language. I have interviewed some Indian people who said, "You know what? Sign language was our first go-to, but it's gone now." And the spoken has been preserved, but sign language has been on the back burner for a while. And so now we're trying to bring that back and fix that error of history. And so we're trying to get more and more people to use it. Yeah.

Judy Heumann:

One of the points that you were just discussing about the boarding schools and we have the history of the boarding schools for Native peoples and the history of boarding schools for deaf people. And that period of time in the boarding schools for deaf people where sign language was really not permitted. And so you see all of the destruction or lack of growth by these various forms of schools in the case of schools for the deaf where the language was not valued.

Melanie McKay-Cody:

Absolutely, absolutely. The older deaf Native people, that older generation, they told me that when they went into the schools, some of them already had Native signs from their home and when they went into the school they said, "No, that's the wrong sign. You're going to have to use ASL." So even though they were allowing sign language, they were not allowing their Indian sign language. So many Indian people lost their cultural sign language. They were told that ASL is better. “Oh, Indian sign language, that's the subpar language, it's the dirty language, ASL's better.” So that caused cultural deprivation, language deprivation, cultural deprivation stolen from them.

Judy Heumann:

And for me, as I've been learning more about you and this issue, it was really fascinating to me to see how hearing Native peoples were speaking and how there was a sign language that's been around for hundreds more years and how it was being used when different tribes were coming together as a unifying language from a business perspective. So there was not only a richness in language and dual languages being used, but very interesting to see deaf people being able to be a part of those discussions because of sign language.

It seems to have been just very natural, something that evolved. And it's really great that you're documenting many of these issues both to instill the language within the Native communities, but also I think to allow the hearing community to get a much better over time understanding of the richness of language and how it was being used for so many years.

Are you working with Native communities in Mexico and Central and Latin America? Is there a common language, or not one language, but is there communication going on north and south within the deaf community or the Native communities?

Melanie McKay-Cody:

As a person, I have not studied any of the Mexican sign languages. I've been more focused on North America, not South America or Central America. There's so many. I wish I could clone myself, send myself out, research all of these and bring it all back to one place! But there's one researcher in the Mayan area, I know one researcher, but it was like a short little stint. And people who are not Native, they go down, they meet the community, we call it helicopter research. They go down there, they grab a bunch of stuff and come back, but they never gave back to the community. And when I do my research, I stay with the community, I exchange with the community. There's a reciprocity there. You have more responsibility to the community if you're rooted there. So helicopter research is not my preference.

Often we have outsiders coming in to do research. I'm more of an insider researcher and I noticed there are many outsiders. They just document it. They take it for academic gain. Look, I researched there, I've got this on my CV now, but that doesn't sit well with me. So I don't do that kind. But one thing I do know that is the same across the board is lip pointing. Instead of pointing with their finger, they point with their lips. It's called lip pointing. That is the same, north and south, they do not point with their finger.

Typically, if they do gesture, it's the thumb or the open hand or the lip pointing, pointing is not polite. It's kind of shooting their spirit or something's just not permitted. And ASL we point a lot because it's the point is a personal pronoun. The boy there, him, he, she, we point for the pronouns. So in that language, it's okay. But in Indian sign language, not polite, we point with our lips or thumb usually. And in South America, it's the same. I asked around and I said, "Do you do this?" And they laugh, they said, "Yes! All the way north to south, that's what we do." I was speaking with people even in Alaska, I said, "Do you point with your lips?" They said yes, so from Alaska down to the tip!

Judy Heumann:

That's a great story. You mentioned very briefly earlier that your father was in the Korean War and you talked a little bit about the code talkers. My father was in the Marines in the Second World War and he was on Iwo Jima yesterday. As I was preparing, I started thinking, and that's when I researched and found the term code talkers. How much do you know about the code talkers? Because all I know is my father talked about it and the importance of this man, a fellow marine.

Melanie McKay-Cody:

Yes. Okay, so code talkers, they are attributed to the Second World War and their language couldn't be broken. They used like a turtle, which meant a tank for example because the shape looked a little similar. So they would use classifiers, what we say in sign language, a classifier system to translate. And only Indian people would use that. They said it's only the Navajos that do that, but that's not true. So the Comanche have that. That's one tribe that has their own code talkers. The last one unfortunately has

passed away. The Navajo have their code talkers. Many of them unfortunately have passed away. There's a few left. But it is a huge honor. It is like the top honor to be a code talker because it couldn't be broken. It was the unbreakable code, that language. So my father did mention, not code talker, but he did say there was a group, he didn't call them code talker, but he said there was an Indian group and there was a Native symbol on their patch, on their arm patch.

And he said there was a Native group that would do things. And he said, "Oh, it was pretty good." So I heard about it, but he didn't tell me much. The most that I learned, I learned from the Native community themselves and through reading, a very interesting story, but not from my father so much, they gave up their life to fight in the war. Imagine that. And what a high honor. My father himself is a hall of famer, by the way, in the military. He just passed away recently. He was 90, but he fought for his tribe as well. He fought for rights, trying to keep the tribe up. So yeah, I'm a military child, so I love to tell those stories and hear them.

Judy Heumann:

Yeah. As I said, my dad was a marine and it was very important to him and I get emotional talking about it. But it was great because I remember when he spoke about this man, I never knew his name, but it was with such reverence and he and a friend went to try to find him one day when they were visiting in Arizona, but they weren't able to find him. But nonetheless, it made a really important impression on me to see this important part of history that most people don't know anything about. And so you're being able to speak about it, I think, is really important because it gives it a different life.

Turtle Island Hand Talk. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Melanie McKay-Cody:

Sure. So Turtle Island Hand Talk, we have one group that was actually before that, it was called Intertribal Council. That was in 1994 established, but then it was disbanded 2009. There was a structural thing. And so unfortunately it disbanded. So after doing my PhD research, asking the younger generation, I said, "Have you ever experienced ethnic communicative kinship? ECK for short." And they all said, "No. What is that?" See, before the IDC, that was the previous organization, we had that. It was like sister brotherhood, you know, as we shared and communicated. Within our family, honestly, we don't have much communication. Maybe because of our language being different, we using sign language, they using a spoken language. So now within this group, we had like this kinship that was even more special in some ways than our family.

So you have childhood communicative kinship as well. You have racial communicative kinship or people who go to deaf schools have that kinship. So in terms of maybe with our biological family, we may feel a certain type of kinship, but the point with the young people was that you need communication with people that you share a real kinship with. You need to associate together. So as I was asking all of them had they had that kinship, kind of a informal survey, they all said no. Most of them lived so far from each other and they felt very bad that they didn't have that. But see, I had that, I had a taste of it. And so I said, "You know what? Let's come up with a new organization, a new name."

So I'm one of the seven founders of Turtle Island Hand Talk. And so based on my research, we established this new organization in 2020, two years now. Wow, time flies. And it's a slow process to develop this network. We're using a lot of Indian perspectives. The ICD was more influenced, I would say, by white culture. It was very administrative from a white perspective. And so now Turtle Island Hand Talk is set up as a council with meetings. We don't have the officers or-- no one's above another person. Everyone's on equal playing field following our ethics and community of-- you know, community being united in that way. So we establish it on a different baseline.

We invite community interpreters, deaf people, and within that there is community voting. So that's how it's been established. And we use a lot of Native perspectives, but what we're doing is we're bringing together that deaf perspective and the Native perspective, and it creates a new cultural layer. Hearing people like parents of deaf Indigenous children are welcome, family members of deaf people are welcome, interpreters are welcome, deaf parents. We call them CODAs, Children of Deaf Adults, C-O-D-A. And we're all supporting our community, all there for one purpose. And I think that's a different goal than the previous one. There was a lot of hierarchy and confusion, just didn't fit with our Native way.

Judy Heumann:

Are you working with the various tribes around the United States on issues relating to the importance of sign language? There are a number of different organizations. For example, in the Latino community, in the African American community. Is there a group of Indigenous or Native deaf people and how do you get together?

Melanie McKay-Cody:

Yes, absolutely. I'm involved with the American Indian Language Development Institute in Arizona, and they have been encouraging Native language preservation and use. Also, we're partnered with UNESCO. Part of the UN is the IDIL. It's the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. So that's under UNESCO. So this right now I'm involved with. They have language, but we're trying to get sign language recognized, that it's not just spoken languages. So we've tried to work on getting that recognized. So that's an ongoing work really.

So in the spring, we're going to have a meeting. It will be American Indian languages, and I'm involved with a lot of the brainstorming related to that. Also, we have a collaboration with the Language Institute. Very interesting Indian languages being worked on there. And we also have four Native linguistics, and that's involved with Native language preservation. That's another organization. They're doing a lot of documentation. Mine's really more focused on the endangered sign languages. That's more my specific field. And I am the only deaf researcher in the nation focused on this. So I have a lot of work to do.

Judy Heumann:

Do you do work with the World Federation of the Deaf?

Melanie McKay-Cody:

No. You know what? I have so much on my plate already. I think I haven't been involved with them. Someone from Switzerland contacted me and they asked why it's not on the map, and they contacted me to add it to their language map on the website. That's not the World Federation for the Deaf. It's a Swedish organization of the deaf. So they have maps and things like that, but there's so much work to do related to that. In the list, where are Indian sign languages? There's a common error that happens that people make. They say ASL came from France. I would just like to share this side story. So people feel that ASL was really strongly influenced by French sign language.

Judy Heumann:

Absolutely, I've heard that.

Melanie McKay-Cody:

But the Native people were already signing here before, right! And so I beg to differ, but they've ignored that influence. You don't see it in the documentation. They haven't accepted it yet. So I'm advocating for that. That Indian sign language was here first before any French sign language came here, any other sign language that came and became ASL. ASL is only what? 250 years old. Native sign language, what? How many hundreds of years old. So we're missing a real detail in this dialogue. So we need to revisit history when it comes to that language. Many Indian sign languages from that area in New England did use sign language even before. And then we had some impact that it had on ASL. So ASL, it's not pure. ASL itself is a conglomeration of several sign languages. So we have the British sign language that was brought, BSL. We have American colonial influence. We have the Indian sign language influence.

It was all there. But most of history doesn't recognize that. I think English people tend to historically brush Native things aside. That was the attitude in the past. But they wanted to draw a line and that there was no advantage to having or learning that. But now we have a different attitude now, and so now we're able to say, "You know it was there." So we have proof, we have documentation, and now we can talk about it, that they were here and that they contributed to the language of that.

You know, I've had a lot of people challenge me. Shockingly quite a lot of challenges, but we've got the documentation and the proof. I want to show you some of that if I could.

Judy Heumann:

That's great. Let me see.

Melanie McKay-Cody:

Okay, I'm showing you a picture. If I could do a audio description, it's a straight line with a bit of a hook. So this was found on rock writings and it looks like this sign that I'm doing with my hand where I make a cup with my hand. That would be the way that you would scoop water. So that's the sign for water. So 1800s, this is the sign used for water.

Now I'm going to show you another rock writing people trying to figure out what this meant and they couldn't figure it out. But you know what? From a sign language perspective, boom, I know what it is. It means under. It's a hill curve and underneath there's a line. So under, that's the sign for under, right there, drawn out. Looks exactly like the sign for under. If I cut my hand and I put the one sign underneath, it's under. So we can identify these signs and the rock writings quite quickly.

I have another one here. Okay, this one's going to be more of a challenge. So this is an actual piece of rock art. And do you see these two figures here? Two people, they're men and there's a woman in the middle. You see how the shape of her body is different. And you see how the man has his arm, his hand is touching his waist in a curve and the woman is using a very strong gesture towards the men. So those two men want to marry her. Ooh, they're really taken by her. And guess what? She's rejected both of them. And we see that in her hand shapes. Her hand shapes have done this because that's the sign for no! No to you and no to you. Right there on the rock writing, we see sign language gestures and we know the story because of it. So everything is there!

So anyways, that's called picture writing, rock writing. Archeologists often say it's rock art. This is not rock art. That doesn't sit well with me. This was not done for artistic reasons. There's a sign there. This is communication. So we call it rock writing. So we have signed language documented on the rocks before ASL was ever here. So that's my argument and I'm sticking to it! People have not recognized that. Archeologists themselves often have not even known. They just say, "Oh, rock art." And they don't realize that there's sign language there. So we're working on that. So really we're just touching the surface of this in terms of we need to ask Native people about their language and how it's been passed on. We need to connect it. The outsider, white linguistics are not getting to be able to interpret this. They don't know.

And there's rock writings all over. We need to research and document those. Canada has their own, it's not been documented sufficiently. We have the Shields. We have the Shields in Canada. That whole area has rock writing over on the east side, the eastern provinces. And there's signs in it, not been documented. The Mayan, also, some of their rock writings. You know what the staircase that goes up? On each of those stairs has rock writing with signs. You see all these hand gestures right there. So much to explore! And it's not been recognized, documented, or explored.

Judy Heumann:

So do you belong to anthropological associations, linguistic associations? Are you and others doing any presentations on the issues that you've been discussing?

Melanie McKay-Cody:

Oh yes.

Judy Heumann:

And what has been the receptivity?

Melanie McKay-Cody:

Very interesting. Yes, absolutely. With the Plains Anthropological Society, that group. Plains Anthropological Society. I went and did a presentation there in North Dakota in Bismarck. So I brought my posters and I showed them. I had a few people staring intently, really confused. "Really? Those are signs?" Most of them were older people who wanted to debate with me. I said, "Bring it on, let's go. Let's talk about it." And so they sat down with me and they said, "Well, you could be mistaken." I said, "Oh, I could be mistaken. Do you know sign language?" "No, I'm not a signer." "Then I'm sorry, how can you tell me I'm wrong if you're not a signer?" If you're a signer and you have a different take on it, okay. But if you don't know sign language, then how can you bring something to this discussion? I'm telling you, it looks exactly like a Plain sign.

So I'm tired of the hearing people oppressing deaf people or white people oppressing Native people. Okay, it's time to stop. It's time to respect the knowledge and contribution that we can make. And so for anthropology, at the Oklahoma University, OTU. We had some debates there and they said, "Okay, if you think that, you need to convince me." I said okay. And I did a lot of work, a lot of work talking with showing the pictures. I have all of this documented on posters. So we have one that talks about the past and then it talks about the present. It has a timeline on one of these rock writings where you see time flowing and there's a horse in the drawing. So if you look at the horse, very strangely, this horse is elongated. Its body is very long, very long.

Not a normal looking horse right? If there's a reason-- this was not drawn like this for no reason. So when Native people say a long time ago, they used this sign. You see? And so they elongated the horse to relate to the sign for a long time. So we just see all these parallels. Also, we see in the very far distance on the left, the figures are very small and they get bigger as it gets to the other side of this rock writing panel. And in ASL and Indigenous sign language, we'll say a long time ago. You notice how I tipped my shoulder back? A long time ago and when I was a little girl, and the signs are back here and very small. But then as we get to the present, we will turn towards the person we're addressing and the signs will get bigger or we'll say in the future, we'll lean towards the person.

And you see this leaning back and leaning forward. And when we see with Plains Sign Language, it was the same. And now we see that reflected perfectly, like a perfect visual representation of that in this rock writing panel. So with the Native writing, they tend to write left to right. In Plains Indian, they write left to right. So in the Great Basin, sorry, I'm going to back up. Interpreter error. In the Great Basin, they write left to right, but the Plain sign language people, right to left.

So interestingly that the language developed differently and how they write is reflected in that rock writing. So you can look at these pictures, these rock writing images, and you can see which tribe could have made it based on whether they're going left to right, right to left. You can also see how they draw a horse and what colors they use that can also tell you which tribe wrote it. And you can also see the emblems for their bands on the rock writing. So there's so much that can be gleaned from looking at these. And many people don't realize that, but it's there. It's there for the learning. There's communication in this picture, big stories being told. And it's not a glottograph, it's not that. That's a spoken thing. A lot of researchers are so focused on that spoken

component. So we need to do more researching this visual language that's related to sign language.

Judy Heumann:

So you are an important historian, academic, and deaf woman yourself. Are you working with other deaf, younger people and your age and older really instilling within them the need to take back language that has been lost and its importance?

Melanie McKay-Cody:

I got help from the elders, the tribe elders. I've been working with them and I've also been working with a handful of archeologists. One woman in particular from Colorado, well, she just moved to Utah. But what an expert in analyzing and studying these timelines and their meanings and all of the clues that we have based on the headdresses and things like that within it. So I'm bringing in the cultural anthropology and the linguistics, and together we're coming to a lot of understandings about these rock writing. So it's really important to collaborate, her specialty, my specialty, coming together to understand it.

I've just started touching the surface of this, but she's been studying it for a long time and now I'm offering to her, "Hey, we see sign language here." So now we're working together on that, really studying it from the migration north. And one problem that we have is people tend to look at her in the Deaf community and say, "Okay, she's hearing, she doesn't know sign language," but we need collaboration. We cannot exclude anyone who has information or knowledge. I have some knowledge, she has some knowledge. So it's really important to work together, like you said.

Judy Heumann:

I want to thank you very much, Melanie, for sharing such valuable information and I'd like to thank Quinn Hodgson, who found Melanie for us, for me, for everyone who's listening, and I really do hope that you will share information about Melanie with other people because the research that she's doing and the work that you're doing, Melanie, I think is important in so many ways. For me, one of the lasting parts of this discussion is really focusing on learning about the history of Native communities and the role sign language has played in those communities. And in part to dispel the fact that ASL might have been influenced to some degree from the French, but...

Melanie McKay-Cody:

That's right, the other way around.

Judy Heumann:

Exactly. And I think that's a very important aha moment, plus the work that you're doing around the country on this subject. So I'd like to thank you very much, Melanie, and I look forward to working with you in the future. Do you have any last words?

Melanie McKay-Cody:

Oh, well, I'd like to thank you for inviting me to your podcast and interviewing me. It's been a real pleasure. My closing words would just be that, like you said, we have a lot of work to do in terms of recognizing the language. We need support from the disability groups, we need support from the tribes. And so I think it's a moment for all of us to work together to recognize that language component and value that North American sign language. So yeah, a lot of work to do.

Judy Heumann:

Thank you very much.

Kylie Miller:

Now, it's time for Ask Judy, a segment where Judy answers questions sent in by listeners.

Judy Heumann:

So Quinn, thank you so much for the work that you've done with us. It's amazing how much you were able to do in such a short period of time. And also thank you for being willing to ask me a question which I look forward to hearing and do my best on responding to. So go ahead.

Quinn Hodgson:

Yeah, so my question was, I struggled for a while over whether or not I could call myself disabled. I was taught to think of my physical and mental issues as temporary and fixable, even though they prevented me from living life the way a lot of other people could. So I was wondering if you have any advice for people like me that have debated over whether or not they have any right to call themselves disabled?

Judy Heumann:

Well, I don't feel like it's my place to tell someone they don't have a right to identify themselves as they wish and it sounds to me more like you and many, many other people feel like they're complicated issues why it may be difficult to assume the term. One is people frequently will think, well, my disability is not as significant as somebody else's, and if mine is only temporary, whether or not that's true or false, then maybe for multiple reasons I shouldn't identify.

And in the middle of all that I presume, but don't know for sure that taking on the identity of a disabled person brings on many other thoughts. And that frequently it's how are you transitioning into expanding how you define yourself and how others see you. So I think it's complex. But at the end of the day, I don't think it's good for people, particularly people like yourself who are thinking so much about this, to have to be hiding or stuffing something away. Nobody ever knows whether their disability will stay the same or become more significant or go away because of some whatever. So I think we live in the moment, and it sounds to me very much like it is an important part of who you are. And in order to own your whole self and be able to go forward as your whole self, you need to feel comfortable being able to articulate who you are. Take what you want and leave the rest from whoever is giving it to you.

Quinn Hodgson:

I like that. That's a good way for me to think about it.

Judy Heumann:

For me personally, being able to authentically represent myself is important and sometimes difficult. But nonetheless, I think if you can feel comfortable with your decision, recognizing your decision can always change. Life changes. But right now it sounds like this is really an important part of who you are for many reasons. I would also say talking to other people who maybe experiencing similar disabilities or dissimilar but invisible, and how they've thought through and where they've come out and how they identify, that's always positive.

Quinn Hodgson:

Goucher has been good for meeting more disabled people that I can talk to and relate that way because I have a lot of friends back home, some with mental disabilities, but no one really with any physical like me. So it was difficult to talk about that part. And going to school has been very helpful in meeting more people like me.

Judy Heumann:

One of the reasons why I think as much as possible face-to-face interactions are important, I believe in particular for many disabled people is because you can slowly move into having discussions and observing how people are and becoming friends. And I was talking to a friend yesterday who uses a wheelchair, but the work she's been doing has been mainly on Zoom and so people don't see her wheelchair. And then she recently went to a meeting in person where they saw her wheelchair and she said it was really shocking to her how differently people treated her when they did see her wheelchair. That in and of itself is an interesting study to do, but I think in relationship to what we're discussing with you, your ability to see people, hear people in what they're discussing, sometimes we need to observe someone that we might want to talk to because we don't necessarily feel comfortable right away for whatever reason to go up and talk with them. But knowing that there's someone on your radar that you may want to go speak to or ask out for coffee or whatever it may be, I think those interactions are really important and you really articulated it in a very clear way. So thank you.

Kylie Miller:

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