



Katherine Blossom

Great Basin Indian Archive

GBIA 029B



Oral History Interview by

**Norm Cavanaugh
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Elko, NV**



Great Basin College • Great Basin Indian Archives
1500 College Parkway Elko, Nevada 89801
<http://www.gbcnv.edu/gbia/>
775.738.8493



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B: Good evening. I'm Katherine Blossom. *Ne newe nanihan Piapenkwi*. I'm from the *Tepatekkate* Tribe from—my mother came from the Reese River area. I was born in Schurz, Nevada, which was a Native hospital for the Native people. But I went to school in Fallon, Nevada, and then I attended UNR for a while. I could not finish because of illness in the family. And I returned to Fallon, and that's where I raised my two older children. I've been a very busy person. Always involved in activities, whatever activities were around. But I've always tried to work with my people. I always had a feeling for my people that they needed help. With that, I got married, and I eventually moved to Elko where I'm residing now. And I worked for the Elko School District for thirty years, retired, and then went to work for Corbin Harney at *Puhampaa*¹, which was a healing center, and he worked with the healing water, which is mineral water. And he was my mentor in the spiritual realm, teaching me about the way our forefathers did things. Our Native people, how they prayed, and what they did with their life—the daily working. At that time, I was an office manager for Corbin, and I was also the maintenance person. I didn't do electrical, but I knew how to turn off the water, and fill the pool house, and the swim pool that we had, and took care of the bookkeeping, and did housekeeping for visitors that came for help with their healing. After I left there, I traveled to different places. I attended ceremonies which became my life. I went to the Sun Dance, and because I only have one kidney, I cannot Sun Dance, which I wished I could. But in that, I would pray for the dancers, and would sing for them, and encourage them when I could, if I was able to talk to them. But in all that, I—my life has been very full. I feel very

¹ KB says this in Shoshone; the center is often known as PooHaBah

honored that I have been able to do what I've been able to do. I mentioned that I only have one kidney: in 1972, I donated a kidney to my youngest brother, William **Streech**, which many of you probably know him by Bill. And because of that, I'm limited—or, they told me I was very limited in what I could do. But except for the Sun Dancing, it has never bothered me. And I have been truly blessed with that. Also, I have been taking care of my son for the last five years, so I have not been really participating in the spiritual ceremonies like I would like to. But that's okay. I feel like I'm at the place where I need to be. But my heart is, of course, with my people. And my work, I feel, is to pray for everyone, to help when I can, to extend a helping hand if I can. But always, prayer is my foundation. Because when I was little, that's how I was given a second chance at my life. At two years old, I ate quinine, and it almost took my life. My eyes set to one side, I lost all my hair, I could not talk, and all my organs stopped. I could not eat, I could not swallow—even water. And I could not urinate or any bowel movement. Everything stopped, and my eyes started setting one way. And my mother, when I first got sick, she took me to all the doctors that she could afford to take me to around Fallon and Schurz area. But the last doctor that came in and looked at me just shook his head and turned around and walked out, I'm told. But with that, my mother prayed, and she told the Creator, she said, "You gave me my daughter. Don't take her from me; I want her." And she begged. She pleaded that my life would be spared, which it had been. And there was an interesting thing: my aunt at that time had married a chief, and his name was Chief Grayhorse. And they were in Oklahoma, my aunt and Uncle Ben. And the Creator heard my mother's prayer, and they came from Oklahoma. And my mother told her sister what had happened, and what little that they knew about my condition, and she said that she

didn't want me to leave. That I was a gift given to her, and she wanted to keep the gift from the Creator. In that, my uncle said that he was going to go to California and get singers, which they did. He went to California, and he brought back singers. And my understanding is that, with the herbs that he brought back with him, they administered—made tea out of the herbs, and told my mother to try and get me to drink it. And she said, “Well, she can't swallow.” And he says, “It's all right. Don't worry about it. What her stomach needs, she'll swallow it. So don't worry about it, just give it to her.” And, so she did the best she could. And evidently, I was able to swallow it. And it was about maybe three, four hours later, my understanding is that I sat up for the first time in *weeks*, and looked around, and I started vomiting. And they said that the poison that I vomited was like that goopy-doo the women used to wear on their hair. It's real thick green stuff. Well, my uncle told me at that time that that's what I had vomited from my stomach. From that time, I started getting well, but I had to learn to talk again, learn how to eat, learn how to walk, and do all those things that I was able to do before. So my life has been very blessed. I've not noticed any weakness in my body. In fact, I've been very, very fortunate that I've come all these years and not really being sick or sickly. I'm very thankful. And I truly have been blessed. But I want to share that with you, because it's so important that we as Native people keep our prayers strong, because your old people from way back—I'm sure you can remember if you would think, and have a feeling—you can pray. And it is our job as Native people to pray for everything that our Mother Earth—which we call our Mother Earth is, the earth because, we call her “mother” because she gives us everything. There's nothing that we wear, we eat, or drive; everything we have—our homes, our clothing, everything has come from her. And in this

way, we should take care of her, pray for her, and not be wasteful with the food she provides for us, which she is still providing today even though she's being traumatized with what we as human are doing to her. We're tearing her open, not returning anything. But our Native way is we *must always* remember: if you're going to go and harvest, you must pray first, and get yourself ready. Clean up; clean your body, take a bath. And then go out with a clean body and a good mind, and take water with you, our precious water, and offer it to the plant or whatever you're going to harvest. And pray for it. Thank it for being there. And just take what you need and leave the rest. Don't tear up and leave scars. But as much as you can, just take what you need and leave the rest so others coming behind you—the animal life, the bird life, whatever—will also have plenty to eat. And in that way, we'll always have food to eat, and our water is so precious. We cannot live without water. And because our water is being contaminated, we all know that, we need to pray for our water every day. Every morning, we should pray for it. That first cup of water you take, we should pray, and be thankful, and ask it to bless our bodies. And that we can have a good, sound body, and a good, sound mind, and a kind heart toward each and every one. And that only comes by prayer. And we need to take care of what we have in a good way. And by our prayers, it gives us a good foundation. It will help you to have a clear mind, and to have good thoughts for everyone. And that's what our Native people have taught us from way back when. And we're not to continue to be negative. We need to be positive. And yes, there are always hardships to go through, but this is part of life. And how we go through the hard things is what makes you and I a stronger person, that we can face the next mountain that we need to climb, or whatever the situation comes in our lives that we can overcome. We can go through it. But you can't do it alone: you need

prayer. You need our Creator to hear and answer your prayer. And you're never alone. And that's a real blessing, to realize that, and to know that. So, I encourage all of our young people, and grandpas and grandmas, mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, all people: start praying. Pick up your prayers. And for our young people, our Native young people, learn your language. Because this is our culture. This is our foundation. And it's only in speaking our language that things become very clear to you, and you have a deeper understanding than just speaking English—at least, that's what I've found in my life. And I didn't know how to speak English when I was a young girl. I was not taught it, because my mother went to a boarding school. And the trauma she went through, she didn't want me to go through that, and to suffer as she did, because when she spoke her language she was abused in all the ways that you can think of and imagine. But she never talked about it. I never realized what went on in the boarding schools, and why some of our old people never talked about it. But I learned about what happened in the boarding school when I went to work for the school district. I used to attend the National Indian Education Conference. And back in Minnesota, I remember an elder man got up, and he was talking about what he went through in a boarding school at Carlisle. And this elderly Native man just stood and cried, because he could remember all the horrible things that happened to him. And then, it came home to me: that's why *my* mother would not let me go to a boarding school. She was very adamant: "No, you're not going. You're staying in a public school." And little did I know what she had to go through—and all our old people. And that's why many of our young people today do not speak our language, because of the shame that our older people have to carry in their hearts and in their lives. And I

believe that's about all I have to say. But I encourage you to live your life in a good way, the best you can.

I would like to share with you—when I worked in the school district, I worked with the Native students. Our children were really having a hard time, because some of them didn't even know who they were. And some were very angry; they didn't know why. But you know, it's things that happen to you as a youngster that you don't really remember *why* you're angry, but you're angry. And if someone should ask you, you wouldn't know what to tell them. But it's good to find somebody that you can trust and tell them what is bothering you. Because there is no person that's in this world that's perfect. We all make mistakes. But hopefully, we learn our mistakes. And when we *do* wrong—own up to it. Own up to what you did, what I did. Because that's part of your healing, is to say, “Yes, I did that, and I'm so sorry.” And *be* sorry for it, if that's how you feel. But you need to find someone—I would say to our young people—find someone you can trust, someone you can talk to. And have them listen to you. And you know, like I say, there's nothing that you have done, or has been done to you, that hasn't happened to someone else. And so we're all in the same boat. We all have come from our mothers and fathers, and some of us have been abandoned by our loved ones; but, you know, find someone that will care, and take care of you, and help you along your way. Sometimes, you have to search and look for that one person. Sometimes, it just doesn't happen. But other times, if you're willing to listen, you'll find somebody that wants to really help you along your life path, and that will help you to get a good start. I know when I was working with the young people at Elko High School, I had a young Native girl that came from a reservation, a large reservation. And she seemed a little timid, but she just seemed so eager to want to

learn. And I encouraged her at that time to continue to—and I asked her what she wanted to be, and at that time, she wanted to be an English teacher. I said, “Well, good for you! You can do it!” And that young lady went on, and she became even a superintendent of schools. And she was Native. She *is* Native. And so, you know, nothing should stand in your way of success. What is success to you? Success isn’t something that means the same thing to all of us. It’s what *you* like to do, and what you can make a living at, and be happy in your own self, what you’re doing. That’s your success. All our stories are different. But in your own right, you become successful for you. Don’t do it for someone else. What is it that makes you happy? This is your life. This is your walk. And you live it in a good way, and it’ll help you to be healthy and strong, and if you work hard as a young person now? Get your education, go on and pursue an education. We need that. But don’t forget where you came from. Don’t forget. If you’re Native, don’t forget that’s who you are. And if you can have a chance to talk to the old people—your grandpa, your grandma, or whoever is available; your aunt, your uncle. Go to an older person and talk to them. Ask them about your lineage, so *you* will know. Because that is your foundation. Don’t forget it, because it’s so vitally important for all of us to know who we are. And one thing I’d like to say to you, I’d encourage you, don’t try to be somebody else. Don’t try to be somebody that you’re not. Because we all have—Native people have come from a strong line of people, but yet we’ve been told so many times, and our older people—our mothers, our fathers, our grandfathers, grandmothers—have been told that they’re stupid and savages. But in your own heart, you know that you’re not that. So don’t believe what people tell you, but search your own heart, search your own life, and pursue your own happiness, whatever that is. What makes you happy? What makes you laugh? And you

know, it's a good thing to laugh. That's what helps us to lift ourselves up. And sometimes it's hard to laugh when you're all by yourself and things are not going right. But you know what? There's always those little things you can look for in life to make you feel better about yourself. The other day—I have to share this with you, talking about laughter—I was smelling the flowers in the grocery store. And they were roses, and I came across these beautiful yellow roses, which happen to be my favorite. And I stooped over, and I was smelling it. It smelt *so* fragrant, I was tempted to buy it, and I thought, “No, I don't think I can afford it, no, I don't think so.” But I just kept that fragrance with me, and I was thinking about it, and I went on. And then I came across—as I was going to check out, I came across some more flowers they had in another area. And I stooped over, and I was smelling the flowers, and a woman came up behind me, and she said, “Oh, you're smelling the roses!” But she said it with such laughter and glee. And she says, “May I smell them, too?” And I looked at her—I was so surprised—and I said, “Well, of *course* you can!” She says, “Well, this one don't have much fragrance.” I says, “You should go smell the yellow roses.” But she had the biggest smile on her face when she stopped to smell the roses. And that's what we need to do. We need to look for little things that make you happy. And it's okay. You'll always find somebody that will laugh with you. But sometimes it's hard to find somebody that will cry with you. But it happens. So I'd like to encourage you—all of you, whoever hears this, or sees this tape—to be encouraged in your own heart, because you're worthy of being happy, and be at peace with your own self. And sometimes, that's hard to find, when we have this dark, black cloud hanging over us. But there is a way to reach out and get rid of that black

cloud. And just, what I'd like to say to you is: keep your prayers strong. Know who you are, keep your foundation, and pursue your own happiness.

[End of recording]