

## INTERVIEW WITH CURTIS CESSPOOCH, NORTHERN UTE TRIBE, CHAIRPERSON

NANCY GREEN: One of the first things I wanted to discuss were, since you've taken office with the Tribe, you probably have a really good sense of what's working and what's not. What are some of the f biggest challenges that you have right now as a tribe?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: We're trying to get an accounting of our monies. The funds. Since our primary source of income is oil and gas, we're trying to get a handle on it. We had a person here, prior to our coming in, that had kind of overseen everything. And we, as Tribal members, didn't really know what was going on funding wise. Also education is an issue. Also there's some alcoholism. A lot of it more now is drugs. But the alcoholism was the prevailing factor; let's say about maybe five years ago. But now it's leaning more and more into gangs and drugs. But that is a problem within the families. And we're trying to make our court system, too, also more efficient and effective in dealing with alcohol and drugs. Just recently we got -- we're also drawing up a new policy, and amending our law and order code, to deal with drugs and alcohol -- drugs and alcoholism. So, we're trying to beef up everything. And that's pertaining to the social problems. That's been neglected in the past.

NANCY GREEN: Why do you think there are so many social problems?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: When I was growing up, respect was more enforced in our families. And nowadays, that isn't as - seems to me that's not a high priority anymore. A lot of the kids do run their houses. And the parents are -- they have no voice, it seems like.

NANCY GREEN: In talking with educators, they've mentioned how important learning about Ute culture is for young people. Do you think that a lack of culture identity is a problem?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: It may be. In some of the schools, when we -- I was on the counsel before, and at that time was trying to promote them teaching a Native American history in the high schools. And even up here. There were programs at that time, too, which allowed cultural activities. And you can see the change in the students there. Before, the students were -- I don't know if you would say self conscious about being Native American. And since these programs came into the school; you could see more pride in the Indian students. And when the Powwows came up, and the children dressed up in their regalia, you could see how proud they were. And I think it does play a large part in it. The other day, you went down to the Bear Dance down there. With the Head Start kids. And you seen all of them kids down there dancing, and participating. What was really good about that too is because, you know, when the kids are small; you can see the non-Indian kids and the Indian kids dancing together. And you don't see any barrier when they are dancing, or even when they're in school. And I think it's neat, because the Indian kids, you know, they do, at that time, when they're kids, they participate in it, and they don't see any barriers between them. I know some kids a long time ago, when they were in high school, or with the kids growing up -- with the Indian kids growing up, they did learn some words, and they became knowledgeable, and they also participated in a lot of the Tribal activities. And it made them bond more with the Indian people. But now, it seems to me like when they do get up into higher grades, that they kind of disappear.

NANCY GREEN: Is it important, do you think, for the non-Indian kids, to participate too?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Sure.

NANCY GREEN: What does that bring to it?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: We have a lot of non-Indian employees here. And they feel that they're not invited to any of our Tribal activities. But we tell them, "Heck, go down

there and see them, because you don't need an invitation. You know, just go down there and participate." And I think it brings up a little bit more closeness between them. You know? It's just not - they're not just working for us, but they're part of the Tribe too. And we invite them down, and we welcome them all to the activities. And it looks good sometimes, when they do participate. We can make fun of them then. (laughs)

NANCY GREEN: When we were talking earlier, you had mentioned that there weren't enough good role models for American Indian kids. Tell me a little more about that.

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Primarily, Indian people don't like to make a show of themselves, or show off, or brag about themselves. And I think, just by being yourself, and the way you dress and act, before anybody, I think that may become a role model for some kids. And I think it's a little bit different than being non-Indian, where you kind of proclaim how great you are, maybe. And I don't really see that in our culture. But just being the positions you're in, I think, and how well you handle yourself, I think that's -- may hopefully affect some of our young kids. So they'll want to be that way.

NANCY GREEN: What's your hope or your dream for the Tribe in the next five or ten years? What do you hope for the future of the Tribe?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Well, I hope the Tribe -- once we get situated with everything here, and we get the right people in place, that the Tribe will be able to move on. Let's say, for instance, if a key person happened to leave, there would be somebody else right in that next spot, to take it over and continue. Instead of us losing a person, let's say, and having the Tribe come to a stand-still, and having to figure out how they're going to go. And I think that's the situation that we are in, let's say like when we took over the business committee. When we came on board. So now we're trying to make the Tribe function as a business, and hopefully make it so that it will stay intact for the future. And by doing that, too, we need some leaders in there that are going to be able to project down the road maybe five years, ten years. And have that vision in mind. I think it's pretty -- there's not that outlook right now, about looking down the road five, ten

years. And even next year. But I hope that by next year at this time, we'll have more of a hold – a handle on everything. And that it will be on this roadway to a more stable future.

NANCY GREEN: Do you think leaders are key, and that education is the access to having more Ute leaders?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Yeah. Right now, with our oil and gas being our primary source of income -- I keep saying that. We need people in there; petroleum engineering, civil engineers. We need hydrologists, we need geologists. All of that. We're always talking about putting our people into our departments. And the only way we can do that is to get our kids educated in all of these fields. You know? It doesn't -- it's going to take four years and longer for them to be able to get their skills up. Some of the people are down there now. That they have. So education is a real important part in -- you know, in any society. For them to get anywhere.

NANCY GREEN: Do you find people have a certain attitude or stereotype about American Indians?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Okay. I was just telling a person yesterday, that there was a mention of some of these tourists that were visiting the ruins down in New Mexico. They were asking how come they built the ruins so far away from the paved road? It's that kind of attitude that people have. They expect the -- they even stop out here and say, Where's the Indians? They're expecting to see us still living in teepees, riding horses, or carrying bows and arrows. And that's not the case. A lot of them are surprised that we have our administration building down here, with all of the departments. And how we're involved with a lot of the businesses -- business and businesses within the Reservation. And just by the word reservation, too, they think of it as being barren, and our houses are -- maybe we're living in huts and still in teepees. And that's not the case.

NANCY GREEN: I don't know if this is easy to do. Is there a way to understand the

relationship of the Reservation, of the Ute government to the state and federal governments? Are you a sovereign nation?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Congress has passed laws and laws and laws, legislation, stating that Indian Tribes are sovereign nations, and the U.S. government and the Indian Tribes are on a government-to-government basis. The states, county governments, are, I would say, a lot of them don't have any say, nor do they have any right to tell the Indian Tribes what to do. Now, you've got various levels of Indian Tribes, and how they were formed. You've got some tribes that are under state jurisdiction, and some that aren't. Some are partial. And it's real complicated. For instance, like on our reservation here, when the allotment came in, when they started giving lands to Indian families, heads of Indian households, and they opened up the reservation, what wasn't doled out to the heads of Indians, the rest was open to the public. So all our reservation is considered to be a checker boarded reservation, where there's spots and parcels of Indian, non-Indian lands. So the jurisdiction, or the law enforcement issue is kind of whose land are we on right now? And whose authority are you under? At one time we were -- we had jurisdiction within the reservation. And we had a court case in '92, which was called the Hagan, where it was considered that Roosevelt over here was no longer part of the reservation. So that became under the jurisdiction of Roosevelt. So any of our members, if they get in trouble over there, they don't fall under the Tribe's jurisdiction. So sovereignty, in some ways, is -- it's complicated. We have partial sovereignty, and -- but we're still under the jurisdiction of Congress. So they can decide what they want to do with us.

NANCY GREEN: So is it still frustrating? Do you feel like you still can't control your own fate?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Up to a point, we can. Again, now, there's been legislation passed by Congress which gives the Tribe self-governance, to determine what they want to do. And to do that, you have to have your Tribe in a situation where they can handle their affairs. So in a sense, it may be there for them. But according to the treaties

specified that the U.S. government would provide certain things to Indian Tribes for giving up their lands. Now, if -- I believe that if you go self-governance, or if you take over any responsibility that the BIA has, I'm afraid that trust of responsibility of the Federal Government will gradually diminish. So I'd still like to see the Federal Government uphold their trust responsibilities to the Indian Tribes.

NANCY GREEN: Do you feel that the Government hasn't been upholding their responsibility?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: In some. Generally they haven't. And it's up to Indian Tribes to remind them constantly, of their Federal responsibility to Indian Tribes. And there's a big lawsuit now, about how the Federal Government didn't uphold their trust responsibility of some of the funding that went to individual Indians, with oil and gas. So. Generally they don't.

NANCY GREEN: What about treaties, are they upheld?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: There's been over 400 treaties made with tribes, and there hasn't been too many of them that's been -- you know, absolutely upheld. There's breakdown in all of them.

NANCY GREEN: Historically, the Utes originally inhabited most of Utah, how did the Ute end up on this reservation?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Now, the Uintah band, my band were living around Provo. Salt Lake area. Wasatch Front. And when Brigham Young and his people came into the valley over there, as time went on, there were more and more of them coming, and the Indian people who were over in that area kept being pushed tighter and tighter. They made several reservations over there. Small reservations. For the tribes that were there. And gradually, they sent scouts out here, to this area, to look for a colony for

them. And they couldn't find anything. Any land that was suitable for farming. And one of them went back and reported to Brigham Young, that the only reason for this place to be here was to hold the world together. So, to them, it was worthless. So that's why they generally placed -- put Indian reservations. But today, that worthlessness is -- it's more valuable now, because of the oil and gas that's underneath. So visibly, to them, it was worthless.

NANCY GREEN: But not with the Utes?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Well, with all of the mining and the oil exploration, it's turning out different.

NANCY GREEN: Is poverty an issue out here? Or with the oil and gas, is that basically being taken care of?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Well, poverty, to me, would mean you're living way below the level of the -- I guess the nation? But you also have to consider the cost of living in various places. And here, our Tribal members get a dividend from oil and gas monthly. And every one of our members gets that. So they can live on that. Not real comfortably, but they can live on it. And hopefully, with more effective management of our oil and gas situation, that may change.

NANCY GREEN: Is unemployment an issue?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Yes. Unemployment is a big issue. I think at one time, it's been mentioned there's 40 percent unemployment. But I believe it's higher than that. And -- but now, with our -- a lot of 24 jobs in the oil and gas industry, there's plenty of work up there. But we're trying to provide employment by going into different ventures, business ventures. And we've been asking -- well, it's a policy of the Tribe to have all of rectors, who are non-Indian, for them to train a Tribal person to take their place. So we're reviving that policy, and making sure that that becomes what the policy is today.

Yes, unemployment is a big, big problem. And it -- and if we can get our kids to go to school, stay in school, and get a skill of some sort. We've got vocational schools. I guess they're called technical schools now. In Vernal and Roosevelt. So we're pushing to get them to start to use those. And they can be here locally, and not go out of the area.

NANCY GREEN: For you, what does being Ute mean? How is being Ute different than maybe being Navajo, or Shoshone?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Being Ute, a long time ago, when the Utes acquired the horse, they were one of the first tribes to acquire the horse. And they were predominantly a big, war-like Tribe at that time. And by being that way, they were among the ones that were more able to move around and more or less be on their own. And every Tribe -- every Tribe is different. And it's just a matter of being born Ute. You know?

NANCY GREEN: The Bear Dance is uniquely Ute, and it's something that's lasted for hundreds of years. At the Bear Dance yesterday, what was it like to see your granddaughter and all the children dancing?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: When I got married -- I spent a little -- a lot of my time off the reservation. And when I came home, got married, and we had kids, my wife kind of got them into the -- back into the culture awareness. So now my -- my daughter, she jingle dances, and my two boys, they sing and they also dance. And my two boys were down there at the Bear Dance singing. And our grandkids and great grandkids are now doing that. So, it's exciting. I like to see it. And I think that's keeping -- they'll grow up and teach their kids to do that. In fact, my daughter's got two boys now, and one of them was down there in Head Start. He was out there dancing. So it will -- it's good.

NANCY GREEN: As far as your vision for the tribe, what would you like to see for your great grandkids when they grow up?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Well, I'd like to see the Tribe stable, for one thing. And it's going to grow. There's a lot of opportunities down south of here, with oil and gas again. So if that can be managed wisely, and smart, you know, the Tribe will be a big player here. I keep saying that. And for them, when they get bigger, there's going to be opportunities for them, and the Tribe should be in a pretty stable financial position at the time. And I'd like to see them go to school and get some education. Become skilled. And possibly come back here and work for their Tribe. I've been telling kids, when I was in the counsel the first time, to go to school. Get their education. And possibly go to work on the outside, so they can get a feel for what the outside does. And then come back and work for the Tribe. So.

NANCY GREEN: Is it a sense of that -- a sense of an outside and an inside, kind of two different worlds? Can you describe that to me?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Okay. There is an inside and an outside when we talk. The outside is any place off the reservation. Big towns, like Salt Lake. Any other bigger town. Because their whole way of thinking is different. Their culture is different. They don't see things as we do. Like we do. Let's take, for instance, I was talking with one of our members the other day. And she was down in -- we were in Denver. And by the third day, she was saying, I'm ready to go home, because I want to feel the dirt. And it's that sort of a feeling. You know? Living on the outside, you've got people that are just -- seems to me like they're bumping into each other. They've got to go here, they've got to go there. They've got to make the money. Come back here, it's not that -- that's not the way of thinking here. And the outside, when -- when you think about -- there's a lot of material things that they think about. And that's not as important here, to us. But I think that, if you have enough to live on, you're satisfied. At least I am. On the outside, it's not that way. It's always this focus on -- on making money. Of not thinking about your culture, or where you came from, or -- I don't know the thinking. It's totally different.

NANCY GREEN: So it's maybe about acquiring things, and getting things, rather than

relatedness or --

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Well, one of -- maybe an example would be when the -- the Indian people were put on reservations. They didn't think of this reservation as being -- we didn't own this one little piece of ground. In fact, the ground belonged to all of us. And the feeling on the outside is that I own this ground. You don't mess with it. It's that kind of a thing, if you can follow that. And one time I when I was saying that, someone mentioned about it being a community -- what do they call that word? They called it, I don't want to say this, but-- almost socialism. A communal type thing. They were also mentioning that the Tribal government takes care of the people and gives them assistance when they do need it. And if you come to think about it, any other government does that for its people. They provide them services too. But I think it was a whole thing of that - like say we don't own the land, parcels of land. And that is not ours, but it belongs to everybody. It was just that type of a feeling.

NANCY GREEN: Talking about the land, we've been talking a lot about the development of oil and gas, but are there any plans preserving the land, as well as developing it?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: There's a piece of ground down south of here, about 70, 90 miles down, that it's in a -- a remote part of the reservation. And they were starting to develop that, in oil and gas. There was a resolution passed, in the '60s, that protected that land from development. And, but recently, going back again to this person that was kind of running the show, they started to develop that area. When we came into the counsel here, we, again, are making an effort to protect that land down that way. That particular piece of land was given back to the Tribe in the '40s. And when the State was formed, you know, there was land set aside for the school, school trust lands. When the land was given back to the Tribe, the reservation encompassed a bunch of those state lands. School lands. So we're trying to make a congressional piece of legislation that would help us return -- or trade them lands for lands further north. So that land down there would become totally Tribal, and we would be more apt to protect it. And if we do

exchange them lands, you know, the lands will benefit the state and the Tribe. So that's a win/win/win for everybody. And it would be a win for us too, because we'll be protecting the land south here.

NANCY GREEN: Is there anything that we haven't covered that you think is important for people to understand or know about the Ute people?

CURTIS CESSPOOCH: Just that we have a membership about 3,100 people. We have three bands. Uintah, Uncompahgre, and White River. Uncompahgre and the White River bands came from Colorado, when they were forced out of their reservations. And they were brought up here to be with us. And one of the reasons why it's called the Uintah-Ouray reservation, is because when the people from Colorado came over, they were under the leadership of a Chief Ouray. So they kind of named it after him. And the Uintahs came from Provo. So that portion came from Provo, Ouray came from Colorado. So it's called Uintah and Ouray.