

Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Three Transcript, Episode One: Ramona Moore Big Eagle

Lis Malone: Welcome to the Melungeon Voices Podcast presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone. I'm the Podcast Producer. And for all of those who are returning to the Melungeon Voices podcast for season three, I am here with your president. Heather Andolina. Heather, how are you?

Heather Andolina: I'm fine. Lis. How are you?

Lis: You look at us. We're surviving another season.

Heather: I know. Right. It's crazy. I can't believe it.

Lis: We are gluttons for punishment. No, it's good. We are having an amazing time producing this podcast doing all these incredible interviews. But here we are season three. I know there was a lot of anticipation for there being a season three. And thank you so much to the executive board for making this happen.

Heather: Yes, listen, I have been receiving all kinds of emails and messages wondering when season three was going to drop. Well, we made it we are here. So, let's get on with it, as they say. So, we always start off our seasons with the presidential address. That sounds so formal. So Heather, I'm going to give you the microphone and you take it from here.

Heather: Thank you, Liz. Welcome back, everyone, to the Melinda and Voices Podcast. Listen, I am so excited to be sharing with all of you another amazing season of our podcast. Season three brings with it this year, not only all new guests and more compelling content, but a special bonus episode, which was recorded at this year's Melungeon Heritage Association's in person Union Conference this past June. Once again, we'd like to thank the Melungeon Heritage Association, and its executive board and our members for their continued support and helping to make this podcast series possible. membership dues and donations from our generous supporters directly fund this podcast. So, if you're not currently a member and would like to join, we would love to have you participate in furthering our organization's mission. Or if you'd like to make a donation to the MHA, we would greatly appreciate your generosity. Please visit us on the web at www.melungeon.org to learn more.

Lis: We are getting so fancy with the bonus episodes and everything

Heather: I know check us out. That's why I'm super excited to be sharing the season with everyone.

Lis: Bonus people. Yes. Oh. Before we get to the bonus content of this season, let's talk about episode one. Here we are. And what do we have in store for this week?

Heather: Yes, so we talk to Ramona Moore Big Eagle in our debut episode.

Lis: And let's learn more about Ramona.

Heather: Ramona Moore Big Eagle is an award winning internationally renowned motivational speaker, storyteller, cultural educator, consultant, and workshop facilitator. She is president and CEO of dare to

soar enterprises, an organization she formed in 1991 to empower people of all ages, and across all walks of life to become more effective communicators. In this season's debut episode, I spoke to Ramona about her Afro-Indigenous ancestry, the significance of storytelling in native communities, and the importance and traditions of storytelling.

Lis: Well, let's get this episode rolling, shall we?

Heather: Yes, we shall.

Lis: Okay, everyone. Let's listen in on this interview.

Heather: Hi, Ramona, how are you today?

Ramona Moore Big Eagle: I'm doing great, Heather. I hope you are.

Heather: I sure am. I'm going to get right into it. I always start with the story. I always like our guests to tell us about their personal ancestry.

Ramona: Well, my ancestry is very fluid or mixed or however you want to say it. My father is from Cherokee Nation. My mom is from the Tuscarora nation, historically two nations that were always at war with each other, but I always tell people somehow love prevailed and my mom and dad found a way to get together. So, on my dad's side, his mom and All the Cherokee women typically married Scotch Irish. And my mother's side the Tuscarora side. They typically married European and African American. So, my mother's mother was half white and half Native. Well, my father's father was Penobscot. He was native and his mother was native and Irish, Scotch Irish. So that's why I say is, Yeah, kind of completed. And I'm an enrolled member of the Tuscarora nation. So, the task of we are one of the Indigenous nations that are connected to the Melungeon people as well as the Cherokee.

Heather: When did you first learn about the Melungeon people? And do you have any personal connection? Ancestry wise to the Melungeon people?

Ramona: Okay, so the first question, when did I first hear or know about Melungeons? I did undergrad and graduate that matter study in Tennessee. I went to Carson Newman college undergrad and went to East Tennessee State for graduate school, both of which are located in eastern Tennessee. And I'll never forget the day, I think it was about my freshman year of college at Carson Newman College in Jefferson City, Tennessee. Someone asked me if I was Melungeon. Now I've been asked a lot of things. Are you black? Are you? And then are you half Black and half Indian? Are you half white and Indian? I've been asked a lot of different questions. But that one had never been asked, no one has ever asked me if I was Melungeon. And so, my first response was, what do you mean when you say Melungeon? And I don't even know what Melungeon is. And they said, you know, people that are part native and part white and part black. I said, well, not that I know of. But I guess I couldn't be, I would probably qualify. So that was the first time ever hearing the term lunging. And I am truly a scholar, a lifelong learner, I always have been, I live in a house with over 53,000 books and my personal library. Here in this house. I have every book I've ever had since second grade. So, I immediately started looking at everything I could find out about lunges, and the more I read, and the more pictures I saw, I thought, wow, these people look like my relatives. These people are kind of made up of what my family makeup is. So, I've always thought there's a possibility, but I have no proof or anything as far as knowing that, you know, we have Melungeon ancestry. I just know that. From everything I've read and people I've talked to in Tennessee

and the Melungeon people that I met in Tennessee, I know that there's a strong possibility I could be. You know, what I do know for certain is that I am test grower. I have a father that was Cherokee, a mom that is best grower. She's still alive at 93. And, you know, and I know their background, so I'm not really sure.

Heather: Possibly, Ramona. On last season's podcast, we interviewed a gentleman by the name of Dr. Arwin Smallwood, and he's Tuscarora. Do you know, Dr. Smallwood?

Ramona: I do. We've met and taught extensively.

Heather: That is awesome. So yes, I think, you know, there's certainly a connection between the Melungeon people and the Tuscarora, certainly. So, you just might have Melungeon ancestry.

Ramona: It's quite possible. I wouldn't be shocked if I did. Ever since that first time, a Carson Newman college and someone asked me about my lunch and I've always left the door open for knowing that, you know, it's a strong possibility.

Heather: Let's talk about the art of storytelling. How did you become involved in this practice?

Ramona: Wonderful, that's easy to answer. I grew up with storytellers and it's amazing to me. You know, the people that did not you know, when you grow up Have you tended saying that every household behind closed doors is like your household because it's what you know, is the only thing you know, you know what you've grown up with. So, I thought everyone grew up with someone in their household that told stories all the time. I didn't know any different really to be honest with you until I went off to college. And that's when I found out that now, I didn't grow up with a storyteller. What, you know, my father, my mother, my grandparents, everybody, told stories, it was just part of my life. And that my dad was an entrepreneur, he owned his own business, he was a barber. He owned his barber shop. And as we all know, all barbers know everything, and tell stories about everything they know. My dad being the owner would close his barber shop, he would come home to a home cooked meal for my mom. And the four of us, my brother, and I, my mom and dad, we would sit down and have dinner together, freshly prepared hot meal. My mom was a teacher. So, she got off, like at 3:30 or so. And my dad came home 5:36 o'clock, and we'd eat dinner together at six o'clock. 6:30. And my dad always told the most fun aspect stories, you know, to the point that sometimes my brother and I would ask him, just like children asked me today as a storyteller, which say, is that real? Daddy? Is it true? Sometimes my dad was said, with a big grin on his face. And a sparkling is I'd say, of course, it's true. I just made it up a few minutes ago. And he would say, you know, and every story, there is a bit of truth. You have to decide what's true for you. And that's pretty much answers that question. Also, because children ask me every program, I ever do that true, is it really happened? You know, so I grew up with storytellers. I loved it. I just thought it was a way of life. And I can remember all the stories my dad would tell me, and what's amazing to me, my brother, who's two years younger than me, grew up with the same mom and dad in the same household just two years apart. He doesn't remember any of those stories. And I go, I know you know that when he should tell that on pretty much every week. I remember it. I go Where were you? Okay, so that's how I get into the storytelling because my dad, you know, as a storyteller, my mom was a storyteller. My dad used storytelling for the sole purpose of entertainment. My mother use storytelling as a technique for teaching as a teacher. At my dad's Homecoming service, I learned so many things about him from people that grew up with him. One of the things I learned about him at my dad's Homecoming service was his friends told me that when my dad was a little boy, his he was raised

by his odd because his mother died very soon after he was born. So, her sister, his aunt, and Rihanna McCown raised him as her own child. But it was really her deceased sister who was the mom of him. So that's who raised him if she was a school teacher, awesome. But his friends told me that, oh, my dad was a little boy, that nanny, that's what we called his art. My great aunt would take him to the movies. And then he would come home from the movies. He would set up chairs on the front porch, and charge everyone five cents detailed in the story of the movie. And they all every one of them told me. My dad told them the story of the movie told them what he saw at the movie. It was like they were right there in the movie. They said, from what he said they could see everything that was happening on the movie, because he was such a good storyteller. They felt like they were there at the movie theater, looking at the movie with my dad. And that's amazing. That was one of the stories about him that just oh my goodness that put a smile on my face still to this day. I smell and I think about him lining up chairs on the front porch and charging everyone by sitting about the movie. I was just going to say I definitely inherited that aspect of storytelling. You know, not just be a storyteller. But to go into business as a storyteller, I've built my life around storytelling. I have a business, Dare to Soar Enterprises. And that business is to teach people how to communicate even more effectively through the power of storytelling. So, I've built my life, my business around storytelling. And it all started with my dad.

Heather: That is amazing. But you mentioned, your father told stories more as entertainment. And your mother told stories more for educational purposes. And I know you're also an American Indian cultural educator, what is the significance of storytelling within Native communities?

Ramona: I'm glad you asked that. Storytelling is key to our culture, our history, our traditions, our way of life, then now, and always will be even in the future. In the American Indian culture, first off, there are many different tribes, many nations, all with their own language, their own traditions, their own individual culture, as a tribe, as a nation. And their own particular stories, their creation stories, their warrior stories, their hero stories as Campbell would say. So, before there was written language, communication, written communication, there's always been oral tradition, verbal language. And as a result, you know, as an artist, as a storyteller, I'm considered an artist. You know, each art form loves to say we were the first, you know, painters in drawers. Yeah, they go, Oh, yes. before anything was ever done. There was always the picture. And, you know, dancers love to hang out with us, the dancers, we would ask the vets or the damn, but with all humility and humbleness, I say you are wrong. It all started with the story. Storytellers were the first artists, storytellers were the first historian, storytellers began it all. Everything else came from the storytellers and their stories. So, before there was written language, there was the story. And those that shared those stories, every day was a sharing of the hunt that day, or the harvesting met, or the you know about the everyday life, the hunting, the harvesting of the food, the gathering, the chores, the children, it all started with those events, and a story about those events for the day. Storytelling has always been a key component of Indigenous culture, always will be. And as a storyteller, I love the responsibility I have been keeping our culture and our traditions alive through the stories.

Heather: That is a wonderful, you know, I was just in Jonesborough, Tennessee.

Ramona: Yeah, one of my favorite places.

Heather: Because I was going to ask you if you've been there, but I would imagine you should have been the storytelling capital of the world.

Ramona: Back when I was in it, Carson Newman attended Carson Newman as a student. I'll never forget, it was either September or October, somewhere it was in the fall. A bunch of us students heard that there was some lady telling ghost stories in a graveyard. We all put ourselves into a car when I say pack, I mean, we were sitting on each other's lap and I mean, because everyone that wants to go piled into one car so far was packed. And we are drove to Jonesborough to hear this lady tell ghost stories in the graveyard. Now we had no idea that the storyteller was none other than Jackie Torres. She was telling ghost stories. And oh, my goodness, we all had goose bumps or hair standing up. We were looking around in the dark and shadows, and it was just the perfect place for storytelling. And I was totally hooked on that event, to think that maybe just maybe I might do the same thing and have the same effect on people, as Jackie Torres did that night in the graveyard telling ghost stories.

Heather: That is so cool. I love ghost stories too Ramona, would you like to tell us about one of your personal favorite stories?

Ramona: I will tell you this is hard to say what's my favorite? I have three children. And it's just like asking you a which one is your favorite. Wow, love all of them. You know, they're equally different. So, I have a different expression of love for each one based on their love language. But you know, I love them all. And that's how it is the stories. I love all of them. So, it's usually kind of hard to pick a favorite, but I do have some better, that have been known till more often than others. And one in particular, the one I did for my TED Talk, back in 2019. The story this, I would have to say that's my signature story. That's one of my favorite stories. So, I'll share that one with you if you'd like.

Heather: Sure thing.

Ramona: Once there was a wise old woman named so. And so first step you have to that she was hired librarian. But she was not living a life of sitting back in a rocking chair reading a whole book or you know that type life. Instead, she loved to get outside in nature. Nature just seemed to bring her a lie. So, every day, she would usually get her knapsack paired. So good internet set, good always putting extra net So, so you know, we might need it was hungry, be it an animal or a purse. So, she always had it for food and that knapsack and she would go into the forest, just to enjoy nature. And that when she would go in, she'd noticed everything like notice overhead have a canopy of trees would be like a like an Arbor and shafts of light would come down to that canopy of trees putting little to Apples of light here and there that she would walk in. She noticed how the ground the grass felt so soft like carpet in bed, she would often take her shoes off, just feel that mossy green grass underneath her feet as she'd walk in. She always smelled the aroma at the bar so she was going into the bars and going in deeper and deeper. The woodsy scents the musky scents, the sense of the Evergreen, all the smells that were there waiting for her as she walked into the bars. And always she heard the sound of the babbling brook, with the water rushing over those stones, rounding them out for years and years and year. Rushing on to other parts of farmers always babbling and giving her the water music as she walked in. And whenever she got thirsty, but she would just go over to that babbling brook. She kept her hands together. Slide the mend the coup, crisp clear water, bring that water to remount and oh she could feel that water as it went all the way down through her body reviving or restoring. This is what she loved best about nature. Now one day as she was sitting beside that babbling brook, just enjoying the sounds of the bars, the smells the sights, to notice something sparkling in the water. She put her hand in and pull it out had a large, valuable stone. She had never seen a stone like this before. But she could tell by the sparkle and brilliance of that stone, that this might be something special. This might be something valuable. But she

kept huge stone and totes it into her knapsack. Just like it might have been any other Oh, river rock, and continued enjoying herself there in the bars. And not too long afterwards, she saw a young man walking through the woods. She called out to him and weigh them, begging him to come over near the brook. Maybe might be thirsty. She could tell by one look at the sun man that he was not just in the forest enjoying nature as she was. She could tell by the look of his clothes that were torn and dirty and Attard looking. Things have probably been a little rough for him. She could tell by the thin frame of his body that he had probably missed a few matte nails. And she could tell by the wrinkles on his brow that he was probably worried about something, maybe even a hint of fear. Where she bent over to the young man and said, Come sits beside me share a meal with me. She opened up her knapsack, take out some food for the young man. And when she did, she could tell that he saw that stone because his eyes grew wide with amazement. You know, it's not every day you meet someone in the forest, that ever stone that large, and to his knowledge that valuable? So, from the look on his face, she took the stone out. How did the young man and said, would you like to have this stone? The young man couldn't believe is the years. Is it worth Did you say? She said would you like to have the stone? He thought this scattered be a joke. Maybe a setup? I don't know what's going on? He thought but he said cool. Yes, of course. Who wouldn't want that stone. She said here. And without any hesitation whatsoever. She gave a stone to the young man. The young man took the stone from her hands. He looked at the stone. He looked at her tears can do his eyes. He started hugging her. Thank you, thank you. You have no idea what this this could mean to me and my family. Times have been rough for us. And I don't even know how we're going to make it. But I think the stone might be the answer. That after hugging her, he walked up the forest with that stone thinking I am going to be read.

He was overjoyed at what it happened with the thoughts the stone is probably so valuable, or take care of every need. I had every bill every debt, while this stone is going to be so valuable. They'll take care of my children's needs and debt. So that your man went home knowing his future was sad because of that style. But you know something the next day he was right back in the fire looking for Zoey, when they found the same joy that he had left with was a joy that he had when he saw her. And he said I've been looking all over for you. You know that stone you gave me yesterday. I took it to an appraiser. It is worth millions. He started talking about one of the largest, whatever he named that still. He said it was so valuable, it was worth millions. And I realized just as I thought my future is everything I could possibly ever need or want is going to be met because of that stone. But then I got to thinking about you. I got to thinking about how you gave me the stone so easily, so freely without any hesitation.

And even though he offered me a lot of money. I said no. And here I am now to give the stone back to you at that point though it looked surprise, she said you came to get the stone back. Even though the appraiser said that it would be enough to take care of all of your needs. He said, yes. You see yesterday, you made me a very rich man with that stone. But I want something that's even more valuable than the stone that you gave. I want what you have inside of you, that caused you to give the stone away. And with that he gave her the stone, unlike before, so he tossed that stone that she now knew was worth millions. She tossed that stone in her knapsack just like it was a regular river. And she sat down with that young man. And she began to tell him story after story, after story, stories of her life, her experiences, empowering, imparting her wisdom, her knowledge, those experiences, story after story, after store, and family, when she started, she wanted that young man and asked me, that's my life. That's who I am. The stories hold who I am, in words. And now I've shared them with you. And the young man hugged her as he had the day before and thank you with tears in his eyes. And he said, you know, yesterday, you

made me a rich man. But I'm giving you the stone bag, I've given you the stone bag. And now because of your stories, because of your wisdom, your knowledge, your experience, given to me by your stories. I am richer right now than I was when I had the stone. And he went away, a very rich man.

Heather: What a beautiful story Ramona. Thank you so much for being on our podcast. It was an absolute joy.

Ramona: Thank you for having me, Heather.

Lis Malone: You've been listening to the Melungeon Voices Podcast. On behalf of myself, Heather Andolina, and the entire MHA executive committee. We'd like to thank all of those who participated in making this episode possible. For more information, you can visit them on the web at www.melungeon.org. The information views and opinions expressed in this podcast episode do not necessarily represent those of the MHA.

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