LaDonna Harris

The family's successful business, NORDAM, gives them the opportunity to give back to their community.

Chapter 01 – 0:55
Introduction

Announcer: "What is it like to live in a tent?" asked Robert F. Kennedy's five-year-old daughter, Kerry, when she met Ladonna Harris for the first time in 1965. This exchange between Harris and the Kennedy family resembled many of LaDonna's experiences with the media, the public, and government leaders as she rose to national prominence as a leading advocate of Native American rights. LaDonna Harris is a Comanche Native American from Oklahoma. She founded the Americans for Indian Opportunity and was a vice presidential candidate for the Citizens Party in the US presidential election in 1980 alongside Barry Commoner. She was given access to power in Washington, DC, because of her marriage to Oklahoma US Senator Fred Harris. To understand what took Harris from the poor farm community where she grew up to the national spotlight, it is necessary to listen to LaDonna talk about the formative years of her childhood. Listen to LaDonna Harris tell her oral history on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

Chapter 02 – 8:25
The Comanche

John Erling: My name is John Erling and today's date is September 21, 2017. LaDonna, would you state your full name, please.

LaDonna Harris: LaDonna Vita Crawford-Harris.

JE: I gotta ask you about the name. Vita, what is Vita?

LH: V-I-T-A. My mother named me LaDonna Vita. My elder sister said, "I don't know Mother was thinking she named me Billie Carl and then named you LaDonna, which was much more beautiful." [laughs] I don't know where she heard the name.

JE: And then Tabbytite, is your mother's maiden name, of course.

LH: That's right.

JE: Harris. Your date of birth?

LH: Two-fifiteen-thirty-one

JE: And your present age?

LH: Eighty-six.

JE: This is one thing I like about this job 'cause I get to ask women their age and I have a right to do it.

LH: [laughs] But when you get this old, you don't mind telling it.

[laughter]

JE: You're here on the University of Tulsa campus and we're in the recording facilities of VoicesofOklahoma.com. Where do you live presently today?

LH: In Albuquerque, New Mexico.

JE: Tell us where you were born?

LH: In Cotton County, on my grandmother's land allotment where the West and East Cache come together below her property that I grew up on.

JE: Probably in a farm house?

LH: Oh, yes. Yes. One of those traditional houses that they built in that particular time for the Indian community that has a porch similar... We all had similar kind of houses across the country. My grandmother loved flowers and trees, so we had a big yard that we had to maintain. And my grandfather...they raised me. I don't know if you knew that. When I was born, was right after the Great Depression, and everybody was still struggling.

So, my father went to California looking for a job. He was Irish. He went to California looking for a job and my mother then went to work for Indian Health. And at that time, if you worked in Indian Health, you lived on the campus. So, she had to live in a dormitory and stay there to do her job. So, my sister and I always were with by grandparents and they were the people who raised me.

JE: I wanna to point out that I think it was actually Temple, Oklahoma?

LH: Yes.

JE: I noticed there were two notable people who came from Temple, Oklahoma: LaDonna Harris and Pepper Martin, who is a baseball player for the St. Louis Cardinals in the '30s and '40s. He was known as the Wild Horse of the Osage because of his daring aggressive base running.

[laughter]

JE: So, you're right up there with that.

JE: Let's talk about your mother. Your mother's name.

LH: Lily Tabbytite Crawford.

JE: She grew up in that area?

LH: Yes, uh.

JE: What kind of a personality did she have?

LH: Well, she was really reserved. That population went through this transition from living in your culture to having to go outside of it and work and participate. So, I think it was hard on that particular population. She was very good looking and I had some great aunts who were the same age as she was. They all ran to give in, they were great flappers, you know, they had that look about them, the haircut and the clothes. She did go to Indian boarding school for a short time but she didn't like it and so her mother took her out. But, she was rather timid even when I got older because she had to make those steps outside of the community that I think really formed her personality.

JE: Mm-hmm. Did you draw, as you look back in your life, something from her or your grandmother maybe that you were raised…

LH: My grandmother.

JE: Mostly your grandmother?

LH: Yeah, my grandparents. Yes.

JE: Yeah.

LH: She would come and visit and, of course, when I got older, she would take me Lawton and we would buy great clothes. I was always well-dressed between her and grandmother, who made me clothes. But as I got older and really wanted to dress up, you know, a teenager, she would take me and she would get the clothes for me. She took very good care of me in that sense.

JE: And your father's name?

LH: Don Crawford.

JE: What kind of a personality did he have?

LH: You see, I never got to know him because he left about the time that I was born…well, after I was born. But I was an infant so I never really knew him though he corresponded with me from time to time. I have letters that my grandmother, his mother, would write to my mother and ask me how I was doing. I did know or I at least met my Crawford grandmother. I would go and spend a week or two when I was about five years old or something that age. I got to know her and then my aunt Audis who was there with her and then they moved off too to join my dad in California.

JE: Your mother was Comanche?

LH: Yes.

JE: She was full-blooded Comanche?

LH: Yes.

JE: And then your father, he was Irish descent.

LH: Mm-hmm.

JE: So you're mostly Comanche but a little bit of Irish. Is that true?

LH: [laughs] Yes.

JE: Does the Irish ever come...

LH: Oh, yes.

JE: ...and blossom through?

LH: [laughs] Yes, it does. [laughs] It does.

JE: And then you said you have a sister.

LH: Older sister.

JE: She's Billie Carl Evans. So, you can trace your ancestry back several generations, I believe?

LH: Yes.

JE: Back to Ten Bears [Comanche chief].

LH: Yes.

JE: And what is the story there?

LH: He represented the Comanches in negotiating with the federal government from time to time. He had a great reputation as an orator. You have to have certain skills, you know, to be able to do that. So, he was recognized for that. "Medicine," we would call it, because that was his medicine. He could communicate well and he represented us on many occasions when we went negotiating with the federal government.

Comanches was the last tribe to be brought back to Oklahoma. You know, we have all of these military bases from Arkansas to New Mexico. About every 500 miles was a military installation after the Civil War to make sure that they could get control of the Comanches, Kiowas, and the Cheyennes and some of the Navajos, you know. They have a trail of tears incident as—as well. My grandmother's people were at Palo Duro Canyon, just south of Amarillo, the military—I can't remember the general's name but he was well known in the Civil War.

They had all these military men, like Custer, who wanted to make a name for themselves. So, this is one of the ways they did. It was to come out after us. By that time, the Comanche's had really grown and they had all these kinds of horses. It was stated in some historical documents that every man, woman, and child had at least 500 horses. Of course, we captured them from the Spanish early on and we became great horse people. That's how we could dominate the Southwest pretty much at one time.

So, there they were and they were hiding in the canyon. The general was familiar with how to maneuver them out of that because he heard about the transition. So, they brought them up and told them to put a—what they could carry and they marched them from Amarillo, Texas, back to Fort Sill. What would happen when they captured some

Comanches, they could be in captivity for a while or surrounded by military. And they would be able to steal a horse and run away.

So, what they did, they ran all of their horses, 7,000 horses over the cliff at the Canyon. And then they had to walk all the way back to Lawton, Oklahoma. People later in history came and took the bones of the horses to make fertilizer. So, that was my grandmother's story. My grandfather has stories too. Of course, grandmother converted to Christianity quite early on and she was one of the first people to help build the church. The Deyo Mission between where Lawton and Cache where.

Her family took their land allotments. My grandfather's father was a Spanish captive by the Comanche's who became a great warrior and participated in the Adobe Walls incident. Comanches and Cheyennes were going to Albuquerque to raid and they ran into this little encampment. So, there's a great story about Adobe Walls. Grandfather told me this story and since we don't have any written history, you have to explain all the environment in which the story takes place.

Later on, Fred and I went out and looked at the site and it was just like grandfather's. You'd almost think that there was a picture taken of it to tell the story that he participated in that incident.

JE: He was a great storyteller then, wasn't he, to...

LH: Oh, yes he was.

JE: ...be able to tell the little details?

LH: He went through all of the great details. It was fun to listen to.

JE: What a great story to hand down to the generations.

Chapter 03 – 5:55
Strong Family

John Erling: You grew up surrounded by very strong women, which must have helped you later on.

LaDonna Harris: Oh, it did. My great grandmother on my grandmother's side too, she was a very strong woman. I always admired her, she lived in Cache and she was surrounded by my great aunts and uncles. She was so like a queen. She sat in a big chair because she's quite elderly at the time and she had a cane. I learned to pay attention to elders because they would pet me and tell me how pretty I was or something sweet and also connect their kinship to me.

I needed that kind of affection from them and so I learned how to behave. If you laugh at silly or talk, they'll send you out to play, so I learned to sit and listen to the women

gossip and get to play. She was the matriarch of the family, my great grandmother and then my grandmother took the responsibility and everybody showed her the same honor in different ways. They wouldn't smoke around her. They would behave, all my great aunts and uncles and her children as well.

JE: Is there a natural respect for the elderly in the Comanches, is that...

LH: Yes.

JE: ...inherent of their culture?

LH: Yes and their knowledge and the fact that they live so long. If you became older that means you had good medicine and you lived right.

JE: So there's tremendous respect then of age.

LH: Respect, yes. Mm-hmm.

JE: You learned to speak the Comanche language. You learned the culture, traditions of the Comanches and so you were speaking English and Comanche at one time. You probably still speak Comanche.

LH: Um, very poorly. I don't use enough, only when I'm correcting my children.

JE: This must have been fun as a youngster, you grew up in this large family...

LH: Yes.

JE: ...and aunts and uncles and cousins and many family get togethers.

LH: Yes.

JE: It had to be a joyous time.

LH: Yes, we were down in Cotton County and they were up between Lawton and Cache but around holidays, we'd make the journey really easy. My grandfather loves to tell that he had the first car in Cotton County. So here he was, you know, in his braids and his Horace Cartwright hat and kerchief. They always wear a kerchief. That was his tie so to speak. So he would drive us and particularly we had to go to the cemetery for memorial day and do all of those things.

We went back and forth and then we would have all kinds of cousins come and spend time with us in the summer time down in Cotton County. The reason we're in Cotton County, when they opened up a reservation in Lawton, all the people came who needed land. All these people from outside the state who's coming to get land, this kind of the last opening of lands in Oklahoma, an outbreak of small pox occurred.

Grandmother lost a child and my great grandmother lost a child. My captive grandfather went down and selected the property for my grandmother and grandfather both because they were all involved in all of these loss of life. He remembered enough to put land where there were waters so that's where the Cache Creek and it also had a natural spring on the property. He did really well but then a lot of the Comanche tribal people were in that area as well so that we had another opportunity to be around Comanche people.

JE: The first house you remembered, did it have electricity, plumbing and all? Tell us about it.

LH: No, it wasn't and, um, there's a great story of how real electric came about the time I left home, I guess. But it was a fine house actually. Grandfather would—the only time he hollered at us was if we didn't shut the gate, so the chickens couldn't get in grandmother's yard because she wanted to have grass. A lot of the Anglo people that lived around us, they just swept their yards.

She had to have grass and flowers, so one of our chores was to water those plants in the evening. Grandfather would go and draw water and put it in a large tank and then we would, according to our size, take a bucket and take it and go water her plants. That was one of our activities in the summer time. In the morning, my grandfather would get a watermelon, cantaloupes, or something and put them under the tree to keep them cool.

So when we get through with our chores, he would cut the melon and we'd all sit around and eat and of course, get juice all over us. And be dirty and tired from playing and whatever we were doing that afternoon, so then we'd take of a bucket of water and pour it on each other so we could go to bed and none could get the sheets all dirty. [laughs] But, it was kind of a ritual and it was just a lovely way to end the day too. The sun was going down when all this was happening and we were ready to go to sleep.

JE: So electricity, when it came...

LH: Well, my uncle went and worked in a war plant in Wichita, Kansas. He came back and he took an old windmill and could charge a battery. So we had a battery radio and lights. We had, you know, one light hanging down. It didn't charge enough and when we walk from the school bus to come from school, we'd listen to the radio. It was during World War II, of course, and grandfather was listening real close because I had an uncle in Germany and he followed the war.

It was interesting how he could interpret it. He could tell you where the troops were and what they were doing. He was a great admirer of General McArthur and Chris. We were all involved in the war. We would look for planes and when the enemy might come, just in case. My uncle, my grandmother gave him some some land, he built a house and it was close enough that we could walk back and forth like children anyway.

I had three cousins over there, one the same age as myself. We would dress up like Nyoka of the Jungle or something and go down play on the creek. Our little cousin got into the war too but he was a Japanese. He would attack us occasionally. We played on the creek all day long until we got hungry and come home. It was fun growing up. In the summertime we always had a house full of cousins and the like.

Chapter 04 – 4:12
War and Church

John Erling: Referring to the war in 1941, December 7th, you would have been ten years old, do you have any recollection of that day or hearing about it?

LaDonna Harris: Yes, because we had the radio at that time and neighbors came over to listen to it. And of course of the charge didn't last, the battery didn't last that long, but we would come home from school and we would want to listen to *The Lone Ranger* or whatever serial was on. And papa would come in and say, "Get away from there you kids..." in Comanche. He was telling us he had to listen, you know, about the war so that he would be informed, I guess.

One of the reasons too, he was in what they call True Bell, which was an all Indian group made up of Comanches, Kiowas, and Cheyennes. When they brought them to Fort Sill, some of the younger men were running off and stealing horses from the Texans. Texas sued us one time to try to get paid for the horses that we stole. So in order to stop it, Scott, I've forgotten what his title was, but he was here at the Fort Sill, and he came up with the idea of having an all Indian military group to keep those younger people occupied too, their uniform sort of like World War I German uniforms, really elaborate.

Papa became one of them. None of them could speak English and they couldn't speak each other's language. Some, they could communicate with the Kiowa's, particularly, and they had to give the commands in sign language. So it's a real historical role that he played at that time, which saved Fort Sill and all of the other Forts then were close down, that were from Arkansas down to Mexico.

JE: So they had an active role then?

LH: Yes, uh-huh. And fortunately, the Mexican war, the war with Mexico.

JE: Mm-hmm.

LH: They were just getting ready to send them over to fight in that war, and it came to an end.

JE: Mm-hmm.

LH: So he missed active fighting.

JE: I think you mentioned earlier it was your grandmother who joined the church.

LH: Mm-hmm.

JE: Tell us about that experience. What denomination was that?

LH: It was Northern Baptist.

JE: Okay.

LH: The Southern Baptist haven't found us. It was a federal government policy to encourage different denominations to come and recruit us, I guess. And they came in great numbers so we had all kinds of denominations.

JE: These were missionaries and I guess?

LH: Mm-hmm. Oh, yes.

JE: Coming to you, and that's how the Baptist Church was started?

LH: Mm-hmm.

JE: Did they try to change your culture?

LH: Well, our church wasn't as bad about that. But I didn't like the first preacher who came because he was saying, grandfather, he's going to go to hell. And I knew that wasn't stuff okay, because he was a good person. He did all these wonderful things. But grandmother help started church in Walters. We had a little church there and most of us were related. They cleaned up an old factory kind of plant that was on one of the tribal lands, and one of the family homes and they cleaned it up, but that's where we went to church later.

Though he was Anglo.

He and his wife both got involved with Comanche culture. They translated hymns, his wife could sing the songs, Mrs. Hope. She had a little portable piano that she could carry around and she would play the piano. So we had a wonderful thing, but papa would sit outside. He would drive us to church, but he would sit outside and maybe smoke a cigarette. Maybe that might be the only cigarette he would smoke for a month or a week or so, and wait for us very patiently. Then we'd go home and he would set out and sing his peyote songs on the front porch and watch the sun go down.

JE: So in that church, it was a combination of Comanches and Whites?

LH: No, the congregation was all Comanches.

JE: All right, but in your church, there was some discrimination that went on?

LH: That went on. Yeah, I felt it anyway.

JE: Who is discriminating against you?

LH: Well, their minister basically. Like the minister who is at Deyo Mission because he was saying that the culture was bad, preaching that kind of thing. So I felt that was a discrimination and I've always felt that way. As a child I felt that they were talking against grandfather and what he was sharing with us was so beautiful and then this person says that he was all wrong.

JE: So the first discrimination you ever were aware of was in church?

LH: Church. Yep.

JE: Interesting.

Chapter 05 – 2:14
Bless Their Hearts

John Erling: Now, you have blue eyes, lighter skin than many Native Americans. And you realized at an early age that that actually made a difference.

LaDonna Harris: Yes, it did.

JE: Did some people think you weren't Native American?

LH: No, they all knew 'cause in Temple—we went to school at Temple.

JE: All right.

LH: You know, they were little tacky names and teasing every once in a while. But my cousin put an end to that. Somebody was calling us a gut eater and she ran over and picked him up and threw him down, so he quit saying things like that. But I went home to grandmother and was all upset about it. She said, "Oh, sister. You have to understand, he doesn't know any better. He's pitiful. Just think of him because he didn't know anything about Indian people…

JE: Yeah.

LH: …and he didn't know anything about Comanches particularly." He's uninformed so she said, "Bless your heart". In Oklahoma, we love to say—if they're acting out or something you can't help but bless his heart. [laughs] So I learned at a very early age, which is in all the work I've done, helped me see when I was Washington. Bless their hearts. They don't understand. I said all. So it helped me not to be angry. She said, "Don't get mad because you're losing when you get mad." Figure out why that person is acting that way and if they're wrong, you can say well, bless their heart. Don't be mad 'cause you've been beaten by that person 'cause they're able to make you angry.

JE: I think we say, "Forgive them for they know not what they do."

LH: Yes.

JE: So that's the concept of that. Right. You're quoted as saying, "I filter everything through a Comanche values."

LH: Yes.

JE: And you've done that your entire life.

LH: Yes.

JE: But you were baptized in the church.

LH: Yes, only to satisfy my grandmother. I was the only child that hadn't been baptized in the whole church. I finally gave up and was baptized in the horse trough. [laughs]

JE: Did you regret ever doing that, thinking "I didn't do it for me, I did it for others?"

LH: Yes. I—I absolutely did. I didn't take it as you would as someone who was giving themselves to that. But it was because I'm afraid I was embarrassing grandmother because she was so well thought of in the community and by the ministers as well so.

JE: The Depression started 1929, continued to the end of the '30s

Chapter 06 – 3:45
The Depression

John Erling: Do you remember...Would it have had any effect on your family?

LaDonna Harris: Well, for some reason, it didn't seem to affect us.

JE: Yeah.

LH: I don't know exactly why that...

JE: But I suppose, you were growing your own vegetables-

LH: Yes.

JE: ...and food...

LH: Oh absolutely.

JE: ...and you always had access to food and that was one of the things obviously, people would be standing in line to get, but you had that.

LH: Mm-hmm. And because of the land that this great-grandfather chose for us, it was quite productive and we'd get to grow crops on it that put us through the years and we had animals, pigs and cattle and horses and dog and cat. So, it was a very well working farm and grandmother always had a major garden, that's one of the things I remember so well of her. When she became older, I would be her horse and she took me up to that little garden plow and I would pull it for her and she would make a rows and plant. And we always had fresh vegetables. We were really well-off in relative terms.

Several times, I remember people coming through the county. We had a house that was- sharecroppers that had built a little house that were helping grandfather and my Uncle farm. They left. They found something. They got better off and so grandmother wanted to brood her house for her little chickens. Then, we got the other half and I—Ann and I—and was our playhouse. So, when these people came through looking for work, if they stayed to work for us, they stayed in our little playhouse. We'd fix it up like a real house. I remember that so well and wondered what happened to them after they left us 'cause grandmother went on big way of feeding them...

JE: Mm-hmm.

LH: ...and being generous to them.

JE: Well, you learned a lot from those role models...

LH: Yes.

JE: ...didn't you? I can't help but thinking to myself how you never ever- ever had to wonder if you were loved.

LH: That's right.

JE: And then you've met a lot of people in life and seen children who always wondered if they were loved.

LH: Yes.

JE: And you never had that feeling.

LH: No. One time, I doubted myself and I'd tell the story—I don't know if it's in the books that you read, but when I was in the first grade and going to school, I was scared to death going to school. So when I got to school here, I found everybody was kin to me. Everybody who was Comanche, was kin to me. So I had all of these relatives. I went to school in the first grade, reader was Dick and Jay. "Here is what American family is." We were told that by the teacher and by the book. A mother, father, a son and a daughter and a dog and a cat.

JE: Mm-hmm.

LH: You probably had it too. [laughs]

JE: Yup. I did. All right. And I can see those picture right now. [laughs]

LH: And I thought, "That's not me." I didn't see myself in the story and that just worried me and I felt, "Well, I don't have a mother and father who live with me," so I worried about it for some time. I kinda got mad at my mother. She went off and left me. So, I went through that transition, then I came to realize that I really had a great life, that I had all these relatives. And I think, being a native American, an indigenous person, is you know that you have this support and this communal society that keeps you together when there's a rare bomb that we have problems [chuckles]. That helped me overcome it and then I started hearing some from my father and felt better about it.

I didn't have any image of him, but I did my mother and I was angry at her for a few months. That image got blurred for a while there for-- It took me a few months to get over that. I would lay on the porch and be angry at Mother and then I decided, you know she had to make these major changes come from this loving home and then have to go out on her own and not really educated. She went to school, but I don't know how many grades that she went through and went to work for the hospital.

Chapter 07 – 4:52
Dyslexia

John Erling: What was your dream as you were growing up? Did you have anybody talking about college or anything like that?

LaDonna Harris: No. The white picket fence was my dream. You know, the house and being a wife and mother and having children. That's what my dream was. I—I can remember the white picket fence 'cause you learn that in school too, and that was what I imaged would be successful.

JE: Didn't you have a difficult time learning because your dyslexic?

LH: Yes.

JE: Talk to us about that.

LH: Well, being dyslexic, you can't read and you can't spell 'cause you take information—lot of people, I think Einstein was, people like that were dyslexic—but what you see gets translated or meddled in your brain. And I thought I was so dumb—because my aunt, we went to school together and she was a year older and, uh, a grade higher than m-myself—that I couldn't spell. My first experience in school, what I did, I memorized the word. And also because of the little spot or turned corner or something, I found a way to satisfy the teacher without really doing what was expected of me. All through school, I did that same thing.

I would study the teacher and figure out the, you know, that she wanted this kind of information and I would give it to her more verbally and she would get after me, after the test, mostly they were women. The test I would take and she said, "You can't spell," and said, "Why don't you go back and try to learn to spell?" Because people didn't know what dyslexia was at the time. And I just thought I was so dumb and I'd asked my Aunt, "How do you spell so and so?" We're doing homework and she'd say, "Oh, look it up in a dictionary." And I said, "If I could look it up in the dictionary, [laughs] I wouldn't ask you how to spell it." So, it was really hard to be or do in school but I had learned how to satisfy my teacher enough that they knew that I knew the subject.

JE: So, by the time you got into high school, you pretty much had that mastered?

LH: Yes.

JE: And it was not to hold you up through high school at all?

LH: Mm-hmm. That's right. And then I had time to be involved in school activities. I was in the, um, glee club and the band would get to go to the football games. And so, a friend of mine and I said, "Well, how could we go with the band?" So we talked them into letting us be the flag girls that would parade around with the flags and wear the little white boots and

all of that and get to go to the ball games. [laughs] So, we'd have to figure out how to do things in a different way but do it that fit what people needed and wanted from us.

JE: I just wanna mention this. In a way, you were raised to be maybe politically aware and point out that Indians were not allowed to vote until the passage of the 1924 Indian Civil Rights Act.

LH: Rights Act. Mm-hmm.

JE: It's just, you know...

LH: Na...

JE: ...this day and age, it's harder for us to believe that.

LH: I don't... Um, being the first people of the land to grandfather took it real seriously and of course Roosevelt was his idol in politics. We'd go to vote and soon as the doors are open to vote, we had to go about three miles to a voting place. We'd go and we'd play in the yard while our folks voted. But we grew up thinking that President Hoover's first name was "goddamn."

[laughter]

LH: That's what- That was what grandpa said, only he would curse him every once in a while when he had a bad day, he would come in.

[laughter]

LH: Boy, when Roosevelt died, I remember that very vividly. In school, how it'd affect the whole school system and then going home and papa just w-was so sad. He became again tied to the radio and, of course, he run away from Indian boarding school so he would say- tell me that once, "Granddaughter, I wished I could write." He could draw his names on checks and things. My mother and my sister bought Elite magazine and Life magazine for him, so he would call me over and say, "Now, tell me who these people are," and I tell him. So, he would listen to the radio then he could visualize and, of course, not havin' the written language, you have to use your creative imagination a lot.

So, he followed the war like that. And grandmother came to visit me in Washington and she had met Lady Bird Johnson when she was campaigning for Lyndon and McAllister, as a matter of fact. So, she, being the Comanche that she was, she gave Mrs. Johnson a shawl. Mrs. Johnson said, "Well, when you come to Washington, Ms. Tabbytite, I want you to come visit me at the White House." So, she came. First time she ever flew, they was just a wonderful thing and, of course, all of the senators wanted to meet her and they all made over her. We'd take her to the senate dining room and Vice President Humphrey was make up for her quite.

JE: Okay. So, you'd already been in Washington by that time?

LH: Oh, yes. I've jumped on you there.

JE: Let's get you to Washington because...

Chapter 08 – 8:44
Fred Harris

John Erling: In high school you met somebody...
LaDonna Harris: Yes.
JE: ...by the name of...
LH: Fred Harris.
JE: Fred Harris. And didn't he run your campaign for turkey queen?
LH: [laughs] Yes and I lost.
[laughter]
LH: I hold it against him.
[laughter]
JE: It was the first of many campaigns that the two of you...
LH: Were in.
JE: ...were involved in. You were married out of high school or shortly right out of high school.
LH: Yes, right out of high school. His folks lived in Lawton and I always had to come up from Walters and catch a bus and come up and my mother would drive me out to his folk's farmhouse and then he would catch a ride and come down and that's how we kept up our relationship for so long. And then decided, "Well, this is not gonna work. Let's get married." So we did.
JE: Are you close in age?
LH: Yes, he's just months older. Let's see, he's November and I'm in February.
JE: Okay, so you're basically the same age.
LH: Mm-hmm.
JE: You get married and then what happens, Fred goes to school?
LH: Well, he went to college. See, he was a year ahead of me. I had a period of living with a great aunt and my sister in Bethany. So I spent the summer with my sister and then I stayed and went to school at Putnam city. And I dated the student body president.
JE: Oh.
LH: So when I went to Walters, the war was over, everybody's coming home. I went back to Walters and my aunt and I went to school there in Walters. I asked her I said, "Well, who's the student body president?" And she said, "Freddy Ray standing over there." And I said, "Oh." He impressed me. He told me he had a job at the *Walters Herald* and that he had cattle, had two cows and uh, he was a chicken judge.

He showed me his ribbons. I was so impressed. He had won so many ribbons for different kinds of chickens that he showed. That impressed me and he was a big FFA

scholar and he won a prize for his speech in high school. The FFA teacher and his wife invited me to go. He had to speak in Dallas but regionally won the regional but lost the national.

JE: You're talking about Fred all the time here?

LH: Fred, yes. And he always said he's gonna be a lawyer. So when we decide we're gonna get married, he was already a year in college. So we went to OU. We were housed in one of the houses where after the war was over, the returning military, it was pretty skimpy, little trailer type house. That was a little bigger than that and had a communal bathroom but did have laundry rooms right across from the stadium.

It was really kind of exciting. He was working as a printer. I got a job working in the library. Did that for a long time until we had our child and then I babysit for the military children that were in that compound. Then they closed that down and built something for the athletic department and we went and rented rooms off of a floral shop. We made a deal with her that if we did some work for her, she would discount the rent.

We really wanted funerals because she really needed help for funerals to put the flower arrangements all together. We thought that was really weird of us to do that. My daughter went to the nursery school and then a woman who worked at the nursery school said that she was taking four of those young children to her farmhouse right outside of town and would I be interested. I said yes. I had asked my daughter 'cause she wasn't really happy where she was at. So this turned out to be just great. She was so wonderful and just had all this great care.

Fred and I both working and of course he was so smart, he was a grade A student and top in his class and everybody came to study at our house because of Fred's notes and having discussions. Even in law school it was the same way. So I always said we went to college because I was exposed to all of that. And then he would try out some of his theories or what he'd learned in anthropology or about the trees and he would tell me what the leaves were and I would help memorize them too. He'd go through that before he had his examinations.

JE: You knew the material as much as he did... [crosstalk]

LH: Yes exactly.

JE: ...before he went out to take his test. What year are we talking about approximately when he was at OU?

LH: It was late '40s, I think. [crosstalk]

JE: Okay. So this time period is the late '40s...

LH: Yes.

JE: ...that we're talking about. Then Fred graduates from OU. How does he decide to run for the state legislature?

LH: One of the lawyers who went to law school with him they were gonna start a law firm. Then he got drafted for the Korean war. His partner did, but Fred, because he had a child, wasn't recruited. So we went to Lawton and he started with a law firm that was already organized really well. They were great people and they certainly helped me socially get acquainted in the community, but we did all the things that you're supposed to do when you become a citizen of a community.

He joined a club which is totally unlike him but he got a lot out of it. Elk's Club and then I joined an older women's group, Lawton Women's Forum, that was what the organization was called. They kinda took me under their wing too 'cause they didn't have young people in and we joined the historical society and we lowered the average age of the board too. 60 years. [laughs] 'Cause we were so young. But they were so pleased because we were interested.

Then of course we saw a lot of my folks. Our first house, my mother was about two blocks from us and my in-laws, Fred's folks, were well more than five blocks, I think. The children grew up with family all the time.

JE: Let's name your children.

LH: Okay, Kathryn is the eldest. Kathryn Cornell [unintelligible 00:05:33] and Byron Harris.

JE: And then?

LH: Laura.

JE: And Laura works with you now, doesn't she?

LH: Yes, Mm-hmm.

JE: So Fred is...

LH: The US, yeah but how did he get interested? Well, when we went to Lawton then he was starting his law practice, our state senator died. By that time we'd been there about a year. There was a lot of talk who's gonna run the state representative, announced that he would. So Fred was talking to his law firm and our banker who'd become a social friend and they said, "Why don't you run Fred?" 'Cause he was a big democrat, head to the democratic party in the student at OU.

His dear friend was head of the republican party and they would have a little radio show and talk about the state legislature. So he had that kind of reputation before he left school. So they encouraged him to run and he did. And when that seat in of the state legislature, he had lived there a long time and was well-known, but something about the way we campaigned worked.

JE: It was a team, wasn't it? You were out there working.

LH: Yeah.

JE: This jumped out of me. They referred to the two of you as Freddie and the Indian.

LH: That's right.

JE: Did you take that all right or... [crosstalk]

LH: Yes, I took it all right. It was an older state senator. He was trying to be affectionate. He was just so burly eastern Oklahoma guy. Kinda rough cowboy looking kind of guy. And so when Fred was elected, of course we had been so close all through law school and going to new community and now he was doing this. He would say, "Come up to the legislature." He was so wise. He had studied all about what was required of a senator and he was the youngest senator that had served at that time.

So Dawn Baldwin, who was the president of the senate asked him to share a common living room at the hotel. They both had rooms and then had a studying room. He would invite me up at that I could sit in a chair by his desk. And it was fascinating. And then his committees, he wanted me to come hear his committees, so I would find a babysitter. I had great aunts who would come and babysit for me, who lived in Cache. They loved to come and take care of the kids. I would go and stay a couple of days. I was the only wife that did that. I was the only woman around and they all came to see Dawn Baldwin because he had so much political power.

It was during the dry days of Oklahoma and they would bring some alcohol. So I would mix drinks and act as a hostess to their little common living room. So, I'd be time to go to dinner, this-they call-- senator said, "Well, why don't we ask Freddie and the Indian come have dinner. Take them out to dinner." [laughs] So we'd go to dinner and some of the younger senator said, "Quit bringing your wife around all the time," but he became dependent on me to interpret people for him. So that's what I did. I would sit around and listen and I was very comfortable. And they would be comfortable with me.

They became comfortable with me. The weren't accustomed to it but they took me in and we would go and have dinner when I was up there and do something with them. I loved the state senator. I just really liked—It was so intimate to-too.

JE: Right.

Chapter 09 – 4:00
Discrimination

John Erling: As I hear you're being so outgoing, there was a time though when you were younger, you were kind of stoic and maybe shy?

LaDonna Harris: Yes.

JE: And not ready to come out of your shell?

LH: It was hard to, and he helped me basically.

JE: So Fred helped you do that?

LH: Yeah. Well, he recognized and then we read up on my disability. He was very sympathetic and being in Lawton and in the new town and getting acquainted, we depended on each other to introduce ourselves to each other's friends. So, we became a couple there and then we started integration of Lawton. That's part of...

JE: Right, and I— and I just wanna make an observation here because all these people were taken with you too as a couple...

LH: Yeah.

JE: ...because you had the kind of personality. They weren't as much taken with you because you were a native American as when you got to Washington.

LH: That's right.

JE: That was a big draw but here it was his...

LH: Yeah.

JE: ...face than your personality.

LH: And of course you have to remember, television had just come in. No women were in any state legislature, so there weren't Whites around. I was there and I was accepted by the older members of the Senate 'cause they just liked me I think. [chuckles]

JE: You had charm, let's face it. I'll call it what it is, okay? You were living in Norman in the early '50s?

LH: Yes.

JE: And you got introduced to civil rights?

LH: Yes.

JE: And the discrimination?

LH: Yes. Oh, yes, when we came out with a lot of equal, but separate-

JE: Yes.

LH: -but, all you did in the law school Fre-Fred was there at the time, they had a rope, velvet rope that all of their students were over here and then this one African American sitting there that was separate, but equal. That was bending the rules really. Oh, you was trying to do something, but it looked and felt so terrible, the isolation like that.

JE: Right. And then of course, Ada Lois Sipuel challenged that in court.

LH: Yes.

JE: And she stews about that discrimination. I've interviewed her...

LH: When?

JE: ...son about that.

LH: Uh-huh.

JE: And how she would come into the classroom thinking that she was gonna sit anywhere, "No, you have to go away up to the top and sit by yourself."

LH: Yes.

JE: But that was challenged and so, when you heard about all the discrimination of blacks, you didn't hear much about the discrimination towards Native Americans.

LH: Mm-hmm.

JE: Did that bother you?

LH: Well, I came to understand it. I would say that there was open discrimination against black people, but it was more subtle about Indians. Everybody in Oklahoma was part Indian, they claim to be part Indian. So that you didn't openly discriminate like separation. I think they did in real early times, but by the time I came along, we were accepted, but we learned later that 75% of us were dropping out of high school. So, we didn't know what we could do. That was when we started Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity but back then we were talking about discrimination. So, it was *covert* discrimination while it was *overt* to the African-American.

JE: I got the same. My father would say, "Politics was in church, but it was so fine we couldn't really see it" and that's what you're talking about.

LH: Yes, exactly, uh-huh.

JE: Right. Sometimes, that's so hard to fight...

LH: It's hard. I-It is.

JE: ...than the one that's so blatant.

LH: That-That's right. 'Cause you blame yourselves, "Something's wrong with me, 'cause we're proud to be Native American in Oklahoma and look at our seal, look at our flag, everything is, you know, we were part of it. But then, so something must be wrong with me." It was so subtle, it was very hard to do and like harder to as you say overcome. Well, we learned some strategies later on.

JE: Did you feel discrimination even as you and Fred were marching on your way to Washington and running for election?

LH: I– There was one club I wanted to join in Lawton when I first moved there and they didn't accept me so...

JE: Really?

LH: ...I was really taken aback by that. That's when I j-joined the older club, women's club.

JE: And you knew it was because you're a Comanche?

LH: Mm-hmm.

JE: Or any native [crosstalk]?

LH: Any native—any native. And I had really great support as who were nominating me, but they turned me down so....

Chapter 10 – 6:20
Campaign for US Senate

John Erling: Fred runs for governor and he loses.

LaDonna Harris: Yes.

JE: Let's move ahead, he then decides to run for the Senate in 1964, and here is this young whippersnapper...

[laughter]

JE: ...running against Bud Wilkinson, the former coach of OU.

LH: A great white hope. [laughs]

JE: He was a great white hope. He could have been president of the United States.

LH: Yes.

JE: What made Fred think he could run and win against him?

LH: He just believed in himself. And no one gave us a chance, I mean, when they talked about it, all the old pros, because he was so well-liked and he had his television show, he made more money than the president of the college, he was everybody's darling 'cause he helped us get past our Okie-syndrome about having to leave the state for California or the depression that the state went through and so he was kind of the new image of Oklahoma, and he became a nationality personality from being a good coach, but Fred was convinced he could do this. So he talked to different people, we sat down, we talked to everybody available because Kerr's death...

JE: Senator Kerr...

LH: Mm-hmm.

JE: ...died.

LH: And that's why there was a special election.

JE: Yeah.

LH: So, it was a strange campaign. It was hard but we went to every town in Oklahoma, uh, he went to every town, I went to half of uh, with him, and then I could tell that my children were getting needy and I'd go home and be mother for a while and then come back and, I was confronted—I would ask people to vote for him and one woman got after me and said, "What are you doing in politics?" And I said, "I'm supporting my husband." But, you know, it wasn't all that accepted for the role I played.

JE: You were a female...

LH: Yes.

JE: ...being involved.

LH: Yes.

JE: And that's what that woman's... [crosstalk]

LH: Remarking and...

JE: Right.

LH: ...he would always, when he would do his little television political speech, invite me to come on and introduce me, I wouldn't say anything, I would just be there so that this became the way we operated and then his classmates at law school were so close, they were the ones who made a commitment that he would take out a loan from our bank and they would commit like $25 a month or something to the campaign to pay off our campaign debt, and everybody thought we had Kerr money because young Kerr, one of the Kerr men were for us, and then one of his staff helped him organize throughout the state.

He knew political people in each town and we'd drive there and they were already notified we were coming so we would have a gathering to shake hands and find a person who would lead that particular community, and we just out-worked him, that's how he really won it, and then I think the telling speech at the closing of the campaign, oh, the other thing too, President Kennedy wanted Wilkinson, head of Physical Activities for Youth...

JE: Right.

LH: ...you know, he did that for a Democratic president.

JE: Mm-hmm.

LH: He was so well thought of, but he was more conservative than everybody thought, politically conservative.

JE: Hmm.

LH: So one of the things Wilkinson did, used the Roman Empire collapse because it had too many social programs. That was one of his statements, so Fred had a big rally here in Oklahoma City he said, "My opponent said this," but why they really collapsed was all the athletic or the shows that they put on [laughs] in the arenas, that was what caused the collapse of the Roman Empire, and they got news and then Vice President came and he helped Fred...

JE: Hubert Humprey.

LH: ...Hubert Humprey, he became our great champion then and was our lifetime friend and then Johnson was coming, but he had been discouraged about doing anything with Fred, we couldn't set up anything, we came to the fair in Oklahoma City, but he was gonna meet with other elected officials, so Fred's press guy just put the phone, his speaker in front of the President and says, "What are you gonna do for Fred Harris?" And he said, "Hmm," it kind of got him off guard and he said some great Texas things, he says, "Well, we'll win this race and take the coonskin and hammer it on the door and bring home the bacon." I mean a whole bunch of things [laughs] without saying I'm gonna support him. He said all these but it came out as a support...

JE: Mm-hmm.

LH: ...and we used it as a support, and then we had little Harris headliner addresses and Wilkinson had all these women folk and well tailor-made clothes, so we came out with our little handmade dresses. When we were trying to think of a slogan for the women's group supports, we were saying, "What rhymes with Harris?" We came out with harlets, there's harlets and we came up with crazy things like that so headliners became and they got prints of Fred talking to Johnson and different kinds of headline stories where Harris did this or Harris did that and that was our Harris headliners, and our children were close.

We had a song [laughs] and my grandmother got involved, my Comanche grandmother, she loved it, but Cowboy Pink Williams was the Lieutenant Governor at that time, we said, "Well, Kaku [grandmother in Comanche] what did you like most about camping?" And he said, "I like that Pink Cowboy." [laughter] She really got into it.

JE: Yeah, that had to be a lot of fun, then I maybe point out that Fred talks about that whole campaign in his oral history here on VoicesofOklahoma.com if you want to make a reference to that. So, to a defeated Bud Wilkinson...

LH: Uh-huh.

JE: ...who as I understood, never wanted to talk about football when he went out into the X and Os, which is what people wanted to hear from him and he then...

LH: Mm-hmm.

JE: ...and it's probably an important decision on his part not to talk that way.

LH: That's right. Let me tell one more thing about what we did was different too. We got women involved, we realized that women haven't been involved and so, for instance, using his classmates in law school, they would have coffee clutches and women would come. When women were involved he would change the attitude of men who thought they knew all about campaigning and wanted to tell you what to do. They would behave differently. So it's the first time that women were involved in a campaign in a way that just made that kind of difference...

JE: Mm-hmm.

LH: ...that's how we got around and I think how we won it.

Chapter 11 – 6:38
Oklahoma for Indian Opportunity

John Erling: When does Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity come into the story? Did it come before you went to Washington?

LaDonna Harris: Yes, oh yeah.

JE: Didn't you organize it?

LH: Yes.

JE: All right.

LH: Well it came out of my experience in integrative law for African Americans.

JE: Okay, and out of that integration... [crosstalk]

LH: I learned some techniques, yeah.

JE: ...Norman came Oklahomans for Indian opportunity. [crosstalk] What was that about and why was it formed?

LH: We had heard 75% of our children were dropping out of school, western side of Oklahoma, so we said, "Why is that?" They must feel some form of discrimination so we've got to figure out how we can help them, work with... Our first attempt was to look at our children, um, we interviewed them. When we interviewed high school kids, if they made it to high school, they couldn't tell you how they made it, what they went through to get there, so we invited younger children, and they could tell you, said, "Well, we can't make straight A's." They believed they couldn't make A's, and we said, "Well, that young woman sitting next to you can," but the way they were talked to by their teachers, and I don't think the teachers intended it to be, but some way they picked up negative energy.

JE: Well, isn't it true that some teachers would call the Indian children squatters...

LH: Yeah.

JE: ...actually use Indian names...

LH: Yes.

JE: ...to make them feel... [crosstalk]

LH: Yeah.

JE: Right, so then the young Indian children saw themselves as the whites saw them.

LH: Saw them, yes. And that was the difference when I say it was passive aggression that was harder to deal with, and how do we help change that, so what we did, I visited a lot of schools and took books. There weren't that many books about Indians, but there were some really great books to these schools library, we'd give them a gift of books and I would talk about, "Now, everybody should learn because this tribe," whichever the major tribe was, where I was, "is here," and said, "You ask your Indian friends what they know about their tribe. If they don't know, then you go and read that book." And said, "You Indian kids better know about your culture and your tribe because your friends are gonna be asking about your tribe."

Just doing that and paying attention, the superintendents were embarrassed we came over in Eastern Oklahoma and they had a young, one of the major tribes, I think he was a Choctaw, and they had a big Indian headdress which was totally inappropriate for the

tribe but he didn't know the young man was embarrassed to death, but that's the kind of things we did at first and said, "Okay, that if you do something in your own community or in your clubs that you organized, or do something in school, then the group can pick someone to go to OU and we will have OU day that lieutenant governor George Nigh would come and we made it an Indian appreciate day, and give them little certificates because they'd done something in their own communities and recognizing that and exposing them to the campus and having people talk to them about college, and it seemed to work, well it didn't work the first time, 'cause we said anybody could join that club, so we made it exclusively Indian club, then that worked.

We weren't afraid to make mistakes because there wasn't any literature to go by or to use, so it worked, that was our first project, and we organized the Western Service Day. We went to each of the communities with a large Indian population and organized that, and then we took on commodities, so many people were on commodities particularly over in Eastern Oklahoma and we organized these women to make a cookbook of how to improve what you could add to the commodity to make it more... [crosstalk]

JE: And why don't you explain commodities.

LH: Commodities were food that people that were low-income people could ask for them if they qualified for their income level.

JE: And what was it?

LH: Cheese, butter, it was great agriculture products that were overproduced, cheese, big old wonderful cheese and butter, but there was canned meats that turned people off, so that was what they had to work on, how to change that meat into some more attractive. [crosstalk]

JE: So you were able to come up with recipes to make it tastier.

LH: Recipes, so that organized the parents a little bit too, and then we started a pig farm, trying to look at economics. We organized the Western side of the state and came over to the Eastern side of the state, and at that time, the BIA, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, appointed their leader. Oh, we were so shocked 'cause we'd been for twenty years or so, electing our own, fighting about it, but we elected our own chairman and chief, whatever term. So, they were shocked to find that out, immediately turned it around, we got in a bit of trouble because I found out that members of the Congress also what district they were in would help choose the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the leader.

JE: Hmm.

LH: I didn't even know that, but letters that Fred got afterward and his papers in Oklahoma University that we read some of those letters that have—we were coming in here and—some people over in Eastern Oklahoma called us communists... [laughs]

JE: Yeah.

LH: ...'cause we were organizing the kids. We had youth groups and they were just wonderful. Then after we went to Washington, we had Sarge Shriver down, we had Fritz Mondale, Senator Mondale, we had, oh, head of the Health and Human Services for the administration. Anyway, we had great national people come down and that gave them more confidence. Then Bobby Kennedy came down, we told the kids at the school that they could invite one or two of their fellow classmates to come, so give them prestige in their school, because everybody wanted to come and see Bobby Kennedy.

So we decided that, since we learned how to work over here in Eastern Oklahoma, we should have a state-wide organization, so we organized a first state-wide organization for Indian opportunity.

JE: OIO it became known.

LH: Yeah, Mm-hmm.

JE: Does that still exist today?

LH: No.

JE: But you did a tremendous amount of work through that.

LH: Yeah, it just was marvelous what we accomplished. We changed the drop-out rate from 75 to 35 [percent]...

JE: Wow.

LH: ...in that period of time, just giving them some identity and some pride about themselves and talk about it, it's all right to be an Indian and enjoy your culture and people talk to you in your language.

JE: At some point somebody said to you, "What Indian problem?"

LH: Yes.

JE: "What Indian problem?"

LH: [laughs] 'Cause they didn't see it, and it's one of the hardest things to overcome. We had the children play the teacher, the Indian children and then teachers played the Indian children. The kids then talk like what they thought the teacher was saying, and the teachers just started crying, they didn't realize [crosstalk] what they were doing.

JE: Yeah.

LH: So we stopped that real quick. [laughs] Taught us a lesson that we learned from, 'cause we didn't know.

JE: Absolutely.

LH: Uh-huh.

Chapter 12 – 6:22
On to Washington

John Erling: So, you go to Washington. Vice President Hubert Humphrey, he was befriending you...

LaDonna Harris: Befriending me.

JE: ...right there.

LH: Yes.

JE: You were welcome by the Robert Kennedys. They lived near you...

LH: Yes.

JE: ...in Virginia, and the Knothole Gang...

LH: [laughs] Yes.

JE: ...Bobby Kennedy, Fritz Mondale, Joe Tydings from Maryland...

LH: Uh-huh.

JE: ...all elected at the same time. You met with the Senate wives. You met Ethel Kennedy, invited to their home in Hyannis Port. I mean, this... And it all took off.

LH: Just like that.

JE: And wasn't it partly because, yes, while you were an engaging personality, you were a Comanche and they were taken with the fact that you were Native American.

LH: Yes.

JE: Was that true?

LH: That's true.

JE: So, you had both of these things going you.

LH: Going for us. [chuckles] Yes, then because of my activity in Oklahoma, I had been involved in mental health and other things and of course civil rights. Well, Shriver then became a good friend and at the time that the War on Poverty programs went here in Oklahoma instead of going directly to the Indian tribes like they were every place else in the country, they were going to the county, and the county, who probably had the most prejudice against the community, wasn't sharing any of the resources of the War on Poverty Program with them, so we changed that. I was adviser to Shriver. I did all the things that the Senate wives should do, make bandages. The other Senator wives...

JE: Yeah.

LH: ...Mike Monroney's wife was the most outstanding member [laughs] of the Senate wives on making bandages. She came in at a different time, you know, a period of history, she was a little bit older than I. I just was appalled that we're using all this energy to do this and of course, the Vietnam War was on, but we didn't even have anyone talking to us. It was just

kind of you, go out there, and made these bandages and left. I did it all. I did it. And then I got involved with Shriver.

JE: Sargent Shriver we should point out was...

LH: Mm-hmm. Running...

JE: ...husband of Eunice Kennedy.

LH: Kennedy, yes.

JE: And he was a Peace Corp.

LH: And the War on Poverty Program and Head Start...

JE: Yes.

LH: ...was a part of. So, he asked me to testify before the House of Representatives for funding for the War on Poverty Program and I said, "Oh, gosh, yes," but the War on Poverty did help the Indians. The people who became community organizers then organized their own campaign and became chairmans of their tribes. So, we had this network of people that kind of had the same experience, but the other thing-- I was involved in the integration of Lawton, that got out in, of course, the way we campaigned as well, African-American community and our local people at home and Lawton recommended that I be m-made, uh, an honorary member of a black national sorority. So...

JE: Hmm.

LH: ...I was accepted. It's all the work that I did here that helped me when we got to Washington.

JE: Yeah.

LH: That people came to me and said t-that we want to honor your work in mental health. I got involved in mental health because Fred was on the Stateline Mental Health Senate Committee. I've toured all the mental health hospitals. I worked with the National Institute of Mental Health and got a reputation that way. Something about it...what worked for Oklahoma...

JE: So you say it prepared you.

LH: Really, yeah.

JE: There is a plan, isn't there?

LH: Yes, [laughs] it was. And then the friendship with the Kennedys. Um, I'll tell you one story about the Kennedy family. Ethel had me over for lunch one day with Art Buchwald.

JE: A noted columnist, Art Buchwald.

LH: Yes. He was also, uh, humorous as well.

JE: Mm-hmm.

LH: Ethel is a very good Catholic woman and she gave grace and she asked Buchwald do it. This is so Ethel. She said, "Art, who do you pray to?" He's Jewish. And he said, "Ethel, we had him before you all did."

[laughter]

LH: And-and at the same lunch and Kerry Kennedy, one of the children came up to me and said, "Ms. Harris, do you live in a teepee?" And, I said, "Ethel, what are you teaching your children?" And, I said, "No, honey, come and sit beside." I sit her on my lap and I just told her how I lived and said, "But we used to and that's my history and you know, that it's all right to have made a mistake." So when I left, she made a little card. Last month she called me and she was doing something about her father and she wanted my opinion on something she was exploring to publicize.

JE: How about that. Great.

LH: Then when grandmother—jumping back to grandmother's visit...

JE: Right, right.

LH: ... she met all the members of the Senate and that was great fun. We had made arrangements to go to the White House. My mother was with her as well and so my mother and grandmother went and Kathryn, my oldest daughter and Fred said, "You all are just getting too much publicity. I'm gonna go with [laughs] you—go with you to the White House." And I said, "Okay, come on." We went and she was so gracious.

Lady Bird gave us a tour of the White House and we have a-a official photographer of three generations of Comanches in the White House. And then the press said, "We'd like to interview your grandmother." I said, "Well, let me ask her." And I said, "Grandma, they want to interview you." And she said, "I don't know." I said, "You're so smart. You know all about politics." We talk about Adlai Stevenson. Fred couldn't understand that grandpa couldn't read because he had talked about all the people who's running for office. So I said, "You'd do well". And he said, "Will you help me?" I said, "Sure, I'll be right there with you if I have to clarify." She was just the greatest hit. They interviewed her about this and that. One person asked, "Well, Mrs. Tabbytite, you met with the Senate, you've met the Vice President, you went to the White House. What impressed you the most?" And she thought just a moment. She didn't look at me for help or anything. She said, "All these trees."

[laughter]

LH: So, she's coming...

JE: All these trees.

LH: ...from Southwestern Oklahoma. Trees are just down the creeks, and she said, "All these trees in Washington." [laughs] They just felt she was marvelous. And then we had tea with the Kennedy children. And Kerry Kennedy got to ask her more questions. And all the kids were there with their dogs. Ethel had it, especially for the kids. Kerry said, "Well, Mrs. Tabbytite, would you give me a Comanche name." So she named her the one who always asks questions. And today, Kerry Kennedy can say her Comanche name. [laughs]

JE: Isn't that cute.

LH: And we took grandmother to the National Arboretum and she took cuttings. And I said, "This is a federal garden. We're gonna get arrested." And she always did, wherever sh-she went, she'd take these cuttings. She carried a man handkerchief which she tied her coins in one corner. She dipped it in the pond and dampened the handkerchief and put these little cuttings to take back to Oklahoma to see if she could get them to grow.

Chapter 13 – 5:30
Testifies before Congress

John Erling: I just want to mention, you've alluded to it that you were the first Senate wife to testify...

LaDonna Harris: Oh yeah.

JE: ...before congress against a lot of attention. Speaker of the house from our great state Carl Alpert was helpful to you?

LH: Yes, oh absolutely. He wasn't gonna let me get hurt. I've watched hundreds of sessions but I've not ever participated and I didn't know if I'd be knowledgeable enough if they asked me some real hard questions, but I gave examples that I knew and that War on Poverty was helping and I told them about what we did in Oklahoma and that we used that money and how the tribes on the eastern side of the state elected their own officials and became now the largest contributors to the state of Oklahoma.

And I said, "That's what can be done when you have good programs like this." Carl was there and he was—[chuckles] he was so nice. I'd asked Fred, he said, "Just don't embarrass me," so I said, "Okay, I won't." So Carl came over anyway and afterwards Shriver sent me a bouquet of roses with a note.

JE: And the note said, "To the lady that made the house a home for the poor."

LH: Yes. [chuckles]

JE: Isn't that a great line?

LH: It is. He's so pretty.

JE: How good you must've thought about yourself. Did you read the speech?

LH: No.

JE: You didn't do any reading?

LH: 'Cause I...

JE: That was...you were dyslexic and I was wondering how that went.

LH: I can't read a speech. I can make points, you know, reference points, and I can go from there but, yes, that's always been a disability.

JE: I wanted to point this out. You and Fred helped the Taos Pueblo Indians retrieve their Taos Blue Lake and President Nixon is part of this story?

LH: Mm-hmm.

JE: Tell us the story.

LH: Well, I have to tell a little bit...Fred and I entertained White House fellows. It's a group of young people that are selected around the country to work in Washington in different departments, and they're called White House Fellows. All of them are, wherever they wind up. Well, we, for a couple of years had invited them to the house and we had some refreshments for them, and let them ask us questions.

There was a young woman there, Bobby Green Kilber, she wasn't married at the time. Bobby Green and she was appointed to the White House. Just out of that little one meeting, she called me and she said, "I want to have another visit with you," so she adopted me as her mother [chuckles]...that's an Indian way too. She had worked on the Navajo as a young lawyer.

So when the legislation came up, Fred was really working hard and of course Clinton Anderson was a very well known senator who had a lot of prestige. He was the head of the committee that the legislation had to come out of. So there was no chance of getting it out, we were told. And then visiting with her, she was saying, "I know that you all are working on the Taos Blue Lake," and said, "Why don't you come and talk to the president?" And it felt, "Well, Nixon?" [laughs] Yeah, being all Democrat. She said, "We'll see what we can work out." So I said, "Okay, let's try it."

She talked to the president and he assigned Lyn Garmet, one of his top advisers to meet with me. And I'd won him over, we stayed friends forever. So he said, "Okay, the president told me to make the decision," so I took that information and ran and made it bipartisan. Also, I've worked on my groups of women and religious group, my civil rights, made it a civil rights issue, a religious issue and a Native American issue so that it just wouldn't get stuck.

Fred had held up all the laws that were coming. They couldn't come on the floor until they voted on the Taos Blue Lake. And that was when the people from Washington said, "That was a strong hard thing to do," because he's battling against a really well-known senator and the senator said to his..."Fred, we don't mess with your Indians in Oklahoma and you shouldn't mess with mine." And then Fred said, "They're not yours, senator."

[laughter}

LH: 'Cause they were treating us in the Department of Interior, like natural resources.

JE: Yeah.

LH: We were the only human program in the Department of Interior. So that's one of the agencies we helped change.

JE: But Nixon did help?

LH: Oh, yes.

JE: Did you meet with him?

LH: Oh, yes.

JE: How did that go?

LH: Oh, it was wonderful. He was so proud. He said he's going to sign the bill and we had a ceremony in the White House, and it was during Christmas time. It was just beautiful. I get emotional just thinking about it. Bobby was there and all of the people that helped us was there, the Taos people came and we sat between them and the secretary of interior.

He signed the bill and he said the most wonderful things, it's on our film, about how all the Taos people that live there and this was their sacred place, and said, "It's a great thing here at Christmas time, we're giving back their land." And he was proud he did it. Fred though, he [Nixon] said, "Do I have to give Fred Harris a pen to sign it?"

[laughter]

JE: But what a wonderful moment that was.

LH: Oh, it was.

JE: And all these things that you've been organizing and doing paid off at last, didn't it?

LH: Yes, that had a ripple effect. You know, they had a termination philosophy in the government. They'd terminate tribes and make them not a tribe and the Menominees had been treated that way, so, they were trying to get back their tribal government. We got involved in that and was able to be helpful and Aida Dear, who's coming to Oklahoma next week, I'm going to host her. She stayed with me. She was a young Menominee woman who came and lobbied the Congress, she stayed with us. We had receptions for them.

The success of the Taos thing made the Menominee thing and then the Alaskan claims was the third big issue. So it just was a ripple effect. People had more courage and confidence that maybe they could bring about change.

Chapter 14 – 3:40
Pres. Johnson Jealous

John Erling: While you were in Washington, President Johnson was jealous of the relationship you and Fred had with the Kennedys…

LaDonna Harris: [laughs] Oh yes.

JE: …had that war going on…

LH: Bless his heart.

JE: ...then one journalist said to Fred, he was the only person in Washington who could have breakfast with Lyndon Johnson, lunch with Hubert Humphrey, and dinner with Robert Kennedy.

LH: [laughs] That's right. It was like that, and Humphrey, the vice president, was our mentor, really. He took us and we went to Korea with he and his wife on an international trip in Germany. He just did special things. Then an Oklahoman came gave tours of the office buildings. If he were there, he'd come out and take pictures with him, if he wasn't there the staff would make over us, and many times he'd call Fred and say, "I've got a good looking woman here. I'm going to go have dinner, you want to join us?" [laughs] So Fred would come and we'd have dinner. I mean, whatever his assignment was for the evening, we'd go and participate in it. It was just a marvelous life.

JE: I grew up in North Dakota, Eastern Minnesota...

LH: Yes.

JE: ...and the guy went back and forth and Hubert Humphrey was bigger than life to us then and still was until he died, as a matter of fact. I'm going to jump ahead...

LH: Yes.

JE: ...here in 1968. President Johnson does not run for reelection, and Hubert Humphrey runs for President. Fred and Fritz Mondale our campaign chairs. Kathryn was at Harvard at that time in '68, and she became part of the anti-war demonstration. As we know, Vietnam was so divisive and right now...

LH: Oh yes, watching them.

JE: ...Ken Burns documentary on Vietnam are going on right now, but the kids would come to your house, and they wrote their telephone numbers on their arms. Tell us about that experience.

LH: I was quite moved by it, and Kathryn said she was coming to participate in Marching, she said, "Can I bringing some friends because they don't have places to stay?" And I said, "Sure." So they made beds throughout the house, on the floor, whatever we could make do, and then the next morning they got up. We fed them breakfast and they were putting their names and phone numbers on their arms and I had their handkerchiefs and put vaseline on their face, put that in a little bag so if they were teargassed they could...ahhhh...that was the atmosphere

JE: That moves you right now, doesn't it?

LH: Mm-hmm.

JE: Yeah. They went out to be attacked by their own government.

LH: Yes, and of course Kent State had happened so they could expect anything.

JE: Yeah. Hubert Humphrey considered Fred for vice president, and then he ultimately chose Ed Muskie, but Fred talked about how Humphrey would go between the two rooms. You were there.

LH: [laughs] Yes, me and Kathryn we were sitting in, Byron was there too, and we were watching the demonstrations outside the hotel where the mayor was just beating the kids up and...

JE: This is in Chicago?

LH: Yes, then over here with Humphrey going back and forth and we had people telling us what was happening. So Fred couldn't take it [laughs] anymore. He said, "Humphrey, go ahead and take Muskie. I would love to introduce him."

JE: That had to be a big letdown, I would think.

LH: It was for all of us.

JE: Yeah, that had to be tough to take.

LH: It was tough, but he felt like, you know, addressing the national convention and then also being chairman of the party was what he did instead, and I rode out with Humphrey to the convention center 'cause he was running late. Fred was so concerned and pushing him because he was about to speak at the convention center. So anyway, we drove through all of those horrible demonstrations. Just made you sick at heart.

JE: Yeah.

LH: Then I sat with the Humphrey family, and I remember the dress I wore, Fred was so great in introducing Muskie, and then we started a whole different life for us again of this chairman of the party.

JE: Fred was chairman of the Democratic Party?

LH: Democratic Party.

Chapter 15 – 8:04
Break-up of Marriage

John Erling: But you ran for president, too.

LaDonna Harris: Oh, yes.

JE: You became a candidate in 1980, Barry Commoner...

LH: Mm-hmm.

JE: ...a well-known environmentalist would run as president and you as vice president on the Citizens Party ticket. Weren't you really is trying to start a third party.

LH: A third party, yeah.

JE: Tell me about that.

LH: Well, people were getting disenchanted with democrats and republicans so Barry Commoner, who was a professor, had all these wonderful ideas about the environment.

They asked me to come to the Citizen's Party Convention and I went with Charlie Loha, who was a Osage lawyer in Washington and Oklahoma lawyer. We went to the convention and they wanted me to run for vice president with Barry Commoner.

And I said, "Oh, no. I have to talk to Fred." So, Fred said, "Well, you have to do it." I said, "Yes, but you will fuss about me going," 'cause we weren't separated all that much. And I said, "I'll be away a lot." And he said, "Oh, no, no. You wouldn't forgive me if I said no." So, I had the kids talk to him to make sure they're really saying yes. And it was awful [laughs]. It was like getting out of bed and trying to run with somebody tied to your shoe strings together.

Uh, him and my associate who was running Americans for Indians Opportunity, both of them resented that I did it. I don't know why it was and it was awful to have that on the back, and, of course, we were already then public and was traveling around the...

JE: They resented that you were running?

LH: Because of my relationship with both of them.

JE: Oh..

LH: I was doing something outside of them. [laughs] In OIO and AIO, Fred was always involved in it, and after that, he felt comfortable with what all we were doing. And this was something outside of our relationship. So that kind of led to a long story, but he didn't take it very well. But we did, reasonably well, forgotten what the percentage was. But then there were two other parties trying to start a third party too.

So we kind of were going for the same vote. And it's almost impossible 'cause every state has a different methodology to start a third party. The cost and the organization that you need, it's almost impossible to do.

JE: When Fred lost in the primary of '76, you left Washington, you moved to the New Mexico, you felt comfortable there, and Fred taught at the University...

LH: Mm-hmm.

JE: ...of New Mexico. You'd become that candidate, but then your interests were different. Fred wanted to can tomatoes, I guess.

LH: Yes, raise chickens.

JE: And raise chickens in New Mexico, but you wanted to go back to Washington. That's what caused the tension and, ultimately, the breakdown of the marriage.

LH: Mm-hmm.

JE: Is it true?

LH: Yes, well, that campaign taught me two things. I was having trouble with the campaign and I told my daughter, Kathryn, and my co-worker at OIO to come and save what's wrong with this. Something's not quite right at how they're using me. They're not using me well. After they said farewell, I said, "Well, what do you all think? I feel kind of excluded from some of the decision making, as if they are treating me like a president's wife."

And they said, "Well, you're acting like it." [laughs] So, that's when I got more aggressive in the campaign. Then the next thing was, we had organized the Council of Energy Resource Tribe and I was travelling around the country, talking to the tribes about what they could do, and having these seminars about how to get control of your own natural resources, and we set up the council. Out of that activity, we set up the Council of Energy Resource Tribe. And we got the federal government all changed around to be involved in it and the tribe's right to negotiate their own deals. Because we found out they were the worst with the federal governments negotiating for us.

We were the worst contracts in the world, not just in the United States but in the world. So, we got some learned people from these couple of universities and had these forums to educate the tribes. And the tribe, it was harder for them and say, "Well, we can't do that. The Bureau won't let us." I said, "You all are the owners of this, you can do what you want to do. You can even say, 'Get them, like, out of here BIA.' But you may need them." Because the BIA were not that sophisticated anyway. It wasn't that they were out of [unintelligible 00:04:13] trying to cheat the tribes, but they were not sophisticated.

Here comes the international corporation with 10 lawyers and they just bribed these guys into anything and then give them front money which was to the tribe of people that had to make the decision along with the Bureau's recommendation. It's just wonderful what you see happening with the tribes now. The Utes was one of our main tribes now. They've got a hotel in the middle of Denver, everybody have used what we taught. It lived for about 10 years and then everybody learned how to manage their own affairs and they didn't need counsel anymore.

Peter McDonald was in charge of it when he was in his heyday. He was the chair of it. Oh, it worked out beautifully. So that lots of wonderful things happened and they all renegotiated their agreements with these companies. And we did timber tribes. We brought specialists in because the timber companies were just coming and clear cutting and they weren't reforesting particularly in the northwest. So, we did a whole bunch of things and then all of a sudden you saw the environment, what are you gonna do for the environment?

JE: Mm-hmm.

LH: We didn't have any protection. We did the federal government, so I worked with—she became my dearest friend, still is. She was second in command of EPA. So, we went to her and she said, "I'll just make administrative decision, tribes can create their own environmental standards." So the tribes have higher environmental standards than the state or city that they're close to. So that has worked out. That was happening, we were successful and everything was going well, so I wasn't paying attention.

And I knew, I knew in my head that when he stepped down from all of that adoration...

JE: Mm-hmm.

LH: ...of senate, there was gonna be trouble. And I, um, was watching for it and then I just... Before all of these, the head of the Energy Department, because that was one of the department we were changing their attitude and their relationship with the tribe, he asked me to come to Washington and be the tribal... [laughs] And Fred just kinda blew up and he hurt my feelings about... I run away from home.

He said... Oh, I shouldn't say. He said that it was only because he was interested in me physically, that's, uh...this is...all this time he would compliment me on how...

JE: Yeah.

LH: So, anyway, I run away from home for about a day. He came back and there was just kind of that...

JE: Yeah.

LH: ...tension. And I know it was that he was gonna be home. He was building a garden, he had bought a calf, and we had to court over it. And the pig, and we had chickens, and a duck, [laughs] and we had, uh, this beautiful place on the Rio Grande River [indiscernible 6:54].

JE: Yeah, but that was tough to go through that divorce, but you went to Washington and for ten years to bring it around to present day, you and Fred have a good relationship today.

LH: Yes.

JE: And with his wife, Margaret.

LH: Yes.

JE: And you have a grandchild.

LH: Yes, great grandchild.

JE: Great grandchild brings everybody together.

LH: Yes.

JE: So the two of you can reminisce about old times and it's a whole big family...

LH: It's just wonderful.

JE: ...that gets together.

LH: Yes, it's just a wonderful relationship now, because it was so good and rich throughout our lives. I guess, I didn't need him as much.

JE: Yeah.

LH: I found my own voice, because he was my voice.

JE: Yeah.

LH: And because of my dyslexia, that's part of my thing, I have to get to know people and I can't read a speech for one thing.

JE: No.

LH: So, he was my voice and I gradually got independent of it, I guess.

JE: Yup.

LH: And that's...

JE: You grew, you grew, you grew, and you must be a great example to women who listen to your story that they maybe at one time been shy and retiring but they found their voice...

LH: Mm-hmm.

JE: ...maybe by listening to you.

Chapter 16 – 5:40
Native American Success

John Erling: You ran with some pretty stout women in '71. You were along with Betty Friedan,...

LaDonna Harris: Yes.

JE: ...Gloria Steinem, Fannie Lou Hamer, Shirley Chisholm, Bella Abzug, formed the National Women's Political Caucus.

LH: Yes.

JE: I mean, you were finding [chuckles] your voice big time with them, weren't you?

LH: Yes. That helped. [chuckles] It helped a lot.

JE: Names, Angie Debo, Oklahoma's great...

LH: Yes.

JE: ...historian. She wrote the book *Still Waters Run Deep*. She wrote about the injustice and unfair treatment of Oklahoma Indians and named names of known Indians and how they had taken advantage of children, adults, and their land allotments. I just wanted to insert her name because...

LH: Oh, absolutely.

JE: ...she was so great.

LH: Yes.

JE: N. Scott Momaday.

LH: Oh, yes.

JE: You know him?

LH: Oh, yes.

JE: Writer, artist, teacher.

LH: We—when he got the Pulitzer Prize, we had a book party for him in Washington DC, and then he invited us to New York when he received it. So we were with him...

JE: Right.

LH: ...Fred and I. And he's still a beautiful friend of mine. He's not as well as he was, but he is still there.

JE: And, we have him in his oral history on our...

LH: Oh, good.

JE: ...website, VoicesofOklahoma.com. Quickly, the status of Native Americans, status of the Comanche Nation today in 2017, how would you describe it?

LH: Oh, it's just decades of growth and changing things. The way that we were set up. The governments that were imposed on us, the way we governed ourselves, created a lot of internal problems. We've looked at that. The Eastern Oklahoma was so poor when we started Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity. Now they're the second largest contribution of resources or money to the state. So, everything is changed. It's a whole different world.

People are going to college; they're graduating. Tribes are having tribal colleges. All of that is looking to education as one of the eras that you need for your bow. This changing is so radically changed. And that's why we started the Ambassadors Program because, in the '60s, I had this network of people who had been in the War on Poverty Programs. We could work with them, and that's how we got so many things done.

We don't have it now, so we looked out and we choose young people from twenty to thirty-five years old to be ambassador. We give them some philosophy. We take them to Washington DC to understand the culture there. We take them on an international trip, and as of this year, half of our class is indigenous people from the US, and the other half is from the [chuckles] world.

JE: Mm-hmm.

LH: We have Japanese. We have Australian and, of course, from New Zealand; we have a sister organization in New Zealand. Bolivia, Peru, really active down there, it's just so much, because Bolivia has an Indian president and we've gone to his inaugurations. We want to be global as well as improving nationally and be part of the global economy.

JE: Pointing out from the '60s to today, the component of casinos came in.

LH: Yes.

JE: Is that good? Is that bad? Does it have both sides? What is your view?

LH: Well, philosophically, I'm against any kind of gaming operation to support the new government, but I would f-f-fight to the death [chuckles] for their tribes to do that. And they've done it so well. It's beyond belief. Those tribes that w-we didn't even know about in California had just come up and now they're both—the economic force as well as the political force, there's problems with it still. Some tribes have disenrolled some of their members because they're getting a little greedy. That's some of the strainful things that comes with it if people will try to ooze people out of there community.

They're really losing s-something terrible when they take that attitude. And, that does drive people to—uh, of course, the gaming is owned by the tribe; by all the population. Every citizen of that tribe is the owner of that operation and it has to be well managed. And, apparently, they have done so well here in Eastern Oklahoma better than we have

on the Western side. We've had small operations. The Comanches have two operations instead of focusing on one...

JE: Mm-hmm.

LH: ...and make it as attractive as the tribes have here in the Eastern.

JE: Oh, here we have the Creeks and their...

LH: Choctaws.

JE: ...Spirit Casino, the Choctaws, the Chickasaws, and the Cherokees.

LH: Yes. They're reinvesting, and that's why they've been so...

JE: And they're actually building roads beyond...

LH: And the hospitals.

JE: ...the sovereign ground.

LH: Yes.

JE: And hospitals. So...

LH: And, hospitals.

JE: ...it is good. And buying back land that was probably taken from them one day.

LH: Absolutely. That's the most wonderful thing. And, you just see this nationwide. The world is changed [chuckles] here too in such a wonderful way. And, so that—oh, it's just amazing to talk to young people now. They're all talking about going to school. They're going to college. They're getting careers. We're encouraging them to look internationally as well about the possibilities of working internationally.

And also, we want to be a part of solutions because we've been viewed as an Indian problem all our lives. And now, we're a part of the solution as the tribes here in Oklahoma have done. They are now a part of the economy. They're part of creating new things. That is all change, and hopefully, we have changed enough. Just keeping ahead of what's happening as we're doing with our international, and that's exciting. We've all learned from each other.

Peru and Bolivia corporations are coming down because all of the new finds are on indigenous land. We have to learn to use indigenous so that—they're having struggles that we had early on with companies. They've invited us down to speak about it and I've taken a couple of people from here to go with me to tell them how we organize the Council of Energy Resource Tribes and how to negotiate with the government, get them on to your side and help them see it's in their self-interest if the tribe does well and not just be exploited.

Chapter 17 – 6:14
Indigenous People

John Erling: I know you laid a lot of groundwork leading up to this era, that you have Native Americans coming up to you and say what you did.

LaDonna Harris: Last night…

JE: We're both getting tears right now, [laughs] which you did for them. They're stronger today. Their children are stronger today. Isn't that true?

LH: Last night, they came up and cried with me.

JE: Yeah.

LH: They were so happy to see me, that was just a loving…

JE: Here on campus University of Tulsa and you showed *Indian 101*, which is a great documentary. I have it and so they did come up to you…

LH: Yes.

JE: …and talk to you. Here's another name that you must respect and that's Wilma Mankiller.

LH: Yes. Oh, I knew her well. In the last stages of her life, I was part of it, and, of course, the Cherokees remembered that I helped them be able to elect their own officials. So they honored me in a parade and stayed at her house and it was a wonderful occasion. I knew them but not as well as I… and I continue to work with her husband.

JE: Yes, Charlie Soap.

LH: Charlie Soap.

JE: We have her also on VoicesofOklahoma.com.

LH: Good.

JE: I just wanted to mention the current edition of *Time Magazine,* September 18, 2017 "First women who are changing the world." It has fifty women in here who were the first, in any of their areas, and so were you a first, first, first. Could have been almost the first lady, maybe, too.

LH: [laughs]

JE: You know, but then one of the reasons you're in Oklahoma is you're receiving the Changing World Prize presented by the Woody Guthrie Center and you'll be doing that Sunday night. You served as an honorary co-chair for the Women's March in Washington in January. That's one of the reasons they're honoring you as an "advocate for equality, peace, and social justice. Miss Harris follows in the footsteps of Woody Guthrie as a guiding force for positive change in our world, among your many many honors, we're giving this honor as well." Ain't that special?

LH: Oh, it is wonderful because we followed his life and know his son, Arlo, very well. He's one of our champions, always been. So it's even a bigger honor because of that that we admired him so.

JE: Can you even say, as you look back, an accomplishment that you're the most proud of or several?

LH: I guess, starting Oklahomans for Indian Opportunities led me to do all these national things and international things now. That experience was so rewarding and I'd learned from the people I met that makes you conscious that, as we say now, at this period of our history that we want to be at the table when they negotiate. We're negotiating on resources, trade, or those kinds of things but we're not negotiating on how to get along with each other. So, in our ambassador's program, we're in training that they can be diplomats to be able to negotiate things that have wealth for all people following their own cultural values because we're one with nature.

And as the President of Bolivia, who is indigenous himself, says, he has an empty chair in his cabinet, the chair for mother nature. So, they're using their cultural values because we think that we're related to all things, rocks, and mountains, peaks. We know that we have the DNA of the stardust so that- even before the Anglo scientists discovered it. We've said that long ago our relationship with "All things", we must remember that now as we meet international people that we're related to them and we're always been embraced by indigenous people worldwide. It's been a wonderful experience to go on with it. Ainus of Japan, for instance, who just got recognized by the Japanese government that they're of indigenous people. They would never say that before...

JE: Hmm.

LH: ...and now, they're saying it. Now, they come and be a part of our program as real as inviting us to Japan.

JE: Explain that term indigenous people. What does that mean?

LH: Indian people.

JE: Right.

LH: Native people.

JE: The Japanese are using that as well.

LH: Yes. It's first people. First people...

JE: People for that land.

LH: Uh-huh. And now we're- got a voice at the UN, we're part of the UN, that takes our grievances and helps us publicize them. We learned about each other. I've just got the magazine that we're part of. Reading about what events are happening. Guatemala, what's happening in South America, as well as Africa and India. Indigenous people are finding their voice because they've been colonialized so long. It's really amazing in some of the

countries where the colonial government had them and never dealt with them exactly. They was kind of on their own, or they're always outside of everything.

And that was true in Bolivia, they're 85% of the population and they were ruled by this upper-class group of Spanish descendants. So, finally, when that government decided they were going to privatize water, the Indian people said, "You can't privatize water. Water is life. No one could own water. It's for everybody's." So they demonstrated for about two years and, finally, the government resigned and they elected a indigenous person as a president. So, that's what's happening around the world. It's really been remarkable

JE: It's remarkable as I've been listening to you to remember that you're 86 years old.

LH: [laughs]

JE: You don't seem to be eighty-six.

LH: [laughs] Oh, thank you.

JE: And I don't know what they are supposed to be but I've seen people who are sixty-six who seem to be older than you and you've been blessed. I think you referred to rather your Comanches lived to be long livers, as you say.

LH: Yes, yes.

JE: And that's in your DNA.

LH: Yes.

JE: Forefathers led to be at least that age and into their nineties.

LH: My grandfather was ninety so we have a good lineage. My grandmother w-was eighty-eight, I think, when she fell and kind of set her back some but all of that energy, I've inherited from them.

JE: Yes, and you displayed that today. So, then, how would you like to be remembered?

LH: Oh, that I love people and I believe everybody has medicine which if you get to know them that you can benefit from knowing them. It's what I strive for and what I live off of. It's what keeps me young.

JE: Yeah, young is for sure. Thank you so much.

LH: You're more than welcome.

JE: It was very nice of you to share this today. I appreciate it very much.

Chapter 18 – 0:33
Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation-funders. We encourage you to them by making your donation,

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