

Beyond the tragedy podcast

Clark alumna is changing the plight of missing and murdered indigenous women and girls

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Introduction

(music)

Rhonda:

Welcome to Penguin Chats. I'm Rhonda Morin.

(music)

In this edition, I'm joined by Clark College Foundation Chief Advancement Office, Joel B. Munson, who has a remarkable story about a woman – a Clark College alumna – who has managed to do something that no one else has ever been able to do in the State of Washington.

And now, the rest of the nation is watching.

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(music ends)

Joel:

You know, Rhonda, I think that one of the best parts of our job here at Clark College Foundation is finding out about alumni and supporters who unabashedly fly their Penguin Nation flag and want the world to know how proud they are of Clark College and the impact it has had on their lives.

Rhonda:

I agree, we constantly talk about the transformative power of a Clark College education on our alumni, but when you see it in action it truly is a marvelous – and often powerful – thing to witness.

Joel:

Which brings us to the story of one such proud Penguin by the name of Gina Mosbrucker.

(Soundbite)

37:51-38:07

“No matter who you are, or where you are from, if you believe in yourself and you want to be great that day then you just need to follow what ever your religion is or whatever your mantra is.”

Joel:

Now -- In proper deference, Gina should be and is, of course, referred to as The Honorable Washington State Representative Gina Mosbrucker – from Washington’s 14th district. It’s a rather big district running east and west from about Camas to Alderdale and south to north from the Columbia river to Mt Rainer National Park – including the Yakama Indian Reservation – which is not incidental to our story, but more about that in just a bit.

By any standard, Representative Mosbrucker is – well, let’s just say she could give the Energizer Bunny a run for his money. She is tireless. She is fearless, And most of all, she is driven to make lives better for those around her.

(Soundbite)

19:40-20:01

“My mantra is I need to go and be great today. Whatever that looks like. I don’t know what its going to look like. It might be a great mom. It might be a great daughter, a great business person with my staff. I just wake up and say I’m going to be great every morning and then I do everything I can to get there.”

Rhonda:

Joel, obviously the representative has already accomplished a lot of these things.

She’s beloved by her family community.

She’s known as a successful legislator on both sides of the political aisle.

But what does she say helped formulate this positive, can-do attitude?

Joel:

As you can imagine, she attributes much of this to her time here at Clark College and also to her father – who she says instilled in her the importance of being positive and to think of others. In many ways her family’s story is one of those great, traditional American success stories that we hear about.

(upbeat music)

Born on a military base, her family really struggled to make their way financially. Her father finally left the military to help run her grandfather’s ranch. And in order to literally put food on the table, they turned to small business start-ups in their hometown of Goldendale – a convenience store, then a gas station, a restaurant, a hotel. Gina herself started a dance studio when she was just 16. Today, the state representative and her family have a successful small business empire that she’s very proud of and one that plays a very important role in the economic backbone of her community. (Music faded out)

Rhonda:

And I understand that dance studio is still open to this day.

Joel:

That's right.

(music)

Rhonda:

Not to take away anything from the state representative's many business and social accomplishments, but I suspect there's more to this story than Mosbrucker being a respected and beloved, high-achiever.

Joel:

You're right. State Representative Mosbrucker is receiving a lot of important attention regionally – and across the country these days. (music faded out) And interestingly, it all began with a phone call from a friend -- right out of the blue -- back in January of 2018.

The friend said “Gina, you have to fix this!”

And the “thing” her friend was referring to was the fact that there was no tracking of missing and murdered indigenous women – not only in the northwest, but across the country.

(music)

Sadly, Mosbrucker had to admit she really didn’t know anything about the subject, which was exactly the point of her friend’s phone call. The fact that a state lawmaker, representing a district that included a Sovereign Indian Nation – The Yakama Indians – didn’t know what was going on was troubling. (music ends) But what was even more troubling was that no one *else* in government could tell her just how serious the problem was.

(music)

Rhonda:

What do you mean, Joel? No one really knew how serious the situation was when it came to missing and indigenous Native American Women?

Joel:

As remarkable as this sounds, the truth is that despite the thousands of stories from families in the northwest and across the country about their missing or murdered loved ones there has been no official way to track this – or even investigate. No way to tell the stories of these women whose lives ended or were disappeared. Soundbite:

Soundbite

2:21-20:28

“There’s no national database for native American women but we have one for every other culture, for every other group of people.”

Joel:

The National Crime Information Center, a non-profit entity, estimates that in 2016 there were 5,712 reports of missing Native American and Alaska Native women. (music fades out) And a recent study by the Urban Indian Health Institute ranked Washington State 2nd in the nation overall for the

number of missing or murdered indigenous women. But, again, these are not official figures -- these are estimates.

(music comes up slowly)

It's almost as if these women never even existed to the world outside of the reservations and the Native American families who have been anguishing and asking questions for so long.

Rhonda:

As a lay person this is really shocking to hear. I'm wondering how Representative Mosbrucker reacted when she first learned about this?

Joel:

(music fades out) She was equally shocked – especially given her professional responsibilities, her personal mantra and belief systems. But as a state lawmaker, she really didn't know what she could do. She listened, of course, to her friend and made some inquiries to try and find out more about the situation. But, you know, lawmakers are very

busy people – many things they are juggling with; a lot of issues to address from many demanding constituents.

Rhonda:

So what happened next? What happened after that phone call?

Joel:

Well, this is where it really starts to get interesting – and if I admitted, a bit spooky.

(music)

Soundbite:

01:56-02:08

“In that same week I had rented a Redbox movie called Wind River, and I had just taken a break, we were in a very hectic schedule, so I was just going to take a break put in a movie, and it was what she had talked about!”

Joel:

The “she” being her friend who made that phone call out of the blue. *Wind River*, is the story of an FBI agent assigned to investigate the murder of a young Native American woman in Wyoming, and all of the obstacles and challenges around that investigation. (music fades out) And at the end of the film, the credits read “There is no national data base on missing Native American women.”

Rhonda:

Well those two things happening in the same week sounds more than a bit coincidental.

Joel:

You think? But wait, that’s not all. Something else happened that same week that moved all of this closer to what I call the realm of the *Twilight Zone*.

(drum beats and protest sounds)

Representative Mosbrucker was rushing into the Capital Rotunda in Olympia one day – trying not to be late for an important meeting – and she came across this demonstration complete with drums and

tribal members decked out in their beautiful regalia. And there was this enormous fishing net strung across the Rotunda with a banner attached to it.

Soundbite:

03:02-03:17

“Literally it was huge it was something I hadn’t seen something that big in the way of a fishing net and it said in letters “Native American missing and murdered women.” So after three signs, I thought I am called to do this. This is somehow gotta happen.” (sound effect faded out)

(music)

Joel:

As if these three “signs” as Mosbrucker calls them weren’t serendipitous enough – it didn’t end there. Moved by these circumstances, Mosbrucker made a late night phone call – the rotunda demonstration still fresh on her mind.

Soundbite:

03:37-04:08

I called Senator McCoy's office late that night because I was working late and said do you know how to get ahold of the people in the rotunda because after the three signs it said something needed to be done immediately and that it was eminent. (fade music out) And the legislative assistant answered late that night, and I expected to leave a message. And she said we have a tribal member here right this moment and I will walk her over to your building. So it was 8:30 until 10 that night when we had the first discussion. (laughs)

(music)

Rhonda:

That is absolutely amazing – the confluence of events. So Representative Mosbrucker meets a Native American representative. Tell us about that relationship.

Joel:

Representative Mosbrucker meets a woman by the name of Earth Feather Sovereign, a member of the Colville Confederated Tribes, and co-founder and

director of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Washington. (music fades) And she tells the representative something truly astounding.

Soundbite:

04:37-05:07

“One of the things Earth Feathers Sovereign had said that night was that she’d been asking for help for decades, she and her tribal members had been coming to the capital building every single year and asking numerous legislators and anyone who would listen for help. And so the point was, it was breaking ground, there was no background, there was no model bill I could copy or there was nothing to duplicate in Washington State and so we created it.”

Joel:

What Representative Mosbrucker created, with the leadership and guidance of the native tribes including Earth-Feather Sovereign, was House Bill 2951. Before we get into what exactly is in this bill, it’s important to know exactly how Mosbrucker and

her ardent fellow activists moved the needle from “Oh my gosh this is a horrible situation” to “now we can start to see these women for who they were and tell their stories.” But first, I want to give our listeners a heads-up, some of what you are about to hear is disturbing and graphic.

(music)

Soundbite:

05:08 -05:20

“And It started by just an eight-city tour across Washington State to make sure that we were listening to the tribes or anyone who wanted to tell their heartbreaking stories and was brave enough to tell their story. 05:20

05:34 –05:42

But the stories we were told they reflected violence and abuse and uh...poverty.

13:02 -13:12

We were finding – we found body parts next to a post office in the Yakama Nation right on the reservation. They've been there for years.

39:08-39:59

It has so many pieces to it. I remember one family in particular, the mom I had sat down with her and she said here is my daughter, here is a picture of her and it was heartbreaking she was a rebellious teenage daughter, she was Native American and she said I kept asking over and over can you help me find her she is missing. Well, she's probably ran off with her friends and she was like no she doesn't do that and she said no, I know who she is. (music fades out) So she herself sent out a search party with friends over and over cause she couldn't get help from the reservation and they found her and wolves had gotten to her and coyotes, so there were just bones and they did the DNA test and they reported in the autopsy that it was from natural causes.

(music)

Joel:

The situation is compounded by the fact that for many of these families, they really feel that the system has completely let them down, according to Mosbrucker and others. Imagine, you are looking for your loved one – your mother, your daughter, your sister, your aunt, your best friend – and no matter where you turn, no one wants or seems to be able to help. Initially, many of representative Mosbrucker’s fellow lawmakers thought this isn’t a state issue – this is a federal issue. So no one knows where to start. No one knows who’s in charge. No one knows what resources are available. It’s like a black hole that nobody wants to enter for fear of what they’ll find.

(music)

Soundbite:

12:50 -12:48

We kept hearing over and over from these families “no one calls me back. Nothing is happening. I don’t know where my child is, no one is looking. I don’t

even know if they are looking, whether its tribal or non-tribal. So I ask who did you report to first? who was the first person you contacted? And some would simply say “We didn’t report it because we knew nothing would be done. We would just look ourselves” or some would say we reported it and we sent pictures of them to Washington State Patrol and they never got uploaded. (music fades)
Here’s the email, here’s the 17 times I reached out to a state patrol office to say I can’t find my aunt and they said sure, and then they don’t get a call back.

(music)

Rhonda:

Joel, it sounds so frustrating and so emotionally overwhelming. How did Representative Mosbrucker approach this – how did she find the strength to enter this black hole – as you called it – when so many others had shied away for whatever reason?

Joel:

It all goes back to what we talked about at the start of this conversation. It has everything to do with Gina's own personal story – the things her father taught her all those years ago, the strength and confidence she has developed when it comes to how she sees her place in this world. All the hard work she has done to get where she is in life. In short, Representative Mosbrucker really believes this work is her destiny.

Soundbite:

14:00 – 14:21

“I think I feel called to do it. I think all of these issues you are talking about they are not issues you can just do. Or they would have been done, people would have known about these things. They would have address domestic violence where we are losing lives.”

(music)

15:20-15:45

I think it's bigger than me, honestly. I'm just super humble about it and I'm honored to carry it and its difficult work but I chase waterfalls and I ride horses and I just really try to find peaceful moments, and it's like you said, when you are caught up in the work, I'm not going to stop.

15:57-16:01

So I think its bigger than me and I continue to do it when I'm called to do it, and if not, I'll go home.

(continue music)

Rhonda:

In the case of missing and murdered indigenous women, Representative Mosbrucker didn't go home – to say the least. Tell us what she did, Joel? How has she and Earth Feather Sovereign and all of those affected families hopefully changed the course of history? What is House bill 2951? (music fades)

Joel:

House Bill 2951 was passed in March of 2019 – just a couple of months after Mosbrucker had her epiphany as she calls it. So you can imagine how much work she and other supporters had to do with a very short window of opportunity. The legislation required the Washington State Patrol to conduct, for the very first time, a study on how to increase the reporting and identifying of missing and indigenous women. The findings of that study were revealing. Preliminarily, they showed that at the time, there were approximately 60 missing indigenous women just in Washington State alone – and this figure is thought to be on the very low end of reality, and is expected to grow much higher when the more accurate numbers are released next year.

Soundbite:

06:24 – 06:48

“So in June, Washington State patrol has to give us that number and they’ve been touring all 29 tribes or making themselves available to try and get the

information, so the number you are referring to I am sure is very under-reported for many reasons, cultural reasons, and families that didn't want to talk about it and help that was asked for over and over for decades but nothing was done.”

Music

Rhonda:

So, we now have numbers – or at least some of the numbers of missing indigenous women – and that figure is likely to grow. What happens next?

Joel:

Awww, this brings us to Representative Mosbrucker's other important legislative achievement: House Bill 1713 which was passed last July. It actually creates the beginnings of an office with Washington State Patrol workers who will have the responsibility of reaching out to the indigenous communities to follow through with these reports and come up with plans and hopefully resources to try and find answers for these families.

The program includes new protocol for state agencies to follow when responding to these reports – and to receive nation-to-nation training so workers understand the law enforcement and governance structures of indigenous tribes.

(music)

Joel:

Representative Mosbrucker is the first to say all of this just represents the beginning of what needs to happen to find these women. But in the wake of this important work, something else has happened. State after state (even Canada) have heard about what's happening in Washington, and now similar legislation is being discussed or is taking shape across north America. (music fades out)

In fact, in the first part of December 2019, US Attorney General William Barr announced the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Persons Initiative at the US State Department. This initiative is meant to provide \$1.5 million in funding to attorneys

general offices in 11 locations to help coordinate investigations with state law enforcement agencies.

(fade in music)

Mosbrucker and others say at least now there is a pathway forward for some of these families to find answers.

Rhonda:

So, let's get back to where we started. The fact that State Representative Gina Mosbrucker is one of our remarkable alumni – and like so many of our graduates she is doing truly transformative things that have significant impacts not only on people in her own back yard, but all across the nation. What does she say about her time at Clark college? (music fades out)

Joel:

You just have to go to her various web pages and see how she feels about Clark. Her Clark degree is prominently posted right along-side her four-year degree from University of Washington. Although

her home is in Klickitat County, she comes down to visit her alma mater on occasions – mostly recently this last summer. She has been a big supporter in the legislature for community colleges and actively engaged with Clark’s past president. In essence, she says she owes much of her success to Clark.

(music)

Soundbite

16:15 – 16:27

“It started here. I had a really great political science teacher and you had a great program here and I fell in love with making change.

17:15 – 17:36

I had a great counselor, too. I had a really great counselor that I think I was a single mom and I thought how in the world was I going to get to University of Washington and that was my ultimate goal and you had a reciprocity which was amazing so I can leave as a junior and go straight into UW

and I don't have to retake classes, and she just said you can do anything you want.

18:15 – 18:38

That's why I love community college. You know I had 750 people in my class at Kane Hall at UW and it was like how in the world? But I love community college because you are able to connect one on one with your professors. You're able to have them know about your life to have them share their life. They just really inspire you to figure out what you love.

(music continues)

Joel:

And that's a really important point. In representative Mosbrucker's eyes, Clark gave her the foundation and confidence to do whatever she wanted to do – and what she wanted to do was make a difference.

16:27 – 16:47

I was going to go to law school and I actually went to Concord Law School and then decided in the middle I don't want to do this. I want to do something bigger than sit in an office and try cases. I want to make the laws that surround that. I want to be able to touch more things to touch more social issues. I want to make sure I can change the world.

(Music comes to an end)

Rhonda:

And change it she has. Joel, thank you for joining us here on Penguin Chats, and for sharing this personal look at Washington State Representative Gina Mosbacker, a remarkable woman and one of Clark's superstar graduates.

Joel:

My pleasure, Rhonda.

(ending music up)

Rhonda:

For more information on missing and murdered indigenous women and Representative Mosbrucker's personal journey to try and make a difference, go to our website clarkcollegefoundation.org and read the article entitled "Stolen Sisters" from the summer 2019 edition of Clark Partners.

There you'll find images of Representative Mosbrucker, Earth Feather Sovereign and the other activists who have worked to bring attention to this important issue.

Also, make sure to look at the painting acquired by Clark College Foundation, that became the cover for the Summer 2019 edition of Partners. It's a hauntingly beautiful work of art illustrating the tragedy of these missing women. The artist is Loretta Gould a Mi'kmaq from the Wayobah First Nation in Nova Scotia, Canada. We thank her for allowing us to acquire this important piece.

That does it for this edition of Penguin Chats. Thank you for listening. I'm Rhonda Morin

(Music and sponsor tag)

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