

# Clark College Foundation Penguin Chats Podcast

Headwaters of leadership with Clark College alumnus Sam Robinson

Written by Lily Raff McCaulou. Produced by Rhonda Morin, APR. Edited by Magaurn Video Media. Music from Universal Production Music. Graphic by Greg Holly, Acme Graphic Design. Penguin Chats podcast is a production of Clark College Foundation. Copyright All Rights Reserved © 2022

You can listen to Penguin Chats on our website by visiting [clarkcollegefoundation.org/sam-robinson](http://clarkcollegefoundation.org/sam-robinson) or wherever you get your podcasts.

Music playing

Rhonda Morin: The Chinook Indian Nation is made up of five Native American tribes that have lived for thousands of years along the lower Columbia River. An area that spans from Tillamook Head on the Oregon Coast, north to Willapa Bay in Washington and east to present-day Longview. These tribes share a common language—Chinook—and a rich culture that centers on water. Chinookan people built and then piloted massive canoes on the Columbia River. Up and down they would travel the Pacific coast, ferrying goods for trade, like modern-day shipping barges. Today, the Chinook are fighting for federal recognition—again, and the benefits that come with that.

Andy Palmquist: Penguin Chats is brought to you in part by Ginn Group, Schwabe Williamson and Wyatt, Vesta Hospitality, Waste Connections of Washington, Arnerich Massena and US Bank. Our corporate partners are helping make extraordinary things happen at Clark College Foundation.

Rhonda Morin: Sam Robinson, a Clark alumnus and Chinook member, sat down with writer Lily Raff McCaulou to discuss his ancestors. They talked about why Chinook people are still fighting for their rights, and how his years at Clark College, from 1980 to 1983, helped prepare him for tribal leadership as vice chairman.

Lily Raff McCaulou: So I want to start, I'm going to start just kind of asking you to set the scene for us. Because I know from speaking with you previously that you attended Clark right around the same time that you started reconnecting with your Native American heritage. So set the scene for us and tell us what was happening in your life at that time.

Sam Robinson: I had just gotten out of the military and spent four years down in Fort Ord, California. And that's where I met my wife of today, you know. Mildred and I decided we needed to move back up to Washington, you know, obviously, the people I was working for, really wanted me to stay and they tried to get Mildred to convince me, you know, but she said, "Nope, he wants to move to Washington." So they agreed to that, and I moved on up here and you know, I'll probably do an appointment for about two months, and then I got a job. And then as I got settled into the job, I felt that, you know, it's time to start taking care of, you know, take some of my benefits, and I decided to go to Clark, and so I went to evening school. So I worked full time, and then did 12, credit hours during evening school. And then flashing back, of course, I think it cost like \$60 or \$70, for full credit as a veteran, you know, pretty reasonable. But, so I came back up here. And then also, you know, the other thing that was in the back of my mind was connecting with the Tribe. You know, as a child, I always grew up around my aunts and

# Clark College Foundation Penguin Chats Podcast

Headwaters of leadership with Clark College alumnus Sam Robinson

uncles and great aunties and great uncles, and down in a little town called Bay Center on the Willapa Bay and, and I felt that, you know, I want to see what the Tribe's doing what the government of the Tribe's is doing. And so I started attending meetings and annual meetings, and life was good, you know, life was good.

Lily Raff McCaulou: You have members of Chinook Indian Nation on your maternal and paternal sides of your family tree. Was your Native American heritage a big part of your childhood? And can you tell us a little bit about that?

Sam Robinson: Well, you know, like I said, you know, I mean, hanging out with the great aunties and great uncles, they're the ones that really, you know, told the story. I didn't know them all, you know, but I knew two of my great aunties, and one of my great uncles, and I remember as a child visiting them and sitting in their living rooms, and they would be talking, you know, with my father about, you know, some of the old days. My uncle Clyde, you know, he had seining rights as a Chinook Indian back in those days, so he was able to fish and so, no, it's always good, my great aunties they were just lovely people, you know, good storytellers. So, it was always good to, you know, have that happening as I was growing up. And then, of course, later when I brought Mildred up here, I took her down to meet them and she had the ability to, you know, spend some time with them as well, you know, and they're very, very loving people. And you know, and then as a child, you know, you know, coming into Bay Center and there are certain times of year where, you know, you just enjoy being down there. One of them is in the spring you know, when you pull off the main road out there and you start smelling the smoke houses and all the fish. Everybody's smoking fish, you know, and you get over there and you're just asking, "Hey, uncle, uncle, when is that fish going to be ready?" "Oh, no, it's got a couple more hours." "Oh, come on, come on!" You know, so you're eager to get into that and, and just connecting you know, going down onto the beaches and so forth where our ancestors stayed, you know, and, and later on, of course, in life, I understood more and more about it. And even today. You know, you just keep learning, keep learning about Chinook, you know, in their honor.

Lily Raff McCaulou: Did you go fishing with your uncle?

Sam Robinson: I did go fishing, yeah, I did go fishing with my uncle a few times out in the ocean, you know, and we always did well. Also going clamming, we'd go out and dig clams, you know, right out in the Willapa Bay and, and crabbing. You know, I mean, the Bay was a giving place and still is and that's why they live there in that Willapa area.

Music playing

Lily Raff McCaulou: The Chinook Indian nation is actually made up of five tribes. They share a language, Chinook, and obviously their ancestral locations are close together along the mouth of the Columbia River. How closely related or intertwined are these tribes?

Sam Robinson: Very, very closely. I mean, we have several tribal members like for instance, myself, I'm Lower Chinook and Willapa because my third great grandfather, Thomas Huckswelt, he was a signer of that Anson Dart Treaty at Tansy Point, and he married a Willapa woman, Cha'isht, my third great grandmother. So very, very tied together. And some people have, you

# Clark College Foundation Penguin Chats Podcast

Headwaters of leadership with Clark College alumnus Sam Robinson

know, multiple, as many as three different tribes. When you're a tribe, you know, you don't marry your own people. So you gotta marry, you know, people from the area. So they're very, very intermingled, you know, we got like, probably about a little over 3,000 members in our nation, and a lot of cousins. You know, when I started reading off the names of who in the families that we're related to, you know, it's about five or six of them down in that Willapa Bay Area, that Long Beach Peninsula area. And it's always good, it's always good to know your cousins. And when we bring new people in, you know, into the tribe, when you know, one of our goals over the last few years is to make them more connected. So we require them to come in and get their enrollment, they have to come to a meeting to get their enrollment. And when they do we ask them what family they descended from, and then we start pointing out all their cousins in the room that day, you know, so you can really get to know and become part of the tribe. Because that's what it's all about, you know, being tribal was being connected, not just family bloodline. So it's always good.

Lily Raff McCaulou: Is that something that happened to you when you first started going to meetings? Did you meet family that you hadn't known was your family?

Sam Robinson: Yeah, it's always good, you know, it's like a family reunion. I mean, when you have the annual meetings, because more people are in there than normal monthly meetings, and you start seeing, you know, people that travel a long distance to come in there. So it's like a huge family reunion, and everybody's just all happy. And it's actually a little bit hard or a little bit difficult to start the meeting, because everybody wants to keep talking, you know, but throughout the day, you know, whether it's lunch or afterwards, people still have that time to connect.

Music playing

Lily Raff McCaulou: What made you decide to first get involved in tribal leadership?

Sam Robinson: You know, I never really thought that I was, you know, ready for that, because, you know, you're always in a learning phase. I remember coming to Clark College one year and listening to Chief Cliff Snider speaking. And he got done and I said, "Hey, Chief, I really enjoyed your talk today." He said, "Sam, you'll be doing this down the road." Listening was my main point, you know, and then my cousin one day, we're sitting in a little Methodist Church at a council meeting in Bay Center, and she said, "Sam, you need to get on council." I said, "I don't know, I don't know." And then a position came open. And there was like six months left on it. And then they said anybody interested, you know, could apply and be interviewed by council and be appointed. And I felt that, well, maybe this is time for me to figure if I wanted to get my feet wet and be part of council. They chose me out of the three people and that was 22 years ago and I'm still on council. So I must be doing okay. You know, I'm still learning, obviously, you know. One thing I tell people today, when I'm out speaking is that when I came on tribal council, we were a federally recognized tribe, you know, and I spent the last 21 years fighting for federal status, you know, so it's tough.

Lily Raff McCaulou: Yeah, let's talk about that because a big part of what you do is advocate for the federal government to officially recognize the Chinook Indian Nation. And, of course, recognition is a legal status that includes certain benefits such as health care benefits and

# Clark College Foundation Penguin Chats Podcast

Headwaters of leadership with Clark College alumnus Sam Robinson

funding. And Chinook Indian Nation was recognized during the end of Bill Clinton's presidency. But that recognition was rescinded early during George W. Bush's presidency. What would it mean for the people of Chinook Indian nation to get this recognition reinstated?

Sam Robinson: You know, first I'd just like to remind everybody that we are a sovereign nation. We are a sovereign nation because of our ancestors and the land they lived on. But recognition brings a lot to people. I mean, a lot of our members, you know, live around other Indian communities, you know, and sometimes you'll be kind of considered "less than," because you're not a federally recognized tribe. But you know, you've got the history, just as much history as they do, you know, so I think that would take a little of that burden off, you know, and people would be very proud to be, you know, to have a seat at the table, and be able to, you know, be just as important to the non-Indian community, you know, like the government, you know, as those other tribes. It would also help us, you know, we're going to bring our people back together, because we're going to be able to develop more, you know, provide for our people, whether it be, you know, health services for elders, or elder housing, or, you know, child protection. We don't have the right to go into courts and make sure that, you know, if our native children are going into foster homes or so forth, we have no say in that. The government just takes them, puts them wherever they want, you know, kind of reminds us, you know, back in the days, you know, like, when my great aunties and uncles went to boarding schools, you know, so they'd actually be taken away. And we'd like to have more say about that, and, and to be able to protect the bones of our ancestors. Because we're not when, you know, when Huckswelt signed that treaty, you know, they stayed in Willapa Bay because they didn't want to leave the bones of their ancestors. They didn't want to move to Yakima like Anson Dart wanted us to. So we were able to stay down there. And that's what helped us keep our culture alive. But it means a lot, it means a lot to be at the table, you know, and get the respect from the government that we should have. You know, when I look at today's world, you know, when they, you know, they're rewriting the criteria for, you know, schools and so forth.

Music playing

You know, it's clearly in the bill, it's for federal, you have to go to the nearest federally recognized tribe. So teachers get confused, you know, we tried to get the word out there, and that Chinook's still here, and you need to talk to us as well.

Lily Raff McCaulou: So take us back to your time at Clark, what made you decide to attend Clark? You talked about this a little bit; you've just moved back to Washington?

Sam Robinson: Well, you know, I grew up in Clark County, you know. When I was one year old, we moved back into this area with my dad moved us up here. And so I was very familiar with Clark College, you know, all along. And so, it was convenient for me to come down here and, and get my feet wet, you know, in the education. Most of my education throughout life was, you know, other than high school, you know, normal school, was hands on, you know, definitely the military was hands on. And so I just wanted to help, you know, come to Clark, and, you know, improve some of my skills and better myself and just learn more and be, you know, of interest. I can see that, you know, by doing that, down the road, you know, especially when I got

# Clark College Foundation Penguin Chats Podcast

Headwaters of leadership with Clark College alumnus Sam Robinson

to tribal council, things were starting to click and starting to fall into place. And I still, you know, I still keep that connection with Clark, you know. Now I do come and talk to people and I've taught a couple of classes at Clark, you know, so I guess chief Snider was right.

Lily Raff McCaulou: Yes, he was. He was. Tell us a little bit more about what you do as vice chairman of the tribal council for Chinook Indian Nation.

Sam Robinson: Yeah, as vice chairman, I mean, the technical thing you do is when the chairman's out, you run the meetings and so forth. But for me, a lot of it's getting out and telling the story. You know, doing a lot of P.R., you know, just over the years educating people that, you know, Chinook is still here. I sat on other committees, you know, I sit on the Education Committee, we were fortunate that one of our tribal members left us an endowment for scholarships, you know, so that's one thing: we do have the ability to give out scholarships to people. And also, I sit on the Natural Resources Committee, because we're trying to really get people educated and, myself, I'm still learning but to go out in the woods and gather and get those medicines and those foods and those materials for weaving, and to be able to take care of our people. And, and then also, I sit on the Canoe Family, you know, we travel hundreds of miles by canoe, and we really hope that we're making our ancestors proud. By being out in that ocean, and wherever we're traveling, and, and we're feeling really good about that. But predominantly, I do, I do get out there, and I do a lot of a lot of sharing that Chinook is still here.

Music playing

And, you know, I'm going to talk about right now we know we're talking about a lot of our struggles without federal status, you know, and sometimes it really kind of chokes me up. But yeah.

Music playing

Lily Raff McCaulou: You mentioned the canoe. Chinookan people have a long history of traveling by canoe. Tell us a little bit about that, because you're not talking about the kind of canoe that a lot of our listeners are probably imagining right now.

Sam Robinson: Well, our ancestors were required to canoe people, they would put in at the mouth of the Columbia River and would end up down by Northern California if they hooked a left and if they hooked a right they'd end up all the way up near southern Alaska, and into the [Prince William] Sound. And they had huge canoes, much bigger than we have today. They were known to have canoes that could carry seven tons of freight, you know, just because of all the training that they were doing. We travel today in canoe journeys, where, you know, there's a host tribe, and you might travel eight to 10 days to get to that host tribe and you're, you're jumping from different tribe to different tribe and sharing songs and picking up more people and going, you know, it makes me realize that our ancestors were leaving relatives everywhere for us. Because we have people we have, you know, Chinook relatives in Nisqually and Lummi and, you know, Squaxin Island and Quinault and Cowlitz. And just everywhere, you know, it seems like wherever our ancestors were traveling, we have cousins, so. And then, you know, it was early on this, we're doing these canoe journeys, these people didn't even know we weren't

# Clark College Foundation Penguin Chats Podcast

Headwaters of leadership with Clark College alumnus Sam Robinson

federally recognized. You know, they held us to a higher standard, you know, and which is really nice, you know, considering, you know, Chinook was huge. I mean, before the place came through, there was just so many Chinook people around and everybody that spoke a different language spoke our language because they wanted to trade with us. And so we had connections for tens of thousands of years. But yes, today we travel in a 36-foot canoe, 6-feet wide, it holds 12 pullers, three extra passengers, a little bit of cargo and we'll go out of that Willapa Bay and paddle up the Ocean of, you know, four days later we're up in Neah Bay with the Makah, so it's all good.

Lily Raff McCaulou: You make the paddles too, right?

Sam Robinson: I do make my own paddles. I actually have a canoe. Mine's a 31-footer, "Ixt·xut," The Bear. It was made by a Lewis and Clark reenactor and gifted to my late cousin. And when Ray passed, he left it to me. So I'm the proud keeper of Ixt·xut. and I have to have at least 12 paddles if I'm gonna invite my friends. So I do make paddles, yes.

Lily Raff McCaulou: And how often do you get out in that canoe? I mean, that's not an easy thing to just take out on a Sunday afternoon.

Sam Robinson: Yeah, it's a little bit a little tough the last three years you know, with COVID and then this year with all the heat you know, to get out. So next year we're paddling to Muckleshoot so we know we have a place to go to and canoe journeys are going to be opening back up and I look forward to getting, mine is more of a river canoe. I mean, it's 31 feet long, but it's doesn't have the high gunnels like our other canoe, "Kthlmin." But now I look forward to getting back out in the canoe and, and, you know, and the singing and the sharing and, you know, talking about family reunions, you know, when you go on a canoe journey, there's like 10,000 Indians there and you're related to a lot of them. So it's good.

Music playing

Lily Raff McCaulou: You were recently elected to your eighth term as vice chairman of tribal council for Chinook Indian nation. And I'm curious how your how your service has changed over this time. And how has the Chinook Indian Nation changed over this time, too?

Sam Robinson: You know, early on, when I started going to meetings, it seemed like there wasn't a lot of participation in the meetings, you know. Sometimes you'd wonder if you're going to have a quorum. It might be a handful of people in the audience, but those people were important people, because they're the elders that you wanted to learn from. So I was always happy to be there. And, and then, you know, then when I got on council, it started getting a little better. And it's been growing lately, you know, now we have committees, you know, these committees are very involved. We've got very educated folks that have come and, and help with us, you know, and that's what we looked at, you know, because we didn't have a reservation and we had things like wars, or boarding school or, you know, things. People had to go find jobs that they moved away. Yeah. And, but when they did, they got educated. And as they got educated, you know, we were able to tap into a resource. I mean, our communication committee is just wonderful, you know, they get the word out really well, through all different areas. And our cultural committee

# Clark College Foundation Penguin Chats Podcast

Headwaters of leadership with Clark College alumnus Sam Robinson

has always been pretty strong. And but yeah, we have people that are educated, we got more people coming in to join us that, you know, they hear that there's a need and, and they come in to help us out. And we're still we're still researching to see when those people moved away, what did they get educated in? So we tried to tell people what needs to be happening. And hopefully that when we get that reservation, they'll all come back and we'll be super strong.

Lily Raff McCaulou: What can people who are listening to this podcast do to support Chinook Indian Nation?

Sam Robinson: I think, you know, to learn more about Chinook is always important, you know. I have friends that want to, you know, be able to go out there. And they said, why not just the other day, they said, Well, I like to tell your story, can you give me more information. So like send us some information, you know, because they want to tell others. And, you know, we have a Twitter account, you know, [twitter.com/Chinook\\_Nation](https://twitter.com/Chinook_Nation), we have our website, you know, that [ChinookNation.org](http://ChinookNation.org). Our [facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com/ChinookIndianNation) is Chinook Indian Nation, and our Instagram is [@everydayChinook](https://www.instagram.com/everydayChinook). And that's a wonderful way for people to go to look and see that we are still here, and we're doing great things. But to learn about Chinook, you know, to learn about what our needs are or how we've been treated over the years is very important, because then these people can go out and reflect that to others and tell the story and tell the politicians on both sides of the river. You know, it took years and years for people to realize that we are an Oregon and Washington tribe. And it seemed like seven years ago when we bought our Treaty Grounds, at Tansy Point down by Warrenton that all of a sudden everybody in Oregon opened their eyes and said, "Wow, they are an Oregon tribe!"

Music playing

You know, they would always consider us a Washington tribe, because that's where our office is. So today, we you know, they want us on their boards, you know, they want our input and it feels good. It feels really good that, you know, we're being acknowledged.

Music playing

Lily Raff McCaulou: What do you wish more people understood about Chinook Indian Nation?

Sam Robinson: I think you know when I greet people, I say, "LaXa'wyam." And we usually raise our hands, because we're lifting those people up, you know, above us, holding them to a high standard. And so LaXa'wyam is our greeting, but what we're saying is that we're pitiful, and that, you know, we're holding them to a high status, and we're glad that they're in our presence. So, I think it's good to know that Chinook people are very humble people, and, and we just want to make sure that we just take care of our people and, we're definitely proud to share, you know, our culture and our history with everybody. You know, stop a Chinook person and we'll talk to you for hours. At least, my wife accuses me of that, you know.

Lily Raff McCaulou: But that's part of your job.

Sam Robinson: That's part of my job. Yes, exactly. And I enjoy doing that job.

# Clark College Foundation Penguin Chats Podcast

Headwaters of leadership with Clark College alumnus Sam Robinson

Lily Raff McCaulou: Yeah. Well, thanks for taking the time to chat with us today, Sam. We'll be sure to put some contact information for Chinook Indian Nation on Clark College Foundation's website so people who listen to the podcast or read about you can connect with the tribes and learn more about your people.

Sam Robinson: Hayu masi, I raise my hands in thanks. So have a good day.

Lily Raff McCaulou: Thanks, Sam, this is great. Thank you so much for doing this.

Sam Robinson: Oh, my honor.

Music playing

Rhonda Morin: Be sure and visit our website, [ClarkCollegeFoundation.org](http://ClarkCollegeFoundation.org), to listen to other fascinating stories about Clark, its alumni and faculty. Well, that does it for this edition of Penguin Chats. Thanks for listening. I'm Rhonda Morin.

Andy Palmquist: Penguin Chats is brought to you in part by Ginn Group, Schwabe Williamson and Wyatt, Vesta Hospitality, Waste Connections of Washington, Arnerich Massena and US Bank. Our corporate partners are helping make extraordinary things happen at Clark College Foundation.

Music playing