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Citation Details

Gibson, L. (2012). Early Inspirations: an Interview with Nichole Maher. Summer 2012 MetroScape, p. 20-26.

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Early Inspirations:

an interview with Nichole Maher

by Leah Gibson



Nichole Maher is the executive director of the Native American Youth & Family Center (NAYA Family Center) in Portland, Oregon. On August 6th of this year, she will join the Northwest Health Foundation as its president and CEO. In 2001, at the early age of 22, she took on her executive role at NAYA, and has taken the organization from a yearly budget of \$215,000 and a staff of seven to a \$10 million budget and a staff of over 100. In addition to her nonprofit leadership, she serves the region's community on numerous boards, including the Northwest Health Foundation, Oregon Native American Chamber of Commerce, Planned Parenthood of the Columbia-Willamette, National Urban Indian Family Center Coalition, Portland Schools Foundation, and Portland Parks & Recreation.

Born in Ketchikan, Alaska, Nichole is a member of the Tlingit and Haida Center Council of Southeast Alaska. After growing up in Alaska, at the age of 10, she lived and went to school on the Siletz reservation. She graduated from Oregon State University with a double major in public health and American Indian studies. She then received a master's degree in public health through a joint program between Portland State University's Mark Hatfield School of Government and Oregon Health Sciences University. Outside of work hours, Nichole plays a mean game of Sunday morning kickball with her team Manifest Destiny and raises two beautiful children, Kekeya (2) and Zodie (3), with her husband, Eddie Sherman (Navajo).

Oscar Arana, one of Nichole's closest friends and colleagues, as well as a Multnomah County field representative for Senator Wyden, says that Nichole's biggest strengths are that "she is passionate about leadership, especially for communities of color, and she is young and therefore able to relate to youth—her sense of humor also makes her stand out." Recently, Nichole was named one of the "50 Most Influential Portlanders" by Portland Monthly.

In the following interview, Nichole discusses her early inspirations and personal commitment to her role as a leader of the Portland urban Indian community.

I never, growing up, thought of myself as a leader ... but I think that I've always had sort of an impatient personality and a sense of urgency.

Leah Gibson: *Okay, so we all know about your many accomplishments from all of the media coverage and awards that you have had recently...but what are you most proud of?*

Nicole Maher: Well, the thing I am most personally proud of is building a sense of community among families in Portland. I feel like I get too much credit sometimes. But the other thing I feel so proud of is being able to see other Native leaders grow and take on really important roles and seeing other Native people in really prestigious positions or serving on boards and commissions. And the part of the work I'm most proud of is helping to support more Native people in these types of positions. In the past six or seven years, I'm seeing more and more Native people in these roles, and I just think that our community has so much potential, and so many people are starting to realize that.

LG: *Speaking of leadership, what first interested you in getting into policy work?*

NM: I never, growing up, thought of myself as a leader. That was not the track I was on, but I think that I've always had sort of an impatient personality and a sense of urgency. And I've oftentimes lacked some of the leadership skills, but I think that the fact that I was always the person that would show up to the meeting and follow through on most of what I committed to are the things that put me into leadership positions. Over the years, I think I've learned how to be a better policy advocate and to gain the skill to hear a policy and be able to translate it into how it would impact our people. And that's something that's taken time for me to develop. I remember thinking a million times that "I don't understand

this," or "I'm sure I'm going to say this the wrong way," or, "Gosh, if I speak up, am I going to sound really ignorant?" But I've also always thought, "If I don't speak up, the issue is not going to get raised." Even if it's just bringing up a point that people haven't thought of, or being the first person to say it, it opens up a space where a lot of other people can bring it up. Now I can see a red flag from far away. But in the beginning, it was just about raising my hand and asking the question. Every time I felt kind of shy, or felt like, "Gosh, I'm not the person who should bring this up," I've kind of just had to sort of just overcome that fear and really just say, "It's about the community, and if I don't speak up, I'm not sure anyone else is going to."

LG: *In what arenas did this first happen?*

NM: Actually, when I was in high school, I really started to notice some severe inequities, like our high school should have been 25% Native American, but all of the Native kids were dropping out and being pushed out and being expelled. We were getting into our senior year, and literally everyone from Siletz was gone, and no one seemed to think it was anything to be concerned about. It was just something that our high school accepted as a norm. And then when I got into college, I really started to see a lot of inequities and racism, so that was really the first opportunity for me to acclimate to that kind of community advocacy. When I came to Portland, essentially NAYA at that time was very small. We were only five people, and what I noticed was that we were trying to do everything for everybody, and we were doing that because nobody else was serving Native Americans. And, essentially...here we were, this decent-sized

population with all these needs...I didn't understand the data then, in the way that I do now. I mean, I suspected, but I didn't have the kind of concrete thinking. And so, it was being in meeting after meeting with the county or youth services providers where it was just acceptable that our community was left out. It was just the way it was, it wasn't a big deal, and it was people's perception that we were lucky to even be invited to the table. And so that's when I really started speaking up. The first couple of years, we made some really great progress in a lot of ways. There were other areas where now I look back and think to myself, "Oh my gosh, I never would have let that happen now. There's no way I would have let that slide." So really, that was the beginning. It was a lot of just, go to the meeting, show up, be really prepared, be really organized, don't say anything you can't back up, and ask questions. Just lots of practice. Consistency, practice, and realizing that in this community, when you advocate for what's fair, what's right, what's just, that people will be mad at you. They'll thank you at the end of the meeting for speaking up, but actually, when you are really trying to change things, and suggest sharing power in a different way, or rocking the boat in typically historically how the power-making has been, you will experience resentment. It's hard for people to accept that. They appreciate that you are being courageous, but they don't want things to change, and when you represent change, you will experience a little bit of resentment. So you have to be able to carry that.

LG: *You talked about how you were able to notice "red flags"...what do you mean by that, and how are you able to recognize a red flag now?*

NM: There are some really interesting

code words we use in Portland. People will talk about how "that community of color, they don't have any capacity," meaning they are not strong enough, they are not organized enough, they don't have the right system. But I find that really fascinating, because we have many organizations of color that are bigger, stronger, more organized, and have some of the best outcomes in our entire [Portland] community. When I hear that word, I get very concerned. And I recognize that that's become a politically correct way to downplay the strengths and the attributes of a culturally specific community.

I would say there are major areas where NAYA doesn't have capacity, but the reason that we don't have capacity is that we have been systematically under-funded and excluded for, you know, thirty-some years, so it's almost like punishing the victim. It still happens all the time where you'll have a room of twenty people and there might be one or two people of color, and they're making decisions for low-income children. Well, low-income children—about 65% of them are people of color. I feel that every person in that room should feel very uncomfortable making a decision on behalf of those communities. People can have good will and good intent, but we know that when we do not include the community that it affects the most, we make decisions that aren't in their best interests. White Portland is still very, very comfortable with making those kinds of decisions. So that's another big red flag for me. And when you bring up, "who's in the room?" and they say, "well, we invited them and they didn't show up," oftentimes people think that's an acceptable answer, but it's not. What that says to me is that you don't actually have the type of relationship that you should have with these communities to get them here.

At NAYA, there was just this fierce attitude of "Our kids can do it, our kids are amazing, they deserve the best."

That's a problem. We should change that, not blame the community.

We like to make this assumption that we're colorblind in this community, which is ironic, because we have some of the worst racial disparities in the country. And so we keep trying to do big one-size-fits-all models, and there is such overwhelming evidence that that doesn't really serve any marginalized community well. And the white bias that comes out in those one-size-fits-all models is amazing. I mean, essentially, programs end up being developed in a way that only matches up to what white folks need, and that doesn't really serve low-income white people well, it doesn't serve people from outer SE well, it doesn't serve communities of color well, and oftentimes the policy-makers will try to organize things geographically, which most communities don't organize geographically. When you organize that way, you leave out some of the neediest people. If you want to change the outcomes, you have to organize it the way that the people need in order to change lives.

LG: *Tell me how you came to work for NAYA.*

NM: I started as the youth and education coordinator, and I was in that role for six months. And it was really interesting because I knew NAYA for a long time, because I had started as a camp counselor, and I had eventually become the camp coordinator for a camp called Konaway Nika Tillicum, and NAYA used to send youth. So I knew about NAYA because this huge white van would pull up and all these urban Indian kids would pile out. When I came to NAYA, I knew tons of kids because I had been their camp counselor.

When I came to NAYA to be the youth and education coordinator, I was only going to stay for a year because I was on my way to law school. I was signed up to get my joint masters in public health and law degree. I had basically taken a year off to work and make some money. The first day I walked in, they had just moved into the Mississippi building. I had such a special feeling about the place. And at that time, Mississippi was scary. They had bullet holes in the windows and there was nothing on that street. They actually interviewed me in the kitchen. My interview panel included Nora [Farwell], Jeff Roth, Robin Dennis, and Ruth Jensen, who was on our board at that time.

And I loved the questions. They were the toughest questions I had ever been asked. You could just see that there was a social justice lens. It was a huge job. I was supposed to case-manage 270 kids. They hadn't had anyone in that position for quite some time. We were kind of behind. The community didn't know me. But at the same time, I loved it. I loved the spirit of the staff. At NAYA, there was just this fierce attitude of "Our kids can do it, our kids are amazing, they deserve the best," and I loved that perspective. I didn't really understand urban Indian issues at that time. I had always been in a tribal setting, where you have a set amount of resources or you are tied to the BIA, and with that comes restrictions. But with it also comes resources. So having no resources was like really kind of shocking to me. At the same time, it gave you so much freedom to do what you really wanted to do, and you were in control of yourself, which I loved.

I worked really closely with Jeff. He and I became really good friends, really fast. He was the executive director [ED].

I actually learned how to fundraise at Oregon State University. I was chair of their powwow for four or five years. We would raise at least \$30,000 a powwow.

I think he saw potential and had me take on a lot of extra things. Then he got this amazing job in DC. They were looking for a new ED and I was not qualified or prepared. But it was actually Paul Lumley who said, “Apply to be the ED. You have everything it takes. Just apply.” And at that time, I had already started thinking, “Well, why don’t I apply to graduate school here, because I want to stay at NAYA.” So I applied for ED, thinking that I would be lucky to get an interview. I just wanted to get to know the board, and I thought, I’ll stay here, I’ll work, I’ll go to graduate school, and then in five or six years—you know, executive directors change every five to six years—I’ll be ready.

So I did the interview, and I got the position. I think there was a lot of chance and a lot of luck. It must have been nerve-racking for the board to hire a 23-year-old ED. It must have been so scary for them!

LG: *How big was NAYA at the time?*

NM: We were seven at the time I became ED. We had gotten a few small grants and tutoring positions. I was so excited. My perspective was [that] “I am going to learn so much more being an executive director than going to law school.” We were in a hard financial position when I became ED. We only had enough money for the nuts of operating. I needed to raise to some money. I needed to learn how to do that.

LG: *Is that why you got started on fundraising?*

NM: I actually learned how to fundraise at Oregon State University. I was the chair of their powwow for four or five years. We would raise at least \$30,000 a pow-

wow. And then, grantwriting, certainly. You learn quickly that it’s all about relationships. Getting a grant is 75% relationship and 25% writing skills. I got my start fundraising on the powwow committee. And, literally, it’s just asking people for money. I’m still learning, though. Every year, we’re getting better.

LG: *What made you decide to get your master’s degree in public health?*

NM: I always wanted to do public health. I always loved upstream health prevention. I always felt like there was a strong connection between self-determination, being healthy, and cultural pride. So, for my undergraduate degree, I did pre-med public health and American Indian studies. I always thought I was going to go to med school, but then I did several internships and decided, not so much. I mean, I could do it, but I didn’t love it. And then the next option seemed to be that I could maybe do law and public health. But then I got the job as NAYA ED.

LG: *What was it like growing up in Alaska?*

NM: I grew up in a very rural community. No electricity, no roads, only accessible by float plane. Very, very small community. We lived mostly off the land. We fished all the time. My mom canned—canned deer meat and canned fish. As a kid, I had no concept of what other people ate. Everybody ate the same thing as us where I lived. My dad was a fisherman, so that was a big part of my life.

Pretty much everyone who lived in Kupreanof was homeschooled, and we didn’t go to regular school until I was in fourth grade. By the time that I got to fourth grade, I was so behind. They

thought I had dyslexia. But I really just couldn't read. I really truly believed that school just wasn't for me. It took me until my junior and senior years of college to get really good at school, but really, I just didn't perceive myself that way, like for a long, long time. I used to stay with relatives all the time. I changed school a lot, and would stay with my relatives, or friends of my parents. I was always kind of staying with someone. I think that that experience really shaped me, too. It was hard, but it kind of taught me to adapt and adjust, and to survive. My parents were always going out on the boat, and I used to get terribly seasick when I would go fishing with my parents. So that's part of the reason that my parents would have me stay with people, because I would get so seasick.

The whole reason that I went on to college is because they had a really strong Title XII program and a really strong Johnson O'Malley program at Siletz, so they were always taking us to conferences and telling us that we should just apply to college. I ended up getting into all of these places. It seemed crazy not to go, and so I went. But my first year and a half, I thought I was going to flunk out every term.

LG: *When did you move to Siletz?*

NM: When I was ten. When I was in sixth grade. We had a lot of extended family in Siletz, and knew a lot of fishermen, so it made sense to move there.

LG: *How do you keep your spirit up in the face of criticism?*

NM: There are so many wonderful things to celebrate. Any time that I'm in the hallway, and fifty kids walk by to go

get tutoring...that is just the most amazing feeling because they are here, they are doing something positive. There are so many reminders all of the time of the hope and the work ethic of the community, like we have single moms in the hardest situations who take the bus all the way out here so that their little ones can go to playgroup. We have so many people in so many hard circumstances who are here and working to better their lives. We have so many people who come to volunteer, like so many of our elders. And our community gatherings; even if we have 700 people and we ran out of food at 600, people still want to be there. That really lifts my spirits because I remember when we didn't have that in Portland. I remember when we had very few dancers at the powwow, and now we have tons of dancers.

I think having a few people that you can confide in is great, as well. I mean, there have been days where it's been harder. As NAYA gets bigger, sometimes it feels like the criticism gets bigger, too. So there are those days where it is just overwhelming. But there are also so many positive things. It's not like I don't notice the negative, but I've always had the perspective that I might as well do something and make some mistakes than be so fearful of criticism that I do nothing at all. The Native community can be very critical, and I've seen a lot of Native leaders become immobilized by fear. I'd rather go for it and be criticized than to just play it safe.

LG: *Is there anything that you wish you could change over the course of your career and your life?*

NM: I certainly wonder sometimes if I could say things better, or what would have happened if I did one thing and

... I just see so many opportunities and so much work, and so much urgency ... it's so hard to say no when there is so much need and so much work to be done.

not another. Like I've mentioned before, there are some policy areas where if I would have been more experienced, I would have never done or said certain things. But they've all turned into really great learning experiences. I certainly have no regrets. There are plenty of things I have done or decisions I have made as the leader of NAYA where I've felt like I've done or said something totally wrong, or I've made mistakes and apologized. But I don't regret it.

LG: *Who are your greatest role models?*

NM: One of my first, greatest role models was David West. He is the director of Native American Studies at Southern Oregon University. I learned so much from him about how to do really positive youth development. There's so much of that positive, youthful spirit at Camp Konaway Nika Tillicum [a summer Native American academy program at SOU] that he was involved in. Terry Cross [the director of the National Indian Child Welfare Association] is also someone that I admire. Another person is Laura Harris from AIO [American Indians for Opportunity]. The thing I love about Laura is that she is one who does so much to build up other leaders, and she has the attitude, "We don't have to be leaders like how everyone else does leadership...we can be our own kind of leaders." We don't have to act like white leaders. We don't have to act like historical leaders. It's really about creating our own kind of leadership.

LG: *What is your biggest challenge?*

NM: I over-commit, and I always see everything as an opportunity to get the word out about the Native community. I'm really trying to get better at it, but I just see

so many opportunities and so much work, and so much urgency, and while I understand about slowing things down, I just think it's so hard to say no when there is so much need and so much work to be done. Balancing that is very hard.

LG: *Are there any projects or issues that would be going on this summer that people should pay attention to?*

NM: I am really interested in the Native American Report [viewable at http://www.coalitioncommunitiescolor.org/docs/NATIVE_AMERICAN_REPORT.pdf]. With the report, we learned that 12% of our population is also our most vulnerable population—our children. I really want to see that population served. The level of disparity and service to that part of the population is criminal.

M

Leah Gibson (Oglala Lakota) is a freelance writer and a Portland State University alum. She holds a master's degree in writing through the PSU book publishing program. Leah was raised in Portland and has strong roots in the Portland metro area

- **Portland has the 9th largest urban Indian community in the US.**
- **There are 28 Native organizations in the Portland Metro area, with combined resources of over 50 million dollars in revenue that go to benefit the city and the region.**
- **Over 60 tribes in Oregon had their tribal status overturned by the federal government in 1953, during the period known as "Termination." The Chinook tribe, which once inhabited Neerchokikoo, was one of the tribes that had its federal tribal status terminated.**
- **Portland is home to members of over 380 tribes from across the country.**