



Together We Are a Net

DIANE L'XEIS' BENSON

Woven together with open spaces left in between... commonly describes a net. Netting being an industry, a craft, an art. It is also mathematical, scientific, a need in which to apply various knowledge, creativity and understanding of compounds, fiber, environmental reactions, and containment applications. In a way, this is true of relationships and cultural existence.

There are five of us – all Indigenous women with various shades and depths of graying hair and facial lines. We are grandmothers, either through lineage or cultural relationship. We are categorized as elders who sometimes call the Senior Center for a delivered meal or sign up for Petersburg Indian Association transit services. We either live with a partner or live alone. We live on an island where Tlingit traditional land use has somehow been conveniently ignored or forgotten by most and where the settlement of Petersburg was founded over a hundred years ago by Norwegian fishermen. We live here – in this Southeastern hamlet of nearly 3,000 residents – that a few tribal members from other villages have been known to snub for not being Native enough.

“Why are you moving there?” I was asked. “There must be all of what? Five Native people there?” Another person writes on social media, “I would have thought that you would have needed to be around more Native people.” Although they may not know it, there are over two hundred Native people enrolled with Petersburg Indian Association alone. Petersburg or *Séet Ká* ('On the Channel') stretches along the Wrangell Narrows - or *Gánti Yaakw Séedi* (Steamboat Pass) as it also became known - and separates Mitkof Island from Kupreanof Island. Fish trap remnants and petroglyphs estimated to be



Image 1: Debra, Mary, and Marianne at group potluck



over two thousand years old, speak to the historic use and occupancy of the area by the Tlingit people.

Each time I walk across the tidal flats, with shells and hardened wet sand beneath my feet towards the petroglyphs, I hear the whispers of ancient ones who marked these fishing territories long before the Norwegian arrival. Mitkof Island is near the mouth of the Stikine river, deep in the southeastern region of Alaska. It is still a traditional land use place; it is still filled with the spirit of the ancient ones who traveled to and through the Wrangell Narrows.

I see the humility of ancestors in the faces of my fellow Tlingit sisters, and the knowledge, stories, and laughter we gift each other on every encounter and know, somehow, that even though we have had different journeys, we are tied together.



Image 2: Talking with Mary

Mary Katasse-Miller, Tlingit name *Kaat'say* (named after her great Aunt from Klawock), is of the Raven moiety and of the *Taan Hít* (Sea Lion) House of the *Taakw.aaneidí* Clan; Mary Ann Rainey (*Kalk'éch*) is the only Eagle of the five of us and is of the *Xeiti Hít* (Thunderbird House) of the *Wooshkeetaan* Clan. Our moieties are determined by our mother's side and this is the determinate factor in our matrilineal culture.

Jeannette Ness (*Kosh Kanaee*) is Raven and, as told by family, is of the Sockeye House of the *T'akdeintaan* Clan (Kittiwake or Sea Pigeon). Jeannette and I are delighted to find that we are both T'akdeintaan, although I am of the *Tax Hít* (Snail House). Debra O'Gara is also Raven and of the *Teey Hít* (Cedar Bark House) of the *Teeyhíttaan*, a clan that comes from *Kaachxaana.áak'w* (Wrangell).

Mary and Mary Ann have been in Petersburg the longest and are the oldest of the five of us at 75 and 77, respectively. They are of this land where Petersburg sits, with their childhoods shaped by the struggles of Tlingit

survival in a Norwegian village. Mary is also tied to *Kaachxaana.áak'w* / Wrangell, a village where she was born that is slightly visible from Mitkof Island, if you stand near the top of a mountain facing southeast on a clear day. Unlike Petersburg, Wrangell's 2,300+ population is predominately Tlingit, even though it was also home to an Indian boarding school now long shut down. Petersburg and Wrangell are the primary communities within the *Shtax'héen Kwáan* (Bitter Water Tribe) region, meaning to say within an area understood to be of this traditional grouping of Tlingit people.

*The people were rooted in place,
and place rooted them in their matrilineal
culture and cyclical relationship
with each other, and the land.*



Image 3: The joy of place in Tlingit Aani (Diane)

When Mary's mother contracted tuberculosis and was coughing up blood, as Mary remembers it, a social worker threatened to take her children away. They 'fled Wrangell.' Tuberculosis took its toll on Indigenous populations, including the cost to my own mother, yet Mary's mother went on to live to eighty-nine years of age. They moved around, first going to Sitka in 1950, to Craig on Prince of Wales Island for a year, and then Petersburg in 1960. Her father had a boat named *Garfield*, but it broke up one day, beaten by a storm and tossed onto the beach. The family of twelve made the journey across open waters from Sitka to Prince of Wales during another move, in a small 32-foot trawler. Mary remembers how her parents "always kept us together." Mary recounts that her father, from a clan in Kake (village on Kupreanof Island), could not ever remember his Social Security Number so he had it tattooed on his arm. She smiles over his ingenuity, and his dedication to his family. The times were challenging but the family stayed together.

Mary makes delicious fried eulachon, a small oily fish, and "crispies" (fried seal fat), as well as fry-bread that competes with the best of them. She raised a good

sum selling fry-bread to assist a family in need. Word spread and townspeople lined up at her front door – it was that good. I ate a foot-long piece before I could collect the rest of the order; it was indulgent, but it was for a good cause, of course.

"My parents wanted us to go to school. That is what we did. All ten of us kids." Mary had two sisters, and seven brothers. The girls not only went to school to learn the 'white man's ways,' they also received traditional special training required for matrilineal obligations. She received guidance on food preparation, self-discipline, and intimate subjects like conception. Women were and are powerful by Tlingit tradition, as it is a matrilineal culture. Men that receive traditional instruction learn the values of true warrior strength and peacekeeping, and love of clan and family.

I let her know how lucky she was, and she agrees. I also share that I did not receive any training as my mother left me and three brothers when we were quite young, moved to the States and started another family. Somehow, she makes me laugh unexpectedly and I cannot help but appreciate how she is - growing up with very rigid instructions for Tlingit refinement - for Mary is, in these moments, the epitome of what it means to be Indigenous, even though she never learned to speak the Tlingit language.

Mary's parents' first language was Tlingit. Although they learned to speak English, her father never learned to write and this made him adamant that the children learn to function in the 'white world.' The solution was school. They all went on to build professional livelihoods in the 'white world.' She wishes she knew the language now. Nevertheless, her cultural existence is clearly present in her cooking, in her appreciation of Native foods and sharing, and in her sewing, as it is with Mary Ann.



Image 4: One of Mary Ann's many 'shawls'

Mary Ann has a prolific skill in regalia making and in her production of Christmas ornaments, wall hangings, collars (pictured) and vests – all designed with clan and other emblematic creations of Tlingit artistry. Her work hangs in the halls of the Petersburg Indian Association building and at the local arts store, Cedar Box. It is also seen on the 'shawls' she provides high school students for graduation day.

Humble, yet with a delightful laugh, she asks for clarity from me on Tlingit pronunciation. I too am not a fluent speaker, but I did have the privilege of living for periods in my youth with my grandparents in Sitka – a grandfather who would have me speak Tlingit before I could eat my breakfast. Grandma would admonish him:

“Do you want her to have a hard time of it?”

She believed that learning the language would only make my life more difficult. They would often whisper in the language during arguments, for fear that ‘the

white people’ would hear them. They had attended schools where their mouths were washed out with soap or their knuckles spanked if they did not use English.

Mary Ann is appreciative when I can assist. Like all of them, I too wish that the Tlingit language flowed freely from our origins. But the little parts that each of us know of our traditional knowledge combine and weave together in such a way that we feel fulfilled.

Mary Ann knows her Tlingit name and how it was spelled but hesitates when saying it. “I’m still trying to learn to say it correctly,” she explains. She was born in Petersburg where her parents lived in an apartment in the old Reyes Building on the docks. It was in the place where the Kito’s Cave bar now exists, just off Sing Lee Alley. Mary Ann adds that there was a Chinese man named Sing Lee who ‘was murdered in that building.’ The building being the Reyes building where she was born.

Mary Ann informs me that her grandfather was full- blooded Filipino and that her grandma was Tlingit and strong in the culture. “But they did not teach us the language; they would not even speak it in front of us.... It was the same with the Filipino language, they wanted us to keep with the English language.” Her voice changes as she contemplates, “Remember, ‘white only’... we could only sit in the balcony in the theatres...” Then adds, “...but they were the best place to sit!” Mary Ann may be humble, but carries a pronounced inner strength, “I would not let anyone treat me any different when I was a kid. I am who I am.” I marvel at her spirit and find that I often feel lifted and proud in her presence.



Image 5: Jeanette and Mary Ann as we picnic on a rainy day



Image 6: Debra guiding Jeanette on skin-sewing

Jeanette, like Mary Ann, was born in Petersburg – her mother coming from *Hoonah*, the land of the *Xunaa Kwáan* in the northern part of Southeast Alaska. Jeanette and Debra are the youngest of the five of us at 63. Jeanette has lived her life in Petersburg and serves on the Petersburg Indian Association (PIA) Council. She was part of the instrumental group that ensured the raising and care of two Tlingit totems that tower across the street from the city’s Borough Building. Debra and I are both the newcomers to Petersburg, arriving here in the summer of 2019. The job of Magistrate brought her here, and I came while I prepared for my last semester as a professor of Native studies. Petersburg was my retirement plan. I was not from here, but I fell in love with the place after burying my best friend here five years previous. It seemed fitting, since it is a Norwegian and Tlingit community, and I am both, my father Norwegian and my mother Tlingit. I immediately got roped into presenting on Elizabeth Peratrovich Day as I had

been known to perform the story of this iconic civil rights leader from our tribe and who happened to be from Petersburg. I met Debra a few weeks before at a garage sale and she promptly informed the Arts Council that I had moved to Petersburg. Presenting at this joyful event at the ANB Hall was a great way to become acquainted with the community and to help me cope with a recent loss.

Petersburg has an active Alaska Native Sisterhood (ANS) and an Alaska Native Brotherhood (ANB), and they help lead the parade on Elizabeth Peratrovich Day 2020, along with the Tlingit dance group from *K̓aach̓x̓aana.áak'w* / Wrangell. The songs and drums fill the air, and Petersburg residents stop on the streets to watch – some joining in to march behind us. As we file into the hall we are greeted by the intoxicating aroma of baked salmon, fish eggs and other Tlingit cuisine delights. Although I wear a plain black headband rather than my beaded headpiece due to the great loss to my family, I am lifted by the smiles and laughter of us ‘elder’ women. I am now safely wrapped in the robe of ancestral presence that I feel moves around the room.



Image 7: Debra with her new weaving project

Debra reports that she is thinking of retiring. She will work on a PhD in Indigenous studies. Debra is remarkable. A truly gifted artist in her own right, she weaves with cedar bark and spruce roots that she herself harvests; she cleans Devil’s Club stalks and makes beads from them that she gives away. Her beadwork is an act of love, as revealed in the traditional robe she wears, displaying its meaning for her clan, and because of it, the robe becomes *at.óow* – those things that carry spirit over time – regalia that is witness to events in cycles of time. We treat these things with great respect.

We find ourselves seated in the front row in the hall, now the older ones. It is clearly time to start settling in to this new role as elder. And that means laughter.

“Atsgané!” I reply to a joke and we all laugh. It means something like being scared or it is scary. The word feels good, because in it is a connection to our ancestors. There in the hall, as we become acquainted, our voices ring with laughter and will continue to do so throughout the year and into the next, as we get together for a picnic on a rainy day at Sandy Beach around a fire, walk on the bike path along the Wrangell Narrows, or share food like a dinner on the deck at my house or a potluck lunch downtown by the Sons of Norway Hall. Always the sharing of food.

Even with COVID it simply meant that we might only get together outdoors in pairs to harvest Devil’s Club, pick berries, or drop off food to one another. Over the holidays we made a phone call as a group to one of us who was far away.

There is wisdom in the sharing that keeps the culture and spirit alive.

Jeanette has not only taught cultural activities in the schools and planned and organized culture camps for youth and adults, but has brought us together culturally as well. She encouraged us all to sign up for the canning workshop sponsored by PIA. All of us sat at our own tables, six feet apart in masks, and were able to be together in that way as we cut fish, seasoned to our liking, and packed it in jars for pressure cooking. A great day. We all went home with a case of jarred fish and a full heart.

We benefit from this union in so many ways. Debra expresses another value of the group in knowing that 'if someone doesn't hear from me, that someone will call.' She appreciates how the group is non-judgmental. "That's what it's all about," she says. Although she participates in Zoom classes and belongs to Zoom groups of artists where she weaves and visits, she will try to get others from our group involved. Jeanette has joined in one group with her for skin-sewing. Debra loves to share what she knows and points out, "You learn by explaining things to others" and how teaching 'is an important aspect of the learning process.' And we all learn from one another, and all the while keeping humor alive.

Humor is a fundamental value of Tlingit people. It is even on the tribe's list put out by the 2004 Elders Forum on Traditional Values. Humor has always been key to our survival. I can still hear my grandmother's giggles when grandpa would tease her about something silly she did and had been feeling bad about it. However, our humor is not always understood, it would seem to us. We talk about how it feels that younger people learn things about the culture and language in books and classrooms nowadays, but not about the way we can be socially. Being raised in the country of our own people, we get that sometimes our kind of humor can prompt confusion by the eavesdropper. But still, we cannot help ourselves.

Mary and I, as it turns out, were both married to a Haida man at one time, a tribe just south of us on Prince of Wales Island and on the Canadian side in Haida Gwaii. "You will never find a Tlingit in a Hai-da bed!" we say to each other and then laugh. Whatever hurts and is still hung out in time, we can send a light breeze through it with humor.

"Obviously, we didn't pay attention!" And we laugh some more. I watch her, her eyes glistening, as we joke, in English, in an all-so-ancient way.

Much of our Native humor is filled with sexual innuendo and can tickle us for hours. "Remember George! That guy! He always say when he wants to stand with you... 'Ge. I want to come by you.' And say it so innocently." And we cannot help but imitate him and laugh. "*Gwál de wooch x'éide kudaxát*," when said in an exaggerated way, can leave a couple of us that know the intent of this in stitches, and means, "Are they stuck together by the mouth already?" I crave this stress relieving exchange that bonds one with another. That creates the space for unbridled human-ness – a joyful spirit that is free to sing.

Some of us have returned to the homeland with scars on our souls, lives lived with many journeys and losses, and we are grateful for each other and the familiarity and comfort of our Tlingit beingness. They feel so familiar, like, family, yet I only met these women over the past couple of years. It turns out that during an interview with Mary for this article, I discover that we are related. One of her relatives married one of my uncles in Sitka – my mother’s brother. Now I call her Auntie. In truth, as we know it, we are our ancestors as it is. We are united.

There is a fluidity required in optimal human relationships to thrive and explore while also requiring a tight-knit bond of trust with room to freefall without fear of injury. We may swing freely in this happy confinement, and that is the beautiful irony.



Biography

Diane L'Xeis' Benson is Tlingit. She is an Alaskan politician, an inspirational speaker, a video production consultant, a published writer and a dramatist.