

MEANS AND MATTERS PODCAST

GUEST: Stacia Morfin, Founder of Nez Perce Tourism

EPISODE TITLE: A Nez Perce Entrepreneur Reclaims Her Tribe's Story

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Stacia Morfin: [00:00:03] There's all of these legends and stories that you would have never have known. You would have drove by there and never even seen that story unless you had a Nimiipuu guide that was there to help foster that relationship of love and connection for Mother Earth, for the land, for all things. To be able to explain those relationships that we have had since time immemorial with our guests, within our own people, is really how we can touch the lives of helping them understand our ideas of what it is to be Nimiipuu.

Leah Thomas: [00:00:32] Hi and welcome to the Means and Matters podcast, presented by Bank of the West. I'm Leah Thomas, environmental justice advocate, educator, creative, founder of Intersectional Environmentalist, Bank of the West ambassador and your host.

My guest today is Stacia Morfin. She is the founder of Nez Perce Tourism, the first indigenous owned and led tour company in the traditional territory of the Nez Perce. Stacia is a powerhouse who is redefining how her culture is shared with people who visit [Nimiipuu Country](#). In March 2019, she began tour operations and has hired more than 55 drummers, singers, historians, storytellers and artists from her tribe to contribute to the tours.

I loved talking with Stacia because she doesn't see her business as having a single objective, but rather as a way to introduce people to her home land and cultivate long-term economic sustainability for herself and the Nimiipuu people.

[Music]

Leah Thomas: [00:01:44] Thank you so much for being here today with us virtually. I'm just really excited to have this conversation. To start, can you introduce yourself to our listeners?

Stacia Morfin: [00:01:55] For sure. Thank you, Leah. [*Stacia introducing herself in nimipuutimt*] What I said in my native language, in nimipuutimt, which is the Nez Perce language, is 'Good morning. My name is One Who Takes Care of Water, also known as Stacia Morfin and [*nimipuutimt*] is welcome.'

Leah Thomas: [00:02:18] Can you tell us a little bit more about the work that you do?

Stacia Morfin: [00:02:22] Yes will do. So I will back it up just a little bit. I am an enrolled member of the Nimiipuu, which is the Nez Perce nation. We are a federally recognized tribe in Idaho. Although we are recognized in Idaho, our ancestral homelands include a large part of the Pacific Northwest, which include, you know, present day Idaho, Washington, Oregon, Montana, parts of Nevada, Utah, up into Canada.

I'm also the founder of Nez Perce Tourism LLC. Before I started the company, I did two years of very intense market research on the region of the Lewis and Clark Valley, is what we call it, straddling between Idaho and Washington. And there was 297 tourism related businesses, who were sharing the Nimiipuu, the Nez Perce story, my story. And none of them were native, none of them were indigenous. Although they may have been very good allies, you know, it hits different when you're able to share your own story from your own perspective. So that's what we do with Nez Perce Tourism.

We had our grand opening March 29th of 2019. But, man, we are really making strides and we're making that impact on an internal level within indigenous people that foster that relationship within themselves of hope and pride and to understand who they are, the warrior spirit that they come from, the matriarch societies that they are part of. So being able to foster that pride in that hope and to our young people is really important work with tourism as well.

Leah Thomas: [00:03:55] That is absolutely beautiful, and I've honestly never heard someone explain tourism this way, and I'm curious to know more of the origin story for your company. Can you bring me to that moment of ideation if you have one, where you were like, this is what I'm going to do. I know now.

Stacia Morfin: [00:04:15] Back in 2003 and 2004, I was just out of high school and I had worked for the tribe, the Nez Perce tribe, for several years. This was during the time of the 200th commemoration of the Lewis and Clark bicentennial coming through and exploring America. And so the tribe was approached with this opportunity to celebrate with the Corps of Engineers, the Corps of Discovery. But there was a council held and a lot of the tribes came together and said, you know, this is great, but we want you to understand that for us, this isn't really a celebration. You know, this was really a start to westward expansion, to assimilation, to genocide. There's just so many atrocities that happened after our friendship, our very great friendship with the Lewis and Clark expedition that helped fill, you know, the reservation systems. We were forced to never speak our language again, forced to cut our hair, forced to change our names.

But we did know that we did want our voice to be heard. And we did have a different side to the story that had been told for the last 200 years. I was a really, really young girl at that time, and I was the tribe's event planner for these historic events. And I really learned a lot there. I learned how to authentically sit with our elders and listen to what they were saying. You know, no video, no recording, you know, no notes. But to really sit with our elders and feel those stories and to understand the true meaning behind the legends.

And that's what kind of started me in tourism. And I went off to college. I got my degree in hospitality. Then I also got another degree in business administration. And I thought, you know what? I can be a business owner. I can totally do this.

And so what I did is I packed my daughter in a Kelty backpack. We went and hiked to one of our sacred sites on top of this mountain, and started singing one of our old traditional Nez Perce songs. At about the second verse, this old man, plain as day appeared to me, right in front of my daughter and I's face. And he told me, he said, 'Child, I'm glad that you came up here and prayed, you know, and poured your heart into wanting to know what the future holds for you, because this is our old way of looking for answers, to find your destiny, to find your [nimipuutimt]. You know you go on these great journeys and you find your purpose.'

And that's exactly what I did. And I was very intentional of asking, you know, what is it that I'm intended to do here on this earth? Help me understand that and help guide me. And he told me that, 'Child, you are going to start a company for cultural preservation. You have to be confident. You have to understand that when people come against you, that they aren't coming against you as a person. They're coming against the principles, the mistrust that was conveyed through the meeting of two cultures that forced us into different ways. So that trauma is still very alive within your people. So you cannot be dismayed. You cannot be discouraged when people come against you or when people say things or when people oppose these ideas that you have.' And so I said, OK, I know exactly what I'm going to do. Right. So, you know, thank you, [nimipuutimt]. Thank you, God, for this opportunity.

[MUSIC]

Leah Thomas: [00:07:40] So after that experience, what did you do next?

Stacia Morfin: [00:07:44] So then I started doing this market analysis and visited all of the tourism sites. And I looked at the travel trends. Who's here? Who's staying? How long are they staying? Where are they coming from? And I realized that there was a niche market with the cruise line industry. There's a river cruise boats that come here through the Pacific Ocean on the Columbia River, navigate to the Snake River and the Clearwater River. And that's all homeland of the Nimiipuu, right? So just within one year, there's already 30,000 people coming to my homeland in my town and visiting, you know, one to four nights. But it happens from March through November. I said, 'Oh, my goodness. Nonprofit? Great. But a for profit? Yes, even better.

You know, how can we generate these marketing funds to be able to foster that relationship with the culture, the heritage, the language – it's really important, our language. And that's why I always want to try to start out in our Nimiipuu or our Nez Perce tongue. Because that language that we have we just recently were able to speak again. So the fact that I get to introduce myself, [nimipuutimt]. The fact that I get to say, 'Good morning. My name is One Who Takes Care of Water,' is really powerful. And it is an honor to be able to speak that language, to have that direct access to my ancestors and to be able to share with our young people that you can speak the language too. You know, you can know where you come from.

And although even I personally have gone off to the left, I've gone off to the right, you know, I come from a background and a community of violence and addiction and alcoholism. I was actually sent to prison, and this was in 2011-12. I was given a 30-month sentence and I spent time in the federal system. And it was that very moment, along with this moment that I had with my ancestor, of when I realized who I was. I fell to my knees and said, 'Help me. God, can you please help me? Because I don't know who I am.' You know, you come from these people, these very strong warrior matriarch people. You have love and you have the hope in you. You know, you have resiliency. I mean, look at me. I can be here today. I can inspire hope for our young people, for our old people. And to be able to be a part of that is huge. And thank goodness it was through how tourism all began.

Leah Thomas: [00:10:13] Thank you so much for sharing that with us, and I hope that, you know, how much of an inspiration you probably are for so many people. So thank you for your honesty there. I just really appreciate you sharing. So the relationship between the Nez Perce and I guess blatantly like white people and indigenous people, peoples worldwide has been really tenuous and violent and destructive for centuries. And when you were starting this business, did you encounter any resistance from other people within your tribe who weren't interested in sharing your culture with others based on that history or based on present-day relations? And how did you navigate that?

Stacia Morfin: [00:10:59] We have plenty of opposition and people who are very supportive of it. But it is really that systemic trauma that fuels the opposition because of the atrocities, because of the blatant murders of our women, children, elders.

You know, when we were given a 60-day notice in 1877, the Wallowa band of Chief Joseph, to go ahead and pack up everything that you have. Pack up your cups, your bowls, your horses, your cattle, your food, your teepees. Every single thing that is that you have, you have to get off this homeland that you were raised on since day one. And not only you, but 500 generations before you or more. And you got to get out of here and we're going to give you 60 days to go ahead and do that. Oh, and don't forget, it's just about wintertime, so you better get moving quickly or else. And the thing is, you know, some people say, you know, that was so long ago. Can you just get over it? That was not long ago. That's my grandmother's mom. That's not like it was three thousand years ago. That was literally still in my DNA when I'm born, that trauma's there.

So when I started this company, oh, my goodness, I did not know what was going to awaken inside of me as far as these feelings, you know, this hurt the sorrow, but to be able to work through them and to talk about it, that's what heals as a people.

And thank God I thought of this before I started my company. I did a community assessment. And in this assessment, we had a few different categories. You know, we had a category of what's Sacred, Secret, Commonly Known and Widely Shared. So our Sacred and Secret, right? Those are two completely separate things. But those are two things that Nez Perce Tourism made a solemn vow to completely stay away from. You know, our medicine places, our hunting

places, our fishing places, those very responsibilities that we do on the daily. That's our responsibility to upkeep that. And those things are very sacred to us.

There's even people in my own family that I don't show them our hunting spots. I don't show them where we gather our medicines because they aren't even responsible enough to be able to foster that relationship. And so our sacred foods are off, our medicines are off limits. Our fishing spots are off limits. But so are our burial sites. You know, we don't want to disturb our ancestors. And so we have to be very careful and we have to be able to protect and to preserve our heritage, our culture in a way that is respectful.

MIDROLL: [00:13:37] After a short break, Stacia and I talk about why our connections to the earth matter and how she's inspired others to join her. Stay with us!

Leah Thomas: [00:14:04] I really love how your tours are offering and teaching this holistic perspective of the landscape and the land, not just solely being used for extraction. Can you speak to how you integrate your tribe's philosophy about the Earth into your business practice?

Stacia Morfin: [00:14:20] What we do with Nez Perce Tourism is we are able to bring all peoples to our homelands. We bring them to our waters, which are sacred to us, our [nimipuutimt], our water, our [nimipuutimt], our rivers. And we bring them here so they can feel, so they can touch, they can smell, you know, they can taste the air, they can taste the water. And they can understand that inherent relationship, that responsibility that we have to protect these things. You know, through the stories that we share. We have a system of water to protect. So to be able to not just tell and show, but to allow our guests to feel why we are so connected, to understand.

There's all of these legends and stories that you would have never have known. You would have drove by there and never even seen that story unless you had a Nimiipuu guide that was there to help foster that relationship of love and connection for Mother Earth, for the land, for all things. And we believe that everything that is alive has a spirit. So as I look outside the grass, the soil has a spirit. These rocks have a spirit. I have a spirit. You, the dog, the squirrel that I see across the way, the pine tree in my yard, every single thing has a living spirit, right? So we are to respect those things. They need air, they need light, they need land and they need their spirit to survive. So we are so connected with our winged relatives, our birds. We're very connected with our four legged, our animals. To be able to explain those relationships that we have had since time immemorial with our guests, within our own people, is really how we can touch the lives of helping them understand our ideas of what it is to be Nimiipuu. What it is to have respect for all things, and to be able to be stewards and caretakers of this land, this water, these resources, these gifts that have been given to us. And those gifts that have been sustaining us since time immemorial.

Leah Thomas: [00:16:18] Has your business in the way that it operates by incorporating sustainability and culture and so many other factors served as a blueprint or inspiration for other people in your community? And if so, how? Or I guess to rephrase, has anyone else felt inspired by the work that you've been doing to join you or create their own sustainable business?

Stacia Morfin: [00:16:42] I do hope to inspire many young and old people to be able to be entrepreneurs within their own spirits. You know, it might not be specifically in a tourism or hospitality related field. But each of us has a gift. And I was able to be a part of Indianpreneurship. It's a training that we did both online and in person. And it walks you through, you know, skills and abilities and talents, and identifying that within yourself. You know, let's look at the opportunities, the strengths, the weaknesses, the obstacles. Let's look to see what a blueprint might be for you to start this business, you know, what would the cost be? So just going through each of these very different business ideas with Native American and non-native people to show them that you can be an entrepreneur. You can start a tourism business if you would like.

There are young people saying, 'Oh, my goodness! You know, how can we be a part of what you're doing? We love it. You know, we want to learn.' You know, maybe we didn't grow up in the most traditional family, but we want to know more about who we are and where we come from. How can we come work with you? How can, how can we volunteer for you?

We also opened up during the pandemic last year, a gift shop, Nez Perce Traditions Gift Shop which is great for local, indigenous artists. We're able to create that workforce development for first time employees. You know, to help with the resume building, help with their, their customer service skills, their people skills, their confidence. You know, when people come and work for me for the first time and this is the first job they've ever had, they're very scared to, you know, know the merchandise, you know. Is this conch, is this [nimipuutímt] shell? Is this, you know, abalone? Is it cowrie shells? You know, who made this? Who's the artist? You know, is this leather or buckskin? You know, all of these different elements that go into gift shop merchandising.

But, you know, you guys, I say the thing is, is that, you know, we're going to get there as far as the materials used for our culture, will get there. What I want you to understand is that it's the relationship you have with every single person that walks through that door. You have been chosen to be a representative of our nation. You know, working behind a gift shop counter you might not think that, but you are. You know, you are representing not only your family, your community, the Nimiipuu, you're representing a whole race of Native Americans. You know, this might be the only time somebody ever comes in contact and gets to talk to a Native.

Leah Thomas: [00:19:08] So there's been a growing awareness, which I could say is very delayed, but in a lot of social justice movements in particular, or even outside of that, I found a lot of people to be talking about Indigenous rights, history and culture, a lot more. There's also a lot of incredible new media and books that are being incorporated into classroom settings and beyond. And it feels overdue, but also really inspiring.

Stacia Morfin: [00:19:37] You know, this relationship with the land, the plants, you know, astrologist, you know, science, medicine are really starting to look back at indigenous communities and say, 'Can you help us with this?'

You know, should we help you with this? Are you going to be responsible? Are you going to continue to extract and continue to take the resources that we absolutely need to survive to be able to foster and create that that growth within our spirits, you know? Or, do we go ahead and just keep it within ourselves? So we're at a really weird place right now, a really powerful place right now, I should say, with moving forward, because those industries are really looking back at the natives for help on this, which is great. But this is what we've been saying the whole time. So to be able to have you know, let's say people starting to become woke or being awakened, you know, is really something that has been great for native communities.

But in that same tone, you know, there are definitely some things that we do need to be working on, on the congressional level, on the policy level. We're doing great work on the congressional level with the Native Act with Congress that just came out. You know, working to support AIANTA, which is the Alaska Native Tourism Association. And ensuring that tourism dollars go into the tribal communities for us to be able to make our communities safer, to be able to build infrastructure internally, to build that identity component for our own people to be proud of who they are.

And you would think, you know, tourism doesn't do that. You know, people think that's not what they do. That's not what she does. And that is a huge component of why I do what I do.

<Music>

Leah Thomas: [00:21:23] Before I let you go, I want to ask you five questions for my lightning round. OK, are you ready?

Stacia Morfin: [00:21:30] Mm hmm.

Leah Thomas: [00:21:32] OK, one, two, three. What advice would you give to your younger self?

Stacia Morfin: [00:21:37] To love yourself. To look at yourself intently in the mirror each morning and say, I love you. And to actually mean it. And if you don't mean it, find out why and say it again and love yourself.

Leah Thomas: [00:21:51] Oh, word. Like, are you a therapist or a motivational speaker? I don't know what's happening this morning. OK, what's the one thing you can do to take care of yourself?

Stacia Morfin: [00:22:06] Oh, I love, love, love to workout. I'm very physically active, whether it's indoors in the gym or whether it's outdoors in nature. Find that place for you that you can awaken all of your senses. Where you can feel the most empowered.

Leah Thomas: [00:22:23] And, what is the best advice that you've ever received from a mentor?

Stacia Morfin: [00:22:28] Always the opposition. And that is because I have such a great determination to oppose the opposition and to prove that it is possible.

Leah Thomas: [00:22:38] What is a book that you really love?

Stacia Morfin: [00:22:41] Oh, I absolutely love *Yellow Wolf: His Own Story* by L. V. McWhorter. It gives you a great description of the Nimiipuu, the Nez Perce people, the resiliency. And a true account of history within North America, within the United States.

Leah Thomas: [00:23:02] And lastly, what's something like a gadget or a device that you can't live without?

Stacia Morfin: [00:23:08] I absolutely have to have, when I'm working out in the gym, my headphones, so I can jam out. Whether it's rap, R&B, Pow Wow, gospel. It's got to be my headphones.

Leah Thomas: [00:23:23] And with that, I want to say thank you so much for joining us today and inspiring our audience. Listening to all of the magic that you create and a little bit more about your history and the history of your people and just the work that you do, like you're a rock star. And just please continue doing amazing things for the Earth and people and planet. Thank you again.

Stacia Morfin: [00:23:46] Thank you so much. I had such a great time this morning.

Leah Thomas: [00:23:54] You can follow Stacia and her business at Nez Perce Tourism, or learn more about them at her website NezPerceTraditions.com.

To learn more about Stacia and the other women that we are profiling on our show, visit meansandmatters.com/podcast.

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Thanks for listening.