



PHOTO BY DIEGO DIAZ

Laura John

Portland's new tribal liaison talks about her new role fostering communication between the city and the native community

BY STEPHEN QUIRKE
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“Everywhere you are, Indians have been. ... Every hill, every creek, every meadow, every forest, every inch of the Willamette River bank in this city has a story of its connection to the indigenous peoples who lived here.”

This was a small piece of the testimony delivered to Portland City Council two years ago by the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission's Jeremy Fivecrows (Nez Perce).

That day – Oct. 7 – the city voted unanimously to begin celebrating Indigenous People's Day to honor the history and survival of its indigenous peoples who lived in and around present-day Portland for more than 12,000 years. Portland today has the ninth largest urban Indian population in the United States.

This September, Governor Kate Brown announced that the state of Oregon would celebrate Indigenous People's Day in honor of advocacy work from the Klamath Tribes Youth Council.

This month Portland announced its own historic step. On Dec. 14 Mayor Ted Wheeler hired the city's first full-time tribal liaison.

Laura John (Blackfeet/Seneca) is a lifelong Portland resident with more than 20 years of work in the Native community. As a professional scientist, policy analyst and social worker, John brings a new perspective to a position that could become a model for how cities across the country work with Native Americans.

The tribal liaison position was created last year to implement a formal relationship between Portland government officials and Native communities of Portland, as well as the government officials of surrounding tribal governments. That relationship sprung out of the cooperative work of cleaning up the Portland Harbor Superfund Site. The city's first tribal liaison, Patricia Davis Gibson, was hired in August last year on a part-time basis. During that time she helped Portland pass a resolution in support of the Standing Rock Sioux in their Dakota Access Pipeline protests, hand delivering the resolution to the tribal council on behalf of the city. Her position sat vacant for nearly a year, from January to mid-December, after Ted Wheeler was elected mayor.

Portland has had definite issues meeting its tribal obligations in recent years. In 2012 the Yakama Nation and the Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission opposed a plan

between the Port of Portland and the city to begin industrial development on West Hayden Island, saying it would cause unacceptable damage to salmon habitat. It was two years before the plan was canceled. Later that same year, the city and port announced another joint plan, this time to bring unit trains full of propane through the port. That plan was canceled in early 2015 after significant public and tribal opposition. There's also been criticism that the city officials don't have any guidance or protocols on how to implement the city's policy around tribal engagement.

Street Roots talked with Laura John to discuss her new position and what it can accomplish for the Native community.

Stephen Quirke: *What was it like growing up in Portland?*

Laura John: I grew up in a really great era in Portland. We had a close-knit robust tribal community. I attended the Native preschool, which was up and running in the late 70s. It used to be located in a house across from where the Convention Center is now. I really had a great community. There's a group of us that all grew up together. We've known each other our whole lives. I think Portland's got a very amazing history when it comes to our Native community here, that most people don't know about.

S.Q.: *Can you explain more about that?*

L.J.: Portland has been a place where Native people have relocated, whether it was for jobs, may have been through the relocation program in the '50s and '60s, when a lot of young Native people – through this federal program – left their reservation communities and came to Portland. And a lot of those families are still here, and raise their families, their children and their grandchildren here.

We've got a number of other regional organizations that are based out of Portland, like Columbia River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission, we have Affiliated Tribes of Northwest Indians. ...

S.Q.: *Is Portland unique in having its own fully funded liaison?*

L.J.: Absolutely. Over the past week that I've been in the position I've been looking at some examples of the work that's being done by tribal liaisons in other cities. I've found a handful of examples, and the level of work, and even the status of that employee, whether they're full-time or part-time, varies.

My hope is that Portland can be an example for other cities in how to have a tribal liaison position. We're a model for other cities in other ways, and I think that we should be the model for the work of a tribal liaison as well, in engaging with tribes and Native communities.

S.Q.: *What does the job of a tribal liaison entail? Is it simply to communicate and coordinate between the city and tribal governments and urban organizations? Is that the gist of it?*

L.J.: That's part of it. The other part is I'm looking internally at where support can be provided. I went to look at the opportunity of developing and providing trainings based on basics – Tribal Sovereignty 101, Oregon Tribal History 101 – to make sure that folks that are in bureaus

where this is relevant, that they understand background. And they understand why it's important, and why tribal consultation is important.

S.Q.: *Would this just be for the city, or would the public be involved in some way?*

L.J.: What I was just talking about was referring to the city – internally – as some type of required training, no different than an equity training.

For the public, that's another piece of the work... What needs to happen to elevate and increase visibility of the Native community here, and the tribes of the area? Is that putting more information out there on significant spaces in the Portland area? Fishing sites? There's a concrete plaque in Waterfront Park that says “Indian Camp” and it has a date on it, but there's no placard as to what that means. And if you went past it, you wouldn't know it was there.

So (we can be) elevating visibility and looking at how Portland can tell the story of tribal people in a better way throughout the city, whether it's a park location, like Waterfront Park, or whether it's art, naming of spaces, things of that nature.

The other piece of my work is to establish the Native American Advisory Commission. That was something that community members and tribal leaders were asking for, so I'll also be working on that.

S.Q.: *There are people from quite a few tribes living in Portland. Does that create complexity as far as government obligations and services are concerned, with people represented by tribal governments all over the country?*

L.J.: Yeah. And what's beautiful about Portland – and this is true for other cities out there – is that complexity. You have people that are from tribes that are traditionally or historically from this area, and you have folks that are from tribes that are from across the country, and even into Canada. Each person that comes here has their unique story, their journey of how they came, and how their family came to Portland. And each one is important, and has value.

You also have the tribes in the area. And Portland, like a lot of other urban areas out there, are near tribes that experienced termination. I think it's great that the tribes like Grand Ronde, Siletz, others, that they have been able to be re-instated ... and you see their presence here in the city as well, which is great, and adds more beauty to our community and our presence here.

S.Q.: *Historically there's been a lot of racism in the region (and of course in the country at large). Growing up here in Portland, did you see racism against Native people, whether institutional or otherwise?*

L.J.: I think because I had only lived here, I wasn't really aware as a younger kid of the racism. I had learned about the impact of redlining on Native families here in Portland, so their lack of access to being able to decide where they want to live, to buy a home. I would take it a little bit further, and describe it as being invisible, and stereotyped. As I got into my teen years and into my adult years, a lot of times my experience is that people will think I'm Hispanic, or they think I'm Asian, they'll

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