

Kris Turner: Hello, and welcome back to Wisconsin Law and Action from the University of Wisconsin Law School. I'm your host, Kris Turner. Today we're thrilled to welcome someone whose work truly exemplifies the idea of Wisconsin Law and Action, Amanda White Eagle, Director of the Great Lakes Indigenous Law Center and a leader in tribal law, indigenous legal education, and community-centered advocacy. Amanda has spent nearly two decades working with the Ho-Chunk Nation, serving as an appellate judge, attorney general, and in other leadership roles, and now brings that deep experience back to UW Law as an educator and director. Under her leadership, the Great Lakes Indigenous Law Center has expanded experiential learning opportunities, strengthened partnerships with tribal nations, and launched powerful programming like the new Native November Law Symposium. Amanda, thank you so much for joining the podcast today.

Amanda White Ea...: Thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here today.

Kris Turner: Not as excited as I am to have you here, I promise you that. But let's go ahead and get started. Let's start with your journey. You have a remarkable background. Years of service with the Ho-Chunk Nation, as I just mentioned, now you're directing the Great Lakes Indigenous Law Center at your alma mater. What drew you back to this work after earning your JD here in 2005, and what does it mean to come back to UW Law in a leadership role?

Amanda White Ea...: Yeah, I'm really excited to be a part of the University of Wisconsin Law School. In terms of what drew me back, I had worked for my own tribe, as you mentioned, for nearly 20 years. And I had an opportunity at NYU in Yale at their American Indian Sovereignty Project to brief cases for the United States Supreme Court and work with amici and work with students and track cases. And I really enjoyed that work and I started thinking about posterity and how additional Native attorneys are needed and Native allies are needed for direct work with tribes. And so I really started thinking about ways that I could contribute to our communities.

And when the position for the Great Lakes Indigenous Law Center director opened, I thought it would be a perfect fit. I would be back in Wisconsin near not only my tribe, but my family. And it really just seemed like it was a good fit. And a lot of what the center had been doing since the '90s, I could see myself working towards those goals.

Kris Turner: For listeners who might be new to it, could you give us a quick overview? What's the Great Lakes Indigenous Law Center and how would you describe its mission?

Amanda White Ea...: Sure. So as I mentioned, the Great Lakes Indigenous Law Center has been at the University of Wisconsin Law School since the mid '90s. Its mission has been to advance the field of indigenous law. And that includes federal Indian law, that includes tribal law, as well as some concepts surrounding international indigenous law. And part of that includes cultivating partnerships between native nations and tribal communities in Wisconsin and the Great Lakes region that really requires improving access to legal education, legal systems. The center also has a component that requires engaging in impactful service and scholarship.

And so a lot of that has to do with creating relationships and securing resources. So I mean, that's a really long answer to say the primary mission is to advance the field of indigenous law and thinking mindfully about law and action, the Wisconsin idea, how do we help our partners that predated the university as well as the state.

Kris Turner:

The reason that answer was so long is because you do so many things. That's not a question, but that was just an observation based on what you just said. And it's amazing how just you have the classroom experience that you already lead, but also the external opportunities that you drive for all the students and the faculty and staff here. Speaking of, the Center has its hands in so many initiatives, externships with tribal nations, community-driven food sovereignty projects, expanded research resources. When you stepped into the director role, what were your goals for the center? How have they taken shape so far?

Amanda White Ea...:

Part of our strategic plan included just different initiatives that the center could work to accomplish over a period of time. And the strategic plan really helped me try to focus because for the reasons that you indicated, the center does a lot for a lot of different people. And I can really credit that to former Director Monette, who was a part of the Center's director since the '90s.

So in order to sort of streamline and figure out what are our initiatives, we engaged in a strategic planning process. It was me along with the center employee, Dan Cornelius, and we spoke with not only tribal leadership in the state, but we also spoke with alums as well as faculty, campus at large, about what some of the initiatives would look like.

So what I did starting off was conduct listening sessions to strengthen relations with tribal state and federal governments. And so our listening sessions really started with our tribal nations. And so meeting with leadership, talking about some of the concerns, what they would like to see from the law school, what their needs are, and then also trying to begin to not only establish and foster those relationships, but partner with tribal colleges as well as the University of Wisconsin system to try to figure out if there's programming that would be of interest to students at their schools to try to create some type of bridge from those institutions to the law school.

Another part was to identify and support tribal governmental needs. And so that was talking with various branches of government, working with court systems and judiciaries to say, "Do you need assistance with the rules of civil procedure, rules of appellate procedure? Are there areas that we could assist your particular judiciary?" And to a lesser extent, we also approached tribes in terms of their legislative branches or their councils to see if there were any needs that could be met by the center.

A lot of this had to do with collaborating relationships and once we've established those collaborative relationships, trying to then distill what would be needed. Once we had all of this information, we went through strategic planning, then we started thinking about programming and what that could look like. And that has ranged everything from trying to find students for particular issues. So as

I had mentioned, one of the points was to reach out to tribal nations and to figure out what their needs were, and then working with the extern program, so the Native Nation's external program to try to find students that were interested in that type of work. Additionally, part of this also included just communicating with tribes and governments and attorneys to really figure out what's going on in federal Indian law, what's going on in tribal law that would be of interest to our communities.

And that required us to take a closer look at some of the case law that was coming out of different districts. And so we have students that would also track cases that could be impactful to Native nations or to practitioners, but really just trying to figure out how we could be a resource. And part of that would be making sure that practitioners and students could potentially write amici briefs for those cases, not necessarily at the Supreme Court level, but at the district court or the federal court level that could impact tribes.

Kris Turner:

I've been writing down everything that the center does, and it's filled up an entire page while you've been speaking to me. One project that has stood out to me in the past and in our conversation here is just the ongoing effort to expand access to tribal legal materials, as you mentioned, like following case law and other things, but also expanding access to constitutions, codes, and court decisions. Why is this work so important? What impact do you hope it will have for tribal communities and students?

Amanda White Ea...:

That's a great question. The access to codes, court decisions, constitutions, it directly reinforces tribal sovereignty and ensures justice and legal fairness, and it promotes respect for the tribal judiciary across jurisdictions. So the importance of that work has just been paramount. Sometimes tribes can make the determination to not have their codes or their court decisions or their constitutions in the public domain, and that's a tribe's sovereign right, and they can make those decisions. But from the law school perspective, from the Great Lakes Center or Indigenous Law Center's perspective, it's really great to have access to those codes and decisions and constitutions for the benefit of students and those individuals that want to advance tribal concerns.

One of the key reasons to allow access is that it really does strengthen tribal sovereignty. It affirms governmental authority. You can use it to guide legal development. And then our students who later become attorneys feel much more comfortable going into those jurisdictions and practicing. A lot of what I received when I was speaking to different tribes about their concerns was just the fact that we don't have a lot of practitioners graduating from law school and going to tribal communities. And part of that is access to information. As a new attorney, it becomes sort of difficult to just say, "You know what? I'm going to go and practice in a jurisdiction that I haven't had a bar examine in." It's a fear of the unknown. And I find that tribes can often sidestep that if they are providing access. And some of the work that the center, the law library, and different practitioners have done in order to provide access and to make it something that you can research and you can find the case law and be a good attorney in those jurisdictions, I think is really, really important.

Kris Turner:

It was wonderful for the Law Library to partner with the Indigenous Law Center and with other partners like Open Law Library and the National Indian Law Library to get some of these codes more openly available, both in our repository and on the tribe's website. What Amanda and I are referring to is the Great Lakes Tribal Law Collection, which you can find in the repository where you'll find several tribal codes and more are coming soon. So it's been a really wonderful opportunity, as Amanda just outlined, to help support the tribal initiatives to put the codes out there and make them more freely available.

This is just one example of a big public facing program that the center has taken on, but there's many other ones that you've helped shape as well. For example, this fall, the Center launched the inaugural Native November Law Symposium. What inspired this new series? What themes did you feel were most important to the center in its first year?

Amanda White Ea...:

Our excitement really centered around this idea of amplifying indigenous voices and making sure that indigenous voices have an ongoing and critical conversation surrounding particular issues. Now you asked why was our first foray into this law symposium, Environmental Justice and Sovereignty? And that had a lot to do with some of the strategic planning that took place and conversations that we've had with tribes. I would be remiss if I didn't state that many tribes in the state of Wisconsin have indicated that environmental concerns are routinely affecting Native nations along with tribal members.

And so we thought that environmental justice and sovereignty could be something that could be really broad and we would have this opportunity to bring in different perspectives. Our initial thought was that it would focus on pipelines, it would focus on climate change, but we also had individuals coming forward and talking about how historical trauma has affected present day.

And so that's when we had folks coming in and be like, "Well, what does boarding school litigation look like? There was a report issued by the federal government. How does that impact tribes and tribal people?" And so we just started really taking what is essentially a complex tapestry and almost getting out of magnifying glass and looking at this thread by thread. And that was really an important ... We have a series of important topics that had practical effects.

And so we weren't just able to take some of this theory, but we were able to then translate it into the practical. And so it was a success. I look back at that and I was like, that was not only something that I think the center could be proud of, but we had participation electronically, we had participation in person. And I think it was just helpful to have these broad topics discussed and not only for students, but for practitioners to understand federal Indian law, tribal law, it has impacts just like contemporary law issues.

Kris Turner:

Professor Monette has been a guest on the podcast twice in the past several years, and he has made similar mentions about how the large impact of tribal law and federal Indian law on larger issues is such a fundamental sometimes misunderstanding of other attorneys or law school students, and I'm so glad that you are continuing to step up and enhance that line of thought. One other thing

you just said that really resonated with me is to examine the threads that make up a tapestry. What a wonderful turn of phrase to understand how laws and these larger controversial and complicated concepts come together just on smaller ideas. I just wanted to call that out because that really struck home for me.

But as you hosted these sessions, I want to continue to examine all these sessions throughout this entire month, you mentioned some of the topics, like environmental justice, boarding school legacies, the indigenous movements across the globe. Were there any particular conversations or moments that really, truly resonated with you?

Amanda White Ea...: Two really resonated. And one was, I just mentioned the legacy of boarding schools and some of the statistics that were highlighted and just how colonialism and erasure affect native communities and how it was strategic. Richard Pratt had the saying, "Kill the Indian, save the man." And in order to disrupt Native communities, it was determined to remove children so that future Indian nations wouldn't have citizens. And looking at some of the policies that we see historically and then some of the contemporary concerns that we see, it's all part of and related. And it was just really powerful to see not only the statistics, but how it is continuing to impact contemporary life. Then additionally, I found the pipeline resistance discussion to be really impactful as well, mainly because we will see how water is going to be central in so many native and rural communities and how the law can be utilized in order to either bolster claims or sidestep claims.

And I think it was interesting to hear the current litigation. I appreciate Midwest Environmental Advocates as well as Earthjustice for sharing their perspectives. And I know, you're like, "Pick one," but I have one more. And that was the panel that really involved children and how children are suing on behalf of really their futures and how climate change is affecting your ability to gather traditional foods. The fact that the growing or snow or any type of change in environment and how that is affecting people on the ground, Our Children's Trust is doing some really interesting work and it was really great to hear their approach. And so they really highlighted what was going on in Montana, but I was interested and I didn't know that there was similar litigation occurring in Wisconsin. And so I think that that was also ... Really, you look at all of these and because I'm a Ho-Chunk tribal member, I'm a Wisconsin resident, and I was able to put myself into these situations and really empathize with what's occurring in our environment.

Kris Turner: This is a good problem to have, to have not just one moment that really was resonating with you, to have at least three that I counted in there as this signifier of how awesome this Native symposium was, Native November Symposium. But as if this wasn't enough, you also support one of the law school's longest running traditions, the Coming Together People's Conference, which our students co-host each spring. For folks who have never attended, what makes this conference so special and why has it endured for nearly four decades?

Amanda White Ea...: The conversation that we had earlier about how the symposium was like pulling at threads of a tapestry, if you were to talk about this idea of the ILSA Conference, it's really the foundation. I was a member of the Indigenous Law

Students Association and an organizer of the Coming Together of Peoples Conference when I was in law school. And the conference, as you mentioned, has been going on for a considerable amount of time, and it's provided a foundation for students to embark on legal careers, areas of law that they find interesting and are able to then bring in panels. And I think the reason why this conference has been so successful is because it's run in large part by students.

When I was a student, it was almost like a rite of passage where it was, "Okay, you're a 2L or you're a 3L and now you, law student, try to put together a conference panel and bring it to campus." And I don't know what your experience was like in law school, but it's kind of something that's rather daunting to be like, "Okay, I'm just a 2L, what do I know about bringing professionals onto campus?" But it requires some skills. You have to be able to call an attorney and be like, "I would like to hear you come and speak about this particular issue because I find it interesting."

And it led to, among other things, but it led to this idea that I was going to be a practitioner soon and that I have an interest in not just learning the core subjects that you learn in law school, but you have to be able to understand when you practice different areas. And so you'd find an area that you found particularly interesting. I think when I was in law school, it was about the Indian Child Welfare Act and a case that was percolating up the circuit court and the federal court systems, but really looking at that, it provides this foundation for students to become involved. And I think the reason it's been so successful is in large part due to the student involvement, as well as some really great alumni speakers and resources. So students will work with UW faculty to say, "This is an area that interests me. How is Indian law affected by it?" And so it's a lot of individuals with knowledge along with students working towards a common goal of providing education for our community.

Kris Turner: Have you maintained or built connections with some of these other students that have worked on this conference along with you and what kind of collaborations have come out of that?

Amanda White Ea...: Yeah. I mean, everything from friendships to meeting with people, I think a lot of what's happened over the years is sometimes you tend to get siloed in your area of like, "Well, I know I'm going to be interested in Indian law, but I know that I'm interested in tax, and so I'm taking tax this year, and that's all I'm going to really be looking into." This requires you to sort of sidestep and look into a different area, and again, developing empathy and understanding as to this other area of law and really just promotes learning generally.

Kris Turner: I've had that same experience getting out there and you kind of have to break down the silo to say, "Okay, we're not just talking about this area law that I'm interested in, but to learn about what other people are doing and really build those stronger connections there." By the way, you asked about my law school experience, I'd need to lay down on a couch and you'd have to hire a therapist to have that conversation, so we won't have that right now. Instead, we'll go back to talking about the Coming Together Of Peoples Conference. So as you had mentioned already, the collaboration with students is really a unique aspect to

making this conference work so well. How do you see the partnership between the Center and the Indigenous Law Students Association shaping the conference each year and in the forthcoming year?

Amanda White Ea...: Really, I see the center as offering any type of assistance that the students need, and that'll vary from year to year. Some years, the students may need financial support, some years the students will need access to particular areas or being able to rely upon myself and Professor Dolan to figure out who in Indian law is considered the expert in particular areas. But really, I think what we'll be seeing in the future are opportunities for federal Indian law, tribal law, and just the general population to have just a meeting of the minds and a general understanding of some of the cases that are coming up.

So it'll be governed by students too. This year, we have a student that's really interested in healthcare law and how Indian health services and healthcare work in concert, or sometimes not. And so having whatever the interests of the students are will greatly impact. And so that's part of the delight of being the Great Lakes Indigenous Law Center director, is I get to learn just along with the students about areas that I may not be entirely familiar with. And so if I have a student coming and saying, "I'm really interested in constitutional law and tribes and how they form constitutions," and then trying to find projects or partnerships that would allow student input on something as valuable as understanding and writing constitutions.

Kris Turner: It is a very fortunate position to be in where you can learn about other areas of law while students are working on that. I feel much the same way having these wonderful conversations with all the faculty here to learn about the work they have done, what they're interested in, what is developed out of it. But you had mentioned previously in a similar vein when you were doing your strategic planning that you had to kind of navigate the space between tribal, state and federal systems and kind of learn about how you could support them and how you would work in all those spaces. What do you see as some of the biggest legal challenges today and some opportunities as well facing indigenous nations, especially in the Great Lakes region?

Amanda White Ea...: I think a lot of it will have to do with environment and land. I think that's happening on probably a national level as well. So as we're trying to figure out what the role of our communities will be, I think you have artificial intelligence, and so tribes are also dealing with artificial intelligence and what it means, water usage. So you think about the Great Lakes and how data centers will be affecting water usage. I know that the center, along with the law library, has looked at smaller issues when it comes to AI and how tribal courts are going to deal with litigants using AI in the courtrooms, and we have a lot of really interesting areas. So I think AI will also be addressed in the law school, addressed in communities and addressed in tribes.

Kris Turner: It'll have to be addressed, or if it's not, it's to our detriment, that's for sure. It is something that's going to challenge us any which way, but we'll have a conversation with that another time. I know that you and Dean Tokaji have collaborated together often and frequently with tribal judges, tribal courts, talking

about AI impacts in society writ large and elsewhere. So I'm so glad that the opportunity for partnership has continued and grown.

Speaking of partnerships, you mentor so many students interested in tribal law or in indigenous justice work. What advice do you give them, both indigenous and non-indigenous as they think about their careers and their role in supporting tribal sovereignty?

Amanda White Ea...: Mentoring has been one of the greatest opportunities that EW Law School has offered to me. And the advice that I've given students has been to learn as much as you can, but noting that nothing will really take the place of doing the work and working with tribes themselves. So I think oftentimes we're able to sort of say, "Well, in theory, this is what a tribe would want." But really there's value in meeting with tribes one-on-one and going to tribal communities and figuring out how to best be a resource.

Oftentimes, I think students are saying, "Well, I'm not a tribal member of such and such tribe, so maybe I shouldn't be working for this tribe." And I think that that's not accurate. I think tribes need allies. They need individuals who are interested in learning and oftentimes when tribes are looking for assistance, they're going to be grateful for the assistance that can be provided.

Rural Wisconsin generally doesn't have a lot of housing opportunities for students in the summer, and I think tribal communities are similarly situated. So working with tribes to try to find innovative ways to provide any type of assistance, I think is going to be key in the future. So hopefully we'll have students that are interested in working for tribes that will be flexible in different ways. And so I also tell students that I'm mentoring that flexibility will be really helpful in your career just generally. I think these little moments of mentoring, hopefully I'm sprinkling in enough of what students need in order to become great practitioners and alums.

Kris Turner: It sounds like there's a lot of ripe opportunities for partnerships that are out there, both in the state of Wisconsin, but potentially beyond. Have you seen any partnerships starting to grow across from tribal nations, from across the US?

Amanda White Ea...: Yeah, so one of the initiatives that one of the center's employees Dan Cornelius is working on is the Elder Food Box. A lot has to do with partnerships amongst tribes to try to assist tribal elders. And so we at the center are hoping to play a role in creating inner tribal agreements, but that's something that I think we're still working towards, either business agreements or any type of agreements that will facilitate tribes working together. But across the United States, I think there are court systems that will work together and pool resources, but there's a lot of opportunities for tribes to work together. But I think a caveat to that would be that there are over 500 federally recognized tribes that all have their own beliefs, sovereign rights and so oftentimes there might be opportunities for collaboration, but that'll certainly be up to the tribes.

Kris Turner: So you kind of started to get into my final question here a little bit, but I want to ask it anyway, of course. Looking ahead, whether it's the center's growth, future

symposia, new partnerships, whatever it might be, what excites you most about the next chapter of your work?

Amanda White Ea...: I think what excites me most about the next chapter is the fact that it can change. So I may say, "Okay, our next Native November symposium will be about American Indian or tribal businesses." And in the back of my mind, I'm thinking based upon the conversations and the phone calls that I've been receiving, I think this would be really helpful, but a lot can happen between now and next November. And if something is coming up that tribes are like, "Hey, this needs to be discussed. This could be a great opportunity for the symposium." It's something that I can pivot and look to.

I think the next thing that we're excited about is the Coming Together Of Peoples conference in the spring. So we'll be working with students to facilitate and help in whatever way that we can, but we have Professor Torey Dolan who has some really exciting and interesting scholarship, and so the center would like to figure out how to support her in any way that we can. So a lot of what we have, we're definitely open to assisting people as we see fit. And like we mentioned earlier, we have some court rules with regards to AI, so we'll be looking at those. So we have a couple of different areas that we have planned, but really I think we're just excited to help tribes in the state and tribal people navigate their potential legal issues.

Kris Turner: Well, I'm excited to see what's next. It's always such a joy to see what events, what symposia, what partnerships the Great Lakes Indigenous Law Center comes up with. And it's always a true privilege for the Law Library to be partnered with you when the opportunity presents itself. Amanda White Eagle, director of the Great Lakes Indigenous Law Center, thank you so much for sharing your time, your expertise, and your vision with us today. Your work has really had meaningful ripple effects throughout the region and beyond. So thank you again for taking the time and for your work here in the community here at UW Law School.

Amanda White Ea...: Thank you so much. Have a good day.

Kris Turner: Thank you all for listening. This was Wisconsin Law In Action from the University of Wisconsin Law School. To hear more conversations with our faculty about their research and its real world impact, visit [wilawinaction.law.wis.edu](http://wilawinaction.law.wis.edu). And you can stay up to date on Wisconsin Law School's scholarship by subscribing to this podcast via the Apple iTunes store or follow Wisconsin Law School on social media wherever you're at for updates on faculty news and publications. I'm Kris Turner, see you next time and happy researching.