



## Episode 24: Growing Indigenous Infrastructure with Forest James

### Transcript *(lightly edited for readability)*

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**[00:00:00] Roxy Manning:**

Welcome to Fierce Compassion, the podcast that explores the power of compassion in creating an antiracist society. I'm Roxy Manning.

**[00:00:18] Sarah Peyton:**

And I'm Sarah Peyton. Our guest today is Forest James, an enrolled citizen of the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation. From his homeland in Ashland, Oregon, Forest's work is rooted in cultural heritage, innovation, and community empowerment. He has over 20 years of experience in the film and entertainment industry, and now has dedicated his career to planning and executing infrastructure projects for Native and rural America. An advocate for Indigenous communities, he blends creativity and business acumen, launching initiatives like a nonprofit for media and renewable energy training. With expertise in wireless engineering, economic development, and strategic partnerships, Forest has successfully funded nearly 1 billion dollars in projects. It was so compelling to hear Forest speak about his experience growing up as a citizen of the Nation of the Tolowa Dee-ni' people in Northern California and Southern Oregon, and how he took his identity, so many different identities, and his lived experience, and has taken this into a life journey of leveraging this experience in service of his communities and their primary needs.

**[00:01:51] Roxy Manning:**

And I was actually deeply moved as a mom myself, when I heard about his journey from this 15, 16-year-old who was on his own, and the importance of mentorship. How many people showed up for him and gave him a chance, and the way that mentorship is crucial for people who are not on this traditional educational occupational path to be able to find their journey and to thrive. And then to see how Forest is now paying that forward in his community is so inspiring.

**[00:02:22] Sarah Peyton:**

And then, of course, because we love Beloved Community and finding it in every place that we can in the world, there's a way that we got to hear about this in a whole new context with Forest, with the model of looking for the highest good for everybody in political and social and cultural and

tribal and neighbors of tribe... experiences of bringing resources together to solve really big problems. It kind of blew my socks off, Roxy.

**[00:02:56] Roxy Manning:**

So we think you're going to be so excited with this episode of Fierce Compassion. Thank you for joining us again.

Welcome Forest.

**[00:03:10] Forest James:**

Oh, thank you. Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.

**[00:03:14] Roxy Manning:**

Well, one of the things I'm very curious about is to hear a little bit about your journey from growing up on the Tolowa Dee-ni' Reservation - and I love this phrase, "where the redwood trees meet the ocean" - and then becoming this multifaceted professional in film, technology, infrastructure. How did that experience shape the path to where you are today?

**[00:03:36] Forest James:**

Oh, sure. Great question. Thank you for asking. First off, traditionally it's actually appropriate for me to introduce myself in my own language, if that's okay.

**[00:03:44] Roxy Manning:**

I would love it.

**[00:03:45] Forest James:**

So, [Tolowa Dee-ni' introduction]. Good afternoon, Sarah and Roxy. I appreciate you having me here today. Yes, I am a citizen of the Tolowa Dee-ni' Nation. We are a small Pacific Northwest tribe that straddles the Oregon and California coastal border. I'm also Yurok and Hoopa, and then half German. The Yurok and the Hoopa are my cousins, so my aunt is Yurok, and my grandpa was Hoopa. They're further south than my tribe. I kind of grew up on all three reservations, but really was raised and enrolled in the Tolowa... the Tolowa tribe.

So, growing up on the reservation, you don't really know what you don't know, right? I grew up around - for me it was normal, just living, it was nothing different than you might expect in any rural community with the exception of most Indian reservations do struggle a bit financially, so there's, you know, a pretty significant gap when it comes to... I guess the resources that certain communities have. So, we grew up with very little. I mean, I had, you know, in many parts of our house, we had dirt floors and unpainted plywood. And, but on the flip side of that, what I've found

is, with my tribe and with many others, is that the tribes that tend to struggle financially, or with economic health, are rich in culture. In fact, there's some of the best singers, some of the best drummers, some of the best dancers, some of the best sweat lodges.

So, growing up on the reservation for me though was, I mean, I was surrounded by family. I'm related to, you know, everybody pretty much, we're a small tribe. So, my cousins, my distant relatives, my immediate relatives, you know, they're all there. And the tribe's really made up of maybe a half a dozen big families, and even some of those are related. So first off, you don't date anybody on the reservation. Chances are you're related to them.

But it was beautiful. I mean, "where the Redwood trees meet the ocean" is an apt description. I grew up in the Redwoods stomping around on, you know, in forests with ferns and redwood trees. My favorite pastime and view in the redwoods is not actually looking at them, it's laying down and looking up. And then growing up on the beach. For me, you know, I grew up with a lot of salmon. I grew up with a lot of Dungeness crab, a lot of smelt, a lot of our cultural foods, certain times of the year. In the wintertime, we could just walk down to the ocean, drag our feet in the water till we kick the crab, bend down, pick them up, put them in a bucket. And we'd boil Dungeness crab right there on the reservation. And I grew up, you know, just thinking that was completely normal. So it was a beautiful thing and, equally, it came with challenges as well, I think. I think I appreciate more about the experience I had early on in life now that I'm older than I did right when I was there. Most people are like, "I'm trying to get out of the town I grew up in." So, you know, that's what I wanted. I wanted to go out and explore.

**[00:07:04] Sarah Peyton:**

I'm just - my head is filled with these pictures of lying down and looking up at the trees and kicking in the sand and finding crabs and all of that. You sort of started to touch this, but how did those roots, the roots of your culture being in that particular environment with those folks and in that world, how did that shape your worldview? And some of the strengths that you bring? And then what are some of the challenges?

**[00:07:38] Forest James:**

Sure. So how it shaped my world worldview, it's actually two part. So what I grew up with, I didn't know as culture. I just knew it as aunties and uncles in life. But when I was 14 years old, my family actually moved us to Hawaii. So I actually spent 11 years on the North shore of Oahu, and we moved in with a Tahitian family, from Tahiti. And every Wednesday they would do Tahitian dances, drumming and singing. And they taught us. And we were all drumming and singing one day and I thought I'd go look over at my dad. I'm like, we have our own dances, our own drumming, our own singing. We have all our own attire, regalia, you know, for when we do it, when we do those things.

So it was actually a combination of my own culture, but being able to experience and see somebody else's culture and appreciate it, that it suddenly, I think it made things click for me. And I immediately had an appreciation. I spent many years going back to the reservation I grew up on, talking to our tribal elders, talking to my family, talking to relatives, and just asking questions. How it shaped my worldview... I would say... you know, somebody recently asked me if there was one thing that I wanted people to know about our culture, what would it be? That's a big question. But the answer to that question is actually to be able to identify the humor. I think, you know, the humor found within most Indigenous communities is fairly similar. That is one thing we all share, is a similar humor. And, it really helped me see that we don't have to take ourselves so seriously. So that, that was a major benefit to me growing up. Because it's easy to take yourself really seriously. It's easy to look at your surroundings, the struggles and all that, and just be absorbed in it. But to break things up with humor was something that really helped me in a positive way.

**[00:09:39] Roxy Manning:**

Can you give an example of how the humor manifested? Like give us an example of what you mean by humor.

**[00:09:45] Forest James:**

Yeah, no. So I do have an example. Roxy, I know you've heard this before, I think. After being in Hawaii for a couple of years, I've went back to the reservation and I'm like enamored with my culture suddenly and remembering everything I was taught and being like, "Wow! This is okay! You guys taught me well!" And I went to a tribal elder and I'm like, "I want to learn a language. I really want to learn it, and I want to know what's important in life." And I'm like, just wanting some wisdom, and he goes, gets all serious, you know, really gets into character. He gets all serious and he goes, "Forest, I want you to remember this saying." He goes, "It's [phrase in Tolowa Dee-ni']. Can you say it back?" And I said, "[phrase in Tolowa Dee-ni']" He goes, "You say that all the time and remember it. Come back to me in a week and I'll tell you what it means. That's the piece of advice you really need."

I'm like, oh my gosh! So in the shower, walking around, I'm like, looking like a lunatic saying, "[phrase in Tolowa Dee-ni']." And I come back to him in a week and I'm like, oh, okay, finally, I'm going to get answers, you know, to all life's problems, I guess. And, I am like, "What does it mean? What does it mean?" And he goes, "It means head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes." You know, and it was just a perfect example, I think, of Indigenous humor is just not to take ourselves so seriously. And that humor is really... you know, being able to laugh is really important in community. Especially if they're struggling. So that's one small example. I'll have to think of others, cause I get this question quite a bit.

**[00:11:31] Roxy Manning:**

Yeah, there's something, as you talk about not taking ourselves too seriously and you've referenced, like, some of the challenges, right? Poverty and even, I could imagine, it's both a strength and a challenge that the community is so small. I actually wonder how self-compassion showed up and how it became part of your journey. So we ask every guest, how do you define self-compassion and what was the role that it played in your work and in your life?

**[00:11:57] Forest James:**

Wonderful question. It didn't come for free. I would say... professionally, I work, I've worked with hundreds of tribes, throughout the U S and Canada. And I see a lot of common threads throughout many of them, and just touching, before I answer that question, on some of the challenges. For me personally, I mean, I've been on the red road for 18 years now. So that means I don't, drink, I don't do drugs, and I haven't since. And, alcoholism and drug addiction is a pretty big thing, and that leads to many other struggles, from abuse of all kinds to... you name it. And when communities struggle with things like this, or if, even me, struggling with alcoholism, that also didn't come for free. It came at a cost. I hurt relationships. I broke, burned bridges. And since then, almost all those have been repaired. But nonetheless, you know, by the time I hit 27, self-compassion was not a word I understood or knew. In fact, I was really hard on myself.

And I think little by little, what I've tried to do throughout my life is surround myself by mentors. So that could be mentally, emotionally, physically, spiritually. Mentors that help me, one, call me out on my baloney, is a polite way of saying it. But then, two, are able to help teach me in certain things. I've had a lot of great secular mentors, but for the sake of this topic, you know, I think the ones that help me develop better self-talk.

Self-compassion, for me... I looked at my res... There's a term - it would definitely qualify as a microaggression - called Rez family. And the Rez family is, you know, what you often see is, again, alcoholism, drug addiction, physical abuse, sexual abuse, you know, all the things that come with a community that suffers from historical trauma disguised as dysfunction. But I saw it as dysfunction. And I saw it as something to be ashamed of. So I think as I, you know, got older, had life experience, self-compassion suddenly became something different. And, even today. You know, recently I went to an intensive training course for Nonviolent Communication, and it taught me a whole nother layer of self-empathy that didn't exist before I went to that training. You know, I guess there's multiple layers to it. I don't mean to ramble on. Self-empathy, what it means to me, in addition to not taking ourselves so seriously is remembering that nothing "is," things "tend to be," right? I am not one thing. I might tend to be an alcoholic at one point in my life, but that doesn't mean that's what I am. So just not freezing ourselves in time, not comparing ourselves to other people, or comparing ourselves to ourselves at a different time in our life. Because if you've

ever compared your insides, to somebody else's outsides, you know you lose every time. And self-compassion is a way to avoid comparing those two things. Does that all make sense?

**[00:15:09] Sarah Peyton:**

Yeah, that makes so much sense. And I'm enjoying that you found a whole new level of self-compassion with the Nonviolent Communication workshop, cause I have some shared reality with that, and I also love bringing in the idea of how comparing ourselves can be so toxic and really put a lot of blocks up in our life path.

So we've been talking about your identity as an Indigenous person and a citizen of your nation, of the Tolowa Dee-ni' people, and now we're really interested in what other identities have been important to you, especially as we're starting to move now out of childhood and toward your profession. What kinds of things have been important? What kind of identities have spoken to you or have carried you in this, in your path?

**[00:16:11] Forest James:**

Sure, so I think... Somebody once told me, a tribal elder, he said that we've achieved emotional sobriety when we can freely move through the states of adult, child, and elder. So I would say that when it comes to my identities, I'm made up of many and they change over time. Hopefully, you know, for the better, and evolve. I'm a working professional. I am an indigenous person. I'm also a German person, from Kiel. So those are my cultures. But, I am a father. I'm a brother. I'm a friend of many people. I am a Christian, actually. I came from traditional Native American beliefs, religion, and it was actually a medicine man that led me to reading the Bible, which is very strange cause I was so prejudiced against the bible. So, that's an identity. I would say there's several others and how they've shaped my view or influenced my work as a creative professional, a businessperson. For what I do right now, there's a saying that it's business, it's not personal. But the work that I do with indigenous communities, it doesn't get more personal. There is no separation of business and personal. They're communities that are just in dire need of support.

But how all these things shaped my, like, my work life. So... so I came from kind of a broken family. You know, my family split apart when I was 14. At 15, I moved out on my own. At 16, I actually joined the film and entertainment industry. A buddy of mine said - much older than I was - he said, "Forest, do you know what a production assistant is?" and I said, "I have no idea." He said, "Well, do you want to learn?" And he could obviously tell - the more I look back, being 15 on my own, 16, it, you know, obviously that's not always normal. But, he, you know, really took me under his wing and said, "Well, let me show you." So that started a journey for me. I got my next 760 some odd days to be in the union, to be an assistant director. So I worked in every department in film. An assistant director pretty much manages people. That's it. I manage the actors, we manage the

crew, and these are big crews where hundreds of thousands of dollars by the minute are measured, so it's high intensity. I would say the different identities that I've had have been shaped by all those mentors.

One of my roommates, when I was 17 - he was also much older than I was - he was a Master Practitioner in Advanced Neurodynamics and Neurolinguistic Programming. And he would hold these trainings and all these doctors and people would come to these trainings for NLP. And for two years he said, "Forest, for the next two years I want you to go to all these trainings with me. You can do it for free. You'll just be the kid in the back, watching, learning, listening." So for a couple of years, I learned about Neurolinguistic Programming, and I was like, "Wow, human behavior, this is amazing!" And it exposed me to questions. It wasn't just the teachers. It was the questions in the classes that the people asked that, that impacted me, you know, the most.

And that just kind of opened my mind to just different things. So that was something that helped shape me, but the film and entertainment and industry really raised me. I mean, I was a teenager trying to figure things out, life out. And I think I love people, and I think that really impacted, you know, the different identities that I have, that my parents instilled in me, for the good that they did it really helped me to just care for people, and that translated into my work. If you don't care about people, you're not gonna... they're not going to be productive. Right? When you're on major budgets and short timelines. It was actually the film and entertainment industry that led me to what I'm doing now, weirdly enough. But, I spent about 12 years in that industry. I had a great career.

I also, I don't often tell people this, but I did have multiple careers. So, when I was 14, my mom started me in modeling, really early, and that took off at about, after about four years into it. So I traveled all over the world during modeling and juggling film projects. So I, got traveling exposure with the modeling and I got people exposure with the film industry and many different personalities.

I guess I found mentors in that industry as well, and I remember saying to myself, "Boy, I didn't go to college and all these people around me have got degrees." You know, I asked the producer once - Brian Grazer, he's produced a lot of films - and I said, "You know, is this something I should be going to school for?" He goes, "Forest, people usually go to school to work with me. You're here. Just keep working, keep learning, keep asking questions, find mentors." And, that's what I did. And I think I just followed the example of the people that taught me and really that helped shape me.

But I'd gone on a personal note. I'd gone through a divorce. Part of the wreckage of my past, which has since then been repaired. But I went through a divorce, and I thought, you know what? I really got to sober up. So I got sober. I went to a Native American healing center for six months and they taught me how to live sober. And I went back to the Indian reservation, just doing simple work. I could go back and make mid six low-mid six figures in LA and jump right into the industry and make money again, but instead I stayed there, honestly, mowing lawns and pulling weeds, and documenting my own tribal council, photographing them, hearing their stories, filming them. And I asked one of my spiritual advisors, I said, "You know, I got a chance to go back and work on a studio film in Hollywood. And I don't have to pull weeds anymore and use food bank boxes." And I've been, poor or without resources three times in my life and wealthy three times. Honestly, money comes and goes, it's a tool, and I found I could be happy or miserable in both circumstances. But he said, "Forest, yeah, you could go back and make money, contemplate what's the best for you spiritually."

So I thought about it and I decided to not go back to LA and jump back into the industry. It was too... my sobriety was too new. I was learning how to live again. I was wrestling with the idea that I was this quintessential native guy that's an alcoholic, being on a reservation. You know, that came with shame. So I met a girl, as is a part of every story, just about, and for me it was. And, you know, we moved to Bend, Oregon. She moved there; I followed her. I moved there with 200 bucks in my wallet. And a buddy of mine had written and produced the TV show Rome on HBO. And he knew I was out there on the reservation, and he knew I grew up on one. And he said, "Forest, aren't you a tribal member?" I said, "Yes, I am." He goes, "What do you know about tribal government?" I said, "Well, just because I grew up around it. I think I know a bit more than most." He said, "Okay!" Well, his buddy Phil Emil had just purchased Steven Spielberg's old company, DTS, the guys who invented surround sound. He goes, "He was born on a reserve up in Canada. He's a British guy and he's got a soft spot for indigenous communities. He wants to build a company that serves, globally, communities. Would you like to help build the Native American version of that company?" I said, sure.

And they flew me around to meet with tribes all over the U S and Canada. And what I found, and this kind of ties back to the real question; how did it shape my worldview? How did it impact my work? As I flew around and met with tribal leaders and tribal citizens, all over the country, and up north in Canada, and I saw problems - and I've always been the type that I find a need and I fill it, and that's... and I do that in life. Sometimes that works good for me, sometimes it doesn't, but for the most part it did good secularly because I saw a problem I found and I built a company to solve that problem. And then as I went around and met with more and more people, I saw the needs and I just built services and hired people much smarter than me to fulfill those needs. And what I

found really quickly, which is a little different in the Hollywood industry, is that it is extremely personal. Not only is government personal for indigenous communities, cause they're related to their leadership, right? Imagine if it's your uncle that fills the potholes with your taxes and it's your auntie that's the chairwoman

And I'll just throw in there really quick, I grew up in a matriarchal tribe. So it could be a man or a woman that served as the leader And we actually have one of the most stable governments because we had a tribal chairwoman for 25 years. She ran and stayed elected and it was amazing to see that impact actually. So one of the first questions I asked when the federal government asked me to evaluate the stability of a tribe, is whether they're matriarchal or patriarchal. Us guys tend to get all egotistical. You know, we, I suffer from the, you know, male issues.

But, anyway, main point being, I saw how much there was a need and how these projects impacted people. Let me give you an example, and then I'll hop off my soapbox. During the COVID 19 pandemic, this is just one, and I've got lots, but COVID may be easier to draw from, so... There's communities... I'll just preface this by saying there's communities 45 minutes outside of San Diego that don't have water and don't have internet and don't have cell phone service. 45 minutes to an hour outside of San Diego, and it's because they're tribes, they're indigenous communities. So a lot suffer that way. During the pandemic, if you didn't have internet. There's some pretty big issues. You couldn't get remote telehealth, your kids couldn't go to school.

So I saw teachers driving three hours each way to a place with no cell phone service, no internet - actually where my grandpa raised us up, up on the Yurok reservation - and they would have to drop the kid's school off, schoolwork off every few days. Every day they would update physical signs of COVID 19 statistics. Every day, they would make that drive just to update this data. And it was that important because indigenous communities got hit really hard. We were essential workers. We were out there watching... I mean, with the Wind River Indian Reservation, you know, we saw a family of 14 die within a weekend. And there's a lot that could have been done to avoid that. Clean water is one of them. Internet, cell phone service is another. We take that for granted. Granted, you know, sometimes it can cause problems, but when you see a mom sacrifice, let's say 30 hours a week from her kids and paying for a babysitter to drive 70 miles each way for schooling, suddenly be able to stay home with her kids, do the same classes online, oh, and start a business to take care of her kids. You see the true impact of adding communications, water and power. And that's our focus professionally. We bring in infrastructure. So water, power, internet.

And I would just say it... I'll just say this; I've always had the motto to not put work before my family. but some of the most difficult times to do that are when the stakes are so high, because

thousands of people suffer. It can be very easy to neglect your family. So I'm learning lessons even today. I can't help everybody, even if I have the team to support many people. I don't know if any of that was helpful or usable, but yeah

**[00:28:54] Roxy Manning:**

This is... it's very, very, helpful Forest. And part of what, actually, I'm touching into it's like when you say don't put work in front of your family, part of what I'm getting is that the people that you're serving are also family. They're extended family. You see this mother, and this is somebody who is part of your community, part of your heart, that same distance with the chairperson. It's the same distance you have. This is your community. So it matters. So I can understand and appreciate why the struggle to kind of find that balance would be so hard when you're so directly connected to an understanding to struggle.

**[00:29:36] Forest James:**

Well, and for the work, we make it personal. So there's what's called protocols. Every tribe has a protocol and even ceremony has a protocol. And some of those protocols - I mean, gift giving is something that you do. Most of the time tribes want to break bread with you and talk about your principles, values, and family before they're going to talk about business. So we always start personal. I do sweat lodges, if I can, with every tribe I work with. I learn about their language. I usually have to learn at least the basics of their language before I even work with them. So it becomes personal even before I get out there, and it is a delicate - it is a difficult balance. And I think that's why they call it balance, not balanced. Because it's, a work in progress.

**[00:30:24] Roxy Manning:**

Yeah, I'm actually curious. Cause as I hear the ways that like, even just these steps that you named, right; I'm going to learn the language. I'm going to try to connect with people. I'm going to talk about my principles and my values and my family. Like, all of these things that are very different from how, like, western folks do business. I'm actually curious about some of the challenges that people face when they try to do business in indigenous communities, because I see you as a bridge between people who might want to bring in those services and the communities that need them. So what are some of the challenges that you've seen come up and how do you create that bridge between these different ways of being?

**[00:31:05] Forest James:**

Wonderful question, and it is very much the reason our companies are still alive. And it's also one of the reasons that people ask who our competitors are and I say there's not enough. Because the challenges that we face... I mean, I didn't really know to identify it with this, but I've been doing conflict resolution for ever since I started this career. The federal government and state

governments and companies, for profit companies, most of which have wonderful intentions, actually, you know, tend to do one of two things, they either overly romanticize indigenous communities and culture, or they look at it as a tragedy when they see dirt floors and drug addiction and alcoholism and abuse, and, you know, a word they used to use is savage, uneducated. You know, so there is the two extremes that I see all the time. And I can usually tell which way somebody leans in the beginning and I typically, I don't take it personally. I just go into explainer mode. My job is literally to teach them.

For instance, to give you an example, state, federal agencies and for-profit companies from all different industries, all different industries, will come and have me simply train them. I'll do cultural awareness trainings and I'll spend six months literally training them on the nuance of tribal governmental structure, why it's important, how it mixes with culture, so on and so forth. right now I just started working on a 56, I mean, 50-mile wind farm, a few dozen miles off of the coast of Manhattan in New York. My sole job is to take the wind farm company and spend six months teaching, training, and producing a document that they can use as like a handbook, which I'm actually doing anyway for anybody and everybody. We are already producing books to just give this information out. So my first job is to train them, raise awareness, because they ask questions that can be offensive. They make statements that are offensive. Not to me, but to the tribe, usually. And keep in mind, most tribal councils are farmers by day, tribal council by night. So it's usually a labor of love that their tribal council. And then my next step is in New York for this particular project, there's 10 tribes, so I have to get the 10 tribes to get along together, which is not easy. And that's what I'll spend the next two years doing. And then I have to get tribes as individuals to get along with the wind farm company, and the state and federal government, because that's who issues the permits, right? So, the challenges that I face is just raising awareness. And I can't do it at the speed of my vocal cords. It's too slow. So that's why we're trying to expand this. I mean, I've trained my competitors just for the added support. And that's why we're going to write a book and do a handbook series and all this stuff is so we can do that. I think I'm going to title it *Pulling the Thread of Indigenous Culture*, because it really has so many facets to it - I'm going to approach it more in a story form, in a TED talk form, so it's engaging to the people - but state and federal agencies simply struggle; there's a reason there's no water, power and internet on the reservations. It's either because the tribes don't trust them and don't want them on there. Or it's because it's way cheaper and easier to build around them. And that's the majority of the time. It's just easier and cheaper to build around them. Because you have to go through specific permitting. And that's what I do.

So for the whole state of Oregon, next week, I meet with all the public utility district CEOs. So they do water and power for the whole state of Oregon. Nine or 10 tribes in the state, there's really

about 17, they're just under one recognition, and Oregon's a bunch of cowboys, you know, and I mean that in a good way, cause there's a beautiful culture there. But they have no understanding of indigenous communities and they've just built power and water around them. They admit it, but now there's funding to build water and power to them. So suddenly it's like, now what do we do? And half the infrastructure in this country is illegal. Just to be clear, most of it's illegal. So I ended up pulling a lot of companies out of the process.

**[00:35:54] Roxy Manning:**

Illegal?

**[00:35:55] Forest James:**

Yeah.

**[00:35:55] Roxy Manning:**

Say more.

**[00:35:56] Forest James:**

It was built illegally. There was, no environmental, cultural, biological, archeological work done. There was no permits issued. They just built telephone lines. So when you look at the state of California, for instance, I think it was shortly after Governor Newsom made a public apology to all the California tribes, which are a lot, for the issues and atrocities, a few years after that, suddenly the telephone companies, if the tribe could prove they illegally obtained that property, the telephone companies have to give it back to them. All the land. So there's a lot of land being given back to tribes right now. And I can usually spot - I know anywhere there's copper lines, it's illegal. And it's not intentional. They just built it before 1974, I think it was, before the national, environmental protection act instituted. They were supposed to go back, long story short, everything's in trespass and that puts all these companies in lawsuits. So they're scared to death. I've pulled more than one company out of lawsuits. So it's a, to get back to your question, it's a delicate balance, but it's one I feel very at home in.

There's a tribe that had a joint business council. This is the one end of the balance. And a joint business council means they work together. I keep in mind, these two tribes fought each other for 300 years, literally in wars, killing each other. Then the federal government puts them on one reservation and says, get along. You can imagine how that went for the first 50 years. So I show up and the joint business council is dissolved. Everybody's against each other. Nobody's showing up to council meetings. The government imploded. It took me two years, but I was able to help rebuild that joint business council, find common ground and get them to do projects together.

Suddenly their funding comes back. Everything works out, for a while. That's rare that happens, but it does happen.

**[00:37:58] Sarah Peyton:**

It's rare that things come together, or it's rare that things fall apart?

**[00:38:04] Forest James:**

To that degree, it's rare that things fall apart.

**[00:38:07] Sarah Peyton:**

Ah.

**[00:38:08] Forest James:**

Things do fall apart, and tribes don't all get along. That's the over romanticizing. They're individual cultures. But yeah, it's rare that councils dissolve like that. It doesn't happen all the time. But I'm usually the guy that gets called when things fall apart, by the government.

**[00:38:24] Sarah Peyton:**

Now tell us a little about the structure of the business that you work with.

**[00:38:28] Forest James:**

Great question. So, start at the beginning, but I promise to take like 60 seconds. So, EnerTribe is my biggest company. That's E N E R T R I B E. We got stuck with that weird name because we got a couple of million dollars from the USDA for a waste biomass conversion to syngas inoculated biochar for agriculture and wood vinegar. Partnered with Johns Hopkins University in the city of Thousand Oaks. Built three machines. Produced a bunch of charcoal. While that was happening, and that lasted for a while, while that was happening I built, I was traveling to all those tribes like I told you.

**[00:39:07] Sarah Peyton:**

Right.

**[00:39:08] Forest James:**

So the needs that came to the top of the list, were twofold. So EnerTribe focuses on telecommunications infrastructure on one part and then economic development, engineering on the other part. So that's EnerTribe and it, helps separate business from government for tribes. So imagine if there was no separation of business and government in the United States. You can imagine what comes with that. So, you, one, operate projects at the speed of policy. Which is

impossible, to run a for profit company at the speed of government. So that's one thing that we'll do. We spend a lot of time doing, making that separation.

So EnerTribe is made up of 18 people now. So we're not a huge company, but we brought in, we'll hit a billion dollars this year. We've brought in a billion dollars into indigenous communities for infrastructure. So telecommunications, renewable energy, water.

And then there's EnerTribe Consulting. I just formed that this year and already it's got more contracts than we can handle. And EnerTribe Consulting was really meant to be for all the customers that just want advice. Because there's very specific people that just want, I mean, all my teams that I use for just the guidance and advice. They usually are tribal citizens. So that's the company that's doing teaching the state of Oregon's public utility districts. That's the company that's working with the wind farms. We are doing some solar farms, and things like that. And then, the last company is called, Tribal Infrastructure Group. So we actually are the only native owned firm, native woman owned firm, in the country that removes forever chemicals or PFAS from water with a non-carbon-based method. And then we have our own sodium sulfur battery that doesn't require any rare earth elements.

So there's three companies all focused on infrastructure, but EnerTribe consulting is really meant for the non-native customers. That's really what it boils down to. So we separated it based on the human resources that were needed for each one. So they're small firms, but we, you know, the state of California has tasked to EnerTribe with doubling its size in the next 24 months,

**[00:41:43] Sarah Peyton:**  
24 months!

**[00:41:46] Forest James:**  
Yeah. So... and they fund a lot of our projects. We probably... we have several hundred million dollars in projects funded by the state. So, we'll see if we can accomplish that. Anyway, those are the companies. Okay. So yeah, those are the companies they're focusing. Our primary mission is to focus on high impact, high positive community impact for indigenous communities. So we've, I mean, we've consulted on cartoons for Netflix that have Indigenous communities. We've worked with Caesars Entertainment because they needed to understand how to do these things. We've worked with, you know, waste companies that get rid of waste, medical waste. So it just depends on who has the need, but we get contacted by all different kinds of industries.

**[00:42:46] Sarah Peyton:**

So now we're starting to see you not just as a servant of your Indigenous communities, but also in the bridge role between the state and federal government and the Indigenous communities, and sometimes private industry and the Indigenous communities.

**[00:43:04] Forest James:**

Oh, for sure. We partnered with the University of Southern California, and we hire graduates from their international public policy and management group. And I hired one of them by the name of Rebecca Lynn, and she's been working with me for several years. And she's actually, I've been training her to be my replacement and she just got promoted to my executive vice president. In six months I think she'll be the CEO of EnerTribe. And that's so I can focus on being that bridge. That's really so I can focus on just glue between everybody that doesn't get along. Being that bridge between everybody that wants to work with indigenous communities and doesn't know how to, and the inverse. So that's where my time will be focused. Clean water, clean energy initiatives, and really being the mediator, between those two groups.

**[00:43:59] Sarah Peyton:**

Oh, wow. You had mentioned that, you know, this was something that you've found yourself doing forever, is being this person who's really interested in bringing people together. And one of the questions we would love to ask is about Martin Luther King's idea of Beloved Community and how Beloved Community, it requires everybody to participate and for us to really kind of extend everyone. And I just wonder if that's a concept that's touched you as well? Where do you land here?

**[00:44:36] Forest James:**

Yeah, when it comes to community... You know, let me preface this statement with a quote; somebody once educated me that being native is not a blood quantum. So dogs and horses are measured by blood. It's a way of life, and whether or not you're enrolled in a tribe, you may have grown up within a culture. And I say that because most traditional beliefs are that it doesn't matter if you're native or not. So communities are built up of people from all different cultures, and it does take the entire community to make things, make positive change happen regardless of your cultural background, being one of your many identities.

There is a tribe called the Karuk. they are a Northern California tribe, and they are considered a fix the world people. So when they make decisions, they want to make sure it has the highest impact on everybody around them. No matter whether they're native. So that means the local towns that incorporated the local companies, the state and federal agencies, and that's how they make every decision. So yeah, it's impacted me. I think it's a natural belief for me, in many ways.

**[00:45:56] Roxy Manning:**

Yeah. So, you know, clearly you are a successful businessperson who's been making like some very needed bridges. And I'm actually curious, how are you inspiring and mentoring the next generation, especially for indigenous leaders?

**[00:46:11] Forest James:**

Wonderful question because... Yeah, you used the right word, mentoring. I'm doing exactly what everybody did for me. I'm giving away freely what was so freely given to me, and that's really mentorship. I try my best to mentor as much people as possible, in every tribe I go to. One example; we donate full length documentaries to every tribe we work for.

**[00:46:39] Roxy Manning:**

Wow.

**[00:46:40] Forest James:**

So I have, on staff, I've got a film crew, I've got editors, I've got animators, graphics. And they all come out and film, make documentaries, and we train. Anybody, because you got to understand, I present at what's called the general membership meetings, and that means every tribal member in the tribe, sometimes that's thousands of people, I present to them everything we're doing, what the goals are, answer really difficult questions at times. And these documentaries are a way to reach out to them to get the younger kids involved and say, "Listen, hey, if you're interested in this, come! We'll teach you how to edit. We'll teach you how to film. We'll teach you how to light." I'm going to - my projects last four to 10 years. So I'm going to be there.

So that's one way we do it also by hiring and job creation. So we do... We'll help tribal members start their businesses. We'll mentor them through that process. We'll let them use our resources, our graphics, our website people, our business planning, you know, our financial strategists, just ways that help in the way that indigenous people learn, which is not all fours on the floor facing the chalkboard.

It's actually for me all through school, I had to draw while I was being taught in order to retain everything. To the teacher, this seemed like I wasn't paying attention, but I could recite everything she said if I was drawing while she was talking. We're very tactile learners in some instances and then visual in pictures, you know, more so. So I teach and I teach in a way that I know most indigenous people learn.

We send them, we sponsor kids. We just sponsored four kids - I say kids, but they're in their early twenties - through highly technical training, that's really not cheap and they would never get an

opportunity for otherwise, and gives them a certification that they could then go out and use and get paid really well. And that's hands on training.

So as I guess we try to inspire them one by example. A lot of us are sober on my team, not that all of you are, all of them are, and there's nothing wrong with alcohol. In fact, I have plenty of friends who enjoy it, and I like it when they drink. But on a reservation, it is nice to be able to show some of the younger ones, the next generation that you can have fun. You cannot take yourself so seriously. You don't have to keep in the cycle you've been in. And so that's another way. So we do it at a personal level and a professional level. Does it always work? But when it does, it's powerful.

**[00:49:33] Roxy Manning:**

I'm loving hearing this because I remember when you were talking earlier, I was really struck by the image of a 15, 16, 17-year-old who is being given all of these opportunities to learn, to show up, like the NLP, the film work that you did. And now I see you giving it back, kind of recognizing that kind of the traditional school is not for everyone, and the drive is still there, the passion for learning, and you're creating those opportunities.

**[00:49:58] Forest James:**

Yeah. Yep, it's not for everyone. Last thing I would say, that third company I mentioned, Tribal Infrastructure Group. It's actually called the 22nd Century Tribal Infrastructure Group, and the reason for that is what do we want our kids to see in the 22nd century? What do we want them to walk into?

**[00:50:15] Roxy Manning:**

Nice.

**[00:50:16] Forest James:**

And that's really what that's about. So always trying to think ahead those next generations is pretty important on many facets.

**[00:50:24] Sarah Peyton:**

Well, we were so grateful to have you with us. As we're coming to a close, what actions would you want our listeners to take to support your work and movements to restore indigenous rights?

**[00:50:37] Forest James:**

It's a wonderful question. Be teachable. Don't be afraid to ask questions, but there's a lot of research you can do. People often don't realize they're surrounded by tribes. If you live in the state of California, there's 117 federally recognized tribes. There's probably over 160-65, actually. So if you live in a town, just research, you could Google it, what tribes are near me, it'll show you.

And you can go to their websites and just read, read the first page, it just tells you about them, it's usually one page. You could, if you know you regularly run into tribal citizens, on their website or they have an app, you can search it, you can learn their language. You can learn "hello," "thank you," "creator," and coincidentally you might be teaching somebody that's a tribal member that never got taught it, and that's okay. So I would say to find the balance between romanticizing indigenous culture and looking at us as uneducated and tragic because nothing ever *is*, things *tend to be*, and we're not all one thing, you know, so... I don't know if that's helpful or...

**[00:51:59] Sarah Peyton:**

It seems a great invitation.

**[00:52:02] Roxy Manning:**

Forest, thank you so much for being with us. And Forest, I'd love to have you have the last word is there something that would be a traditional way of ending our connection?

**[00:52:15] Forest James:**

Oh, well, shu' shaa nin-la is "thank you." Thank you for having me. It's been an honor to be here. You've both been very gracious with your time and as well as the listeners. So thank you very much for this opportunity. I appreciate it.

**[00:52:29] Roxy Manning:**

Thank you, Forest. And thank you for the work you're doing in the world. For all of our listeners, we want to invite you to support this work that we've been doing with the podcast by going to the website, [antiracistconversations.com](https://antiracistconversations.com). And there you can learn about our books, *How to Have Antiracist Conversations* and *The Antiracist Heart*. And you'll also learn about our upcoming podcast guests. We'll have one more guest this season and then the new season dates.

**[00:52:56] Sarah Peyton:**

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