

# The Good Life Camp Part 1, with Melinda McKeveitt-Isham

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**Joe Mamlin:** This is news from the Peak.

I'm Joe Mamlin.

Today we welcome a special guest from the Lac Courte Tribal Child Support Agency. Last year, this agency received one of the grants from the Office of Child Support. The grant is aimed at economic mobility and responsible parenting. This was awarded to eight sites, three of which did have a Native American component, and we're fortunate to be working with the Lac Courte Tribe in managing this grant.

One of the elements of their approach, which is unique to them, was a camp for native kids from age 11 to 13. The purpose of the camp was to teach a curriculum based on their culture, and this was the first year for the camp, and it was a really great experience for everyone involved. We learned a lot from it. We learned what worked, what didn't work, and we're very optimistic about how it's going to play out in the future.

Our guest today is Melinda McKeveitt-Isham. Melinda is a case manager in the Child Support Office and is also very involved in the management of the grant programs and was one of the leads in the development and the operation of this camp.

On this episode, Maureen Leif and I speak with Melinda about her experience in developing the camp program, and we share some of our own experiences about participating in the camp itself. This will be the first in a multi episode series about the camp and about the grant, so be sure to subscribe and watch for future episodes on this topic coming out very soon.

Thanks for being with us today. Stick around to the very end. We hope you enjoy it. It's going to be a great episode and we'll be right back.

**Maureen Leif:** Hi, it's so great to see you!

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** Hello! I'm happy to be on the show!

**Maureen Leif:** We haven't seen each other in a couple of weeks. I don't know about you, but I'm still processing and thinking about the camp a lot. In our house, Addison and I have been talking about the kids a lot and just wondering what they're doing, and so the ripple effect of the camp to me was greater than I expected.

But to start kind of at the beginning, just like if you're out at a Powell or a party or something and you're talking about what you do and what we're up to this summer, I'm just curious how you describe the camp and what the goals of the camp were in your terms. I know that there's the grant description, but how does Melinda describe it?

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** Well, I definitely wanted to build self-esteem in the kids, and that was kind of my biggest goal, was trying to show them how they should act around people that they have never been around. So with manners, being respectful, making sure that they're helping their other campers too. Since it was such a new experience from them all, I was definitely looking to see who those leaders were and kind of just kind of picking them out through the crowd and seeing if they're helping with the other campers and just making sure that they know that they matter.

And that was kind of my biggest goal for the week, was getting a little bit more confidence in a lot of these campers because I kind of knew that they were going to come in without that. So it was definitely an important thing for me to build their confidence and show that people do care about them.

**Maureen Leif:** And so the goal of the camp from a grant perspective was really to talk about economic mobility. So as you know, we did the curriculum and there were exercises and trying to do all of the economic mobility stuff in somewhat of a cultural lens to kind of mesh the two. I guess my first question is after reflecting on the camp, do you think we were successful in that and if so, how?

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** I definitely do see that with a lot of the campers because we did have not just having the game warden come in or Becky teaching dance because you could get paid for dancing. That could be a career. Economic mobility definitely stems from making sure that you kind of have a future lined up as well. And we didn't just have those other people.

We had the camp counselors know by the end of the week were talking with Andy about working there for the summer and some of the kids also were talking to does it how is it to be a camp counselor? So I think for the most run we did talk, there was that economic mobility aspect, but we could have definitely done more.

**Maureen Leif:** Well, we learned something every day. And I think one of the things that we learned was that the learning in that environment had to take place organically from an experiential standpoint.

So for me it was those little conversations one on one while we were hiking or the one kiddie was taking a break from swimming and we would just kind of talk to them about or your mom would talk to them about, can you see yourself doing this next summer? I heard someone asking someone about college. To me, some of it was classroom type, but a lot of the learning that I observed was really more just kind of organic and out in nature and not so kind of scripted, so to speak.

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** Yeah, that definitely helps with the kids. Just again, what I was saying about building their confidence, that's going to make them want to do more after high school, instead of like, oh, I'm stuck in this one spot. Instead of that, like, oh, I could be a game warden, I could be a counselor, I could teach dance and dance in the Pablo's and make money that way as well.

So I think that they definitely learned and having some of the same kids back next year where maybe we have a different or look at our curriculum a little bit differently will help as well, because then we're not just building new kids each year, we're growing with those kids from last year.

**Joe Mamlin:** Yeah, and obviously part of this camp was there was a cultural component and that was one of the cornerstones, was the seven teachings of the Ojibwe and the language classes. And of course, a lot of that happened during the dance classes as well.

How do you think that worked? Do you think that the kids absorbed that? I mean, I know that they did a decent job of remembering what the seven teachings were and they gave the awards, which I think was really meaningful to the kids that got the awards. But how do you think we did on that respect of the goal of the camp?

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** Yeah, I think we did great with the cultural aspect, for sure, especially having such a short time. We did dance almost every day. They didn't just learn about the different dances they do at Powell's. We had one of our counselors in his regalia, we had our dance teacher wearing a ribbon skirt. We had also campers who brought their ribbon skirts. So that definitely went through the week.

And I would definitely bet on seeing more of those kids out on the Powell grounds this next summer than we did last summer. And same with the language. Like Mason has been using the language more in the house, and I bet you all of those kids have been, too. So I think that the cultural aspect of the camp went great and I definitely want know continue the same things that we did this year.

**Joe Mamlin:** So for those you grew up in that environment and in that community and we didn't. So can you just explain maybe a little bit for a lot of our listeners? Why is that such an important cornerstone to their development? Like you said, building self-esteem, helping with economic mobility, what's the tie in with the cultural piece and how does that support the kids, do you think?

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** Well, just being a part of the community in general is helping the you know, they have this during the year, even if they go to LCO school or Hayward school or Waduka dotting, that those things are taught as we're all a family and that we grow together, we stay together. Native American culture, you don't see like a one family household.

Usually it's a multifamily household because they stay together throughout the decades. And that's the biggest thing about Native American culture, is that we are such a family oriented group that we just want to always be together.

And when it comes to the powwows and the language, it's so important that we teach those kids because it is getting lost and it's kind of just disappearing slowly and slowly and we don't want that. Just like the bloodline, you marry somebody who's not Native American, the bloodline goes thinner and thinner and bringing that culture back to them. Even if your bloodline is thinner, you're still Native American. You're still seeing the dances, the powwows, the language, and that just brings everybody together.

I think it's so important to be a family and stick with the family outlook for the camp. Like, we are all one, because we are. And I think that's just the biggest thing that Native Americans do, take each day to their kids at home, that we do this together, not separate. So just as if this is mom, dad, child, it's not just mom, dad, child. It's mom, dad, child, grandma, grandpa, aunts, uncles. And you could see that at Powell's.

If you go to the Powell's, you'll see them all sitting together in a group, like, okay, this is my grandma, this is my grandpa, this is mom, this is dad. And that's the biggest part about our culture, is that we are so close together that we don't want to just everybody leave, and then our tribe gets smaller and smaller.

**Maureen Leif:** So throughout the course of this grant, the focus was on economic mobility and teaching about parenting, and Becky talked about the boarding schools and addressing historical trauma. So throughout the course of the week, a lot of different themes kind of rose to the top for me in different ways. Our evaluation team has talked a lot about how connection to culture helps with better outcomes for kids. So they're less likely to experiment with substances, they're more likely to graduate, go to college.

So I've known that academically, but I think I saw it kind of come to life when we were at camp because of what you're talking about, Melinda, that you have this belonging. So if one of that circle, like when we were sitting all together as a circle, we were one. Everyone was equal, and so you felt this level of support.

So no matter what those kids were going through at home, and some of those kids were going through a lot at home, there was this sense that when they were there and when they were with their people, they were one, and that they had support and they had love. And so it was really powerful to kind of know that, but also to just feel that that you can see why kids wouldn't want to experiment with drugs and alcohol or go out, do something bad, because they had this whole group of people behind them that believed in them and loved them. I don't know if anyone else experienced that, but it was really powerful for me.

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** I definitely think that the positive parenting went through all week because we were there. We were those positive parents. When I signed up these children and their parents came in and signed those forms, my biggest thing that I said to them that I was going to be the mother there. I would make sure that they felt safe and we did, we all did that. You don't have to be Native American to care for a child, especially not your own child.

We made sure that they knew, like, hey, if you're doing something wrong, we called them out on it. Let them have that parenting structure that a lot of them well, not a lot, but some of them didn't have at home. So we gave them that parenting structure for that week. So just even a week could help somebody's mind change. We had kids who started off not knowing how to behave and by the end of the week they were helping out and cleaning and being respectful. And that definitely reflects on us as well because we were the ones that brought them to that point.

It wasn't just Bonnie or Becky or sue or me. It was you guys. It was Joe and Maureen and Addison like each one of not, I think we all played a part in helping them see what a positive parent, you know, they are going to take that and they're going to be positive parents because they saw maybe their parent doesn't act like that, but they saw how a parent should act during the week and that definitely will help. And seeing them again next year, they'll get more and more of that.

**Joe Mamlin:** Well, and I do think you're right about that, that we all kind of played a role and tried to set these examples. But I also think that the other thing that happened is I got better as the week went

on too. Because, I mean, it'd been a long time since I've been around eleven year old kids, period. But let alone these particular kids with their particular challenges and personalities and everything like that. So they weren't the only ones that learned something about relating with people throughout the week. I think I did too.

**Maureen Leif:** I was reflecting on the facial expressions and the apprehension in the kids' faces when they were getting off the buses, but also reflecting on all of us because we had worked so hard to put this camp together. We had such a schedule and we had all these details worked out and just that first moment of like, oh, how's this going to go? And just the excitement, but also the anxiety of what did we just get ourselves into?

**Joe Mamlin:** And it wasn't long before those details were just something we thought of once.

**Maureen Leif:** Yes, but then I was reflecting that first half an hour versus well, we left on Friday and we both got in the car and just cried like a half an hour outside of town. We missed everyone already. The kids were hugging and just that bond that we created in five days. And I thought, five days is not that long, but my gosh, we did a lot in five days and the change in the kids and the change in all of us in five days. I don't know if you guys had that same reaction.

**Joe Mamlin:** Yeah, for sure.

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** I didn't want to leave. And that was the weird thing, because it's like, at the beginning, you're so stressed out, oh, there's only a couple more days. Oh, it's halfway. And then it's like, you get home Friday night, and you're sitting there like, oh, I wonder what this kid's doing, and I wonder how this kid's feeling right now or kind of wishing that we were still back there.

And it's definitely sad to think that you wanted it to be longer. It was weird because at first, you didn't you wanted the week to go by, and then it's like, you build such great bonds with these kids, and again, five days, you know, like, five days, and we're getting teary eyed talking about are.

**Joe Mamlin:** Yeah, well, I'll tell it's, it was a great relief for me. And I'm sorry, Maureen, that you missed this part, but I felt a lot of relief at that celebration at the end, because to see them at the celebration and see their parents and grandparents and brothers and sisters come and just see that they do have it just made me feel better about, like, okay, there's something there. And now they have something to bring to those people.

And meeting some of the moms and dads just really made me feel a lot better. Not that I felt bad, but you know what I mean? It gave me a lot more comfort for, like, okay, they actually are okay, a lot of them, and it's good, and hopefully they'll come back and it'll build on it. But that celebration at the end, I think was a great kind of ending moment for me. And I think it was a good way to close the **[inaudible 18:36]**.

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** And not just that, but just seeing the happiness on the Guardians or the parents faces as well that their kids did this because this was a new experience for most of them. So just making them make it through the week, like, you can have still a two parent household and be a

low income family and not have the money to send your child to camp. And this is such a great experience to just be able to do that for anybody who was willing to sign up and go.

And the first day, how many people said they wanted to go home and they didn't want to sleep in those cabins? And then by the last day, when I was asking kids, just like, you were saying, oh, aren't you excited to go home? And a lot of kids were like, no, they wanted to stay. I mean, yeah, there was some that were like, no, this is better than home for other reasons, but most of them were like, oh, it's too short, it's too short. We had so much fun.

And that was such a great feeling, not hearing that every day, like, I want to go home. I want to go home. I want to go home. And by the end of the week, we all wanted to stay Andy, not just us, but Andy was such a great person to have there as well. And I feel like the kids even bonded with him. There was those bonds with him and his staff, they were amazing. I didn't have any complaints at all. It was just a beautiful space too.

**Joe Mamlin:** Yeah, I was going to ask you about that because one of the things, as we said earlier on this camp was really focused on teaching your culture and teaching the kids more about their own culture and what was the impact, do you think, of having those kind of I'll just say outsiders there in leadership roles? How did it work? How did we keep that line where it needed to be in terms of you guys teach them what you know and then we provide backup support? Did that work out or do you think because I also think that at least the people that talked to me were very excited to also, at least on the outside, learn about the culture too because we never were taught anything about it either. So how did that work out for you?

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** I think it worked out really well. Having them there, especially having such a high number of staff that they had there. I didn't hear any of the kids being disrespectful towards them, so I hope that didn't happen. But they were smiling. They knew their names. And I think it really helped them, like the Camp Highland staff wanting to do that cultural aspect with us because the kids like, look, oh, look. They are interested in our culture. They want to learn about our culture. And they're not Native Americans.

Usually we don't have that a lot. So it's really good for them to see that we're such a great community, we have such great culture to teach others as well, not just our own people, but we can spread the word, we can show them how we as a family are. And having them involved with the dancing and just having them do the language for the food and all of was it was a great thing for us to see. And Bonnie and I would always like, oh look, he's doing the lip nod instead of the pointing or whistling win or just Mik Witch whenever they would say like they were really getting involved in our culture.

And I think the kids definitely seen that as well. And it wasn't just us as staff who were like, wow, they are amazing. The kids did see that. And if at the end they know going and saying bye to Andy and going and saying bye to the staff as well, it wasn't just saying bye to know they were going to miss them. I definitely think them being involved in our powwows and our dancing and our language helped majorly for those kids as well.

**Maureen Leif:** I agree. I think that was such an important piece that they were learning from us and we were learning from them. Like, how do you run a camp? And they were learning the two steps and

the swan dance and the camp counselors when they did the fish dance. Our campers really got into it because they were into it. And I will say just as a layer up from that, that's been my biggest surprise. And the most impactful thing about working with the Lac Courte Tribe is just your openness.

And I felt nervous to take the project and not have a lot of background in the culture. And I came in with a real curiosity and wanting to learn, but also sort of afraid that that was going to be intrusive and that I didn't want to do anything, that I didn't want to inject myself anywhere that I shouldn't, and just a little nervous about it.

And the fact that you all made us ribbon skirts and shirts for the conference and that you took us ricing and this project has literally changed my life. And it's creating that ripple effect that I think we're missing as a greater society in the world is knowing each other and understanding and appreciating what your culture is and just the ripple effect of, like, now my family is reading about Native American history, and my daughter is researching her ancestral roots because she wants to understand more of where we come from, just all of that.

I think that's all because of you guys being so open and welcoming and inclusive to us and letting us in and learn about it. It's literally changed our lives for the better. Now you're going to get me weepy again.

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** That's such an amazing thing to hear because it's just, we again, I've been part of this culture since I was born. We grew up at the powwows house. And me being blonde hair and blue eyes, it was definitely a little difficult for me. But the biggest thing is we don't want it to die. We want it to grow. We want people to know about us. We want people to learn why we're here. And again, tears. But it's such an amazing thing that everybody that we dealt with for the week, not just for the week, but for the past year with Grace Peak has just felt welcomed and it felt right and it felt like what we should be doing.

**Maureen Leif:** Yeah, well, I want to just keep doing it. Like, I want to be at camp every year and I don't care how we make this happen, but it was so powerful and we learned a lot. Maybe we switch gears, talk about what we learned. But this grant, sometimes I think the federal grant reports kind of report out on some statistics and there are some things that are learned and some best practices that come out. But I think for me, this grant has literally changed lives and quickly. We plan that camp so quickly. I don't know. Do you guys want to talk about anything that...

**Joe Mamlin:** Well, I want to add on to what you're saying, though, before we switch gears, because I think that's one thing that not that I'm in a position to give advice to the federal office. But when asked and when I was talking to the commissioner about our experience and about just the tribal programs in general, I think that's one of the things that's really important to remember is we get caught up in this program about statistics and numbers and how many cases you have and how many dollars you collect and how much of it's distributed, et cetera.

And I think the impact of these programs and the grants especially, but just even the fact that your program exists and that there are people in your office that are doing outreach in your community and doing all the other things that you do has an impact that's difficult to measure in our normal

terms. And we can't ignore the direct impact that these programs have on families that state programs often don't have because they can't have.

And I think that's the importance of your program and of tribal programs in general is that you have a challenge of being small, but you also have a luxury of being small. You have an ability that programs around the country would love to have. And I think it's just great the way you capitalize on that.

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** Yeah, I definitely agree with that for sure. Being a tribal child support, if you're a state, you would never be able to do things like this. It's right in the word child support, we literally were supporting the children of this community. We were teaching them how to be adults grown, grown men or grown women.

And hopefully that they take that week and they think to themselves like, oh, I can do better than the one before me. And always changing their future is definitely something that was such a great experience, just being able to see some of the kids in the beginning who had those struggles and then by the end, like, oh, I want to be a photographer. If the NFL doesn't work out, I'll be a game warden.

So it's like, you know, those things are definitely amazing things to come out of five days. And I definitely think that being a tribal entity or a tribal program is what really brought this to life. And grants in general, if it wasn't for this grant, none of that would have happened. And we're just applying for that grant and thinking about this camp in a whole.

**Joe Mamlin:** Well, and I don't want to diminish the cultural element of it at all because I think that was critical. But I also think, like you're saying, all kinds of kids would benefit from the other things that were learned here, like about self-esteem and respect and how to get along as a group, and it just would be nice to see this grow in a lot of ways in and out of your program. What were some of the things that happened at camp that you were surprised about that you didn't expect?

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** I definitely did not expect the scheduling to be an issue. That was something where we came in with the schedule, and I was thinking, like, we are going to be set to the schedule every single day. I like to work on schedules. So having to rewrite it every night and think about it and change with that part, that was something that I wasn't expecting to do. But I think we did great doing, thankfully.

**Maureen Leif:** Well Andy. Andy, the camp director, did say in our debrief meeting that was one of our strengths, was kind of being able to go with the flow and kind of meet the kids where they were. So their energy level, their interest, like having them inside doing classwork or classes, language classes, while they were sitting there looking at the beautiful lake, just didn't work. So when we switched things up and biggest lesson learned was that this group was obsessed with swimming, so we had to work more swimming in. But that was one of our strengths, was just kind of meeting the kids where they were and going with the flow. And you did a great job at that.

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** Oh, thank you. Yes, I did not expect, I guess I expected more of the children to come in with cultural knowledge. And that was something that I was definitely like, oh, wow. When I had asked them separately after, they'd be like, oh, I don't want to go to language or something like that. I'm like, well, don't you have Ojibwe in school? And they'd be like, yes, we do.



And then I'd be like, well, what do you do at powwows house? And some of the kids were like, well, we dance.

And I'm like, well, this is just like that, you're dancing here. But it was because of the lake and they're looking at all this fun things while they had to do the dancing. And I think that's what I was definitely going in thinking, that they had more of the culture. But I think it was more, again, just not wanting to sit there and sit there instead of swimming.

**Maureen Leif:** I'm excited to follow along the story and the journey and did some surveys of the kids the first day and some surveys of the parents. My biggest hope is also that it had the impact on secondary impact on us, the counselors, which we didn't talk about. But I also hope that the kids went home and got the parents interested. But my biggest kind of dream or hope is that, and I just have to believe it, is that the kids going home and talking to their parents and aunties and asking grandma stories. And I hope that the ripple effect is even greater than what we could actually visualize, and that's like this greater impact to the community.

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** That was such an amazing thing, I mean we, Mason and I have ran into so many of those kids already, not just like Walmart or Hayward school. And they run up to me and hug me know, tell me who their teacher is or tell me what they just you know, I hope that really continues, because that's the most important part, is that type of reaction, having them just caring that we cared.

And when I worked at the Boys and Girls Club, I left for a while after that. And this past year, I ran into two kids who graduated and are going to college, and they remember me. And that's really what I hope that this is going to do, is they take that to college, they take this experience with them where they are better for it and they're better people because of it.

**Joe Mamlin:** Well, thank you very much to Melinda for joining us today, and we have a lot more to say about the camp and about the grant, so watch for more episodes in this series as we get perspectives from others who were involved in this amazing program. We'd love to hear from you and get your ideas and your feedback. And if you'd like to be a guest on the show, please reach out to us on the contact link on our website.

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This was news from the Peak.

I'm Joe Mamlin. Thanks for joining us!

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** I don't think I've really listened to any I don't think I've ever listened to, like, a podcast.

**Joe Mamlin:** Okay, well, in short, a podcast is basically just the same thing as what used to be a radio show back in the old days.

**Maureen Leif:** I just think it's cute because maybe this isn't professional, but with that headband, Melinda looks like she was one of the campers.

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** Oh, right. I know.

**Maureen Leif:** So cute.

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** No, I found so I had to dig through our shed with all of our bins in it. So I was trying to find my scrapbooking bin nowhere to be found. Just going to put that out there. But then I found a whole thing full of bows, so I was like, oh, I guess I'm wearing bows from now on.

**Maureen Leif:** That's awesome.

**Joe Mamlin:** If you can't scrapbook but you can accessorize, it's still a win.

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** Exactly. Yeah. It's okay. They're just wondering why they weren't invited.

**Joe Mamlin:** Oh, they can be on. Just for the record, we invite sue to be on this podcast almost every month.

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** I'm sure.

**Maureen Leif:** That's perfect.

**Joe Mamlin:** And the crowd outside your door is.

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** Really I think they're having a little Powell right outside my door.

**Maureen Leif:** Well, I hope that after this, they take you out and they put you on their shoulders and carry you around and think, she's a jolly good fellow.

**Melinda McKeveitt-Isham:** That was very stressful, but 100% worth it. All the memories are coming back and it's like, I just want to go to the schools and check on them.

**Maureen Leif:** Yeah.

**Joe Mamlin:** Maureen, do you have anything to add?

**Maureen Leif:** No. Can I talk in my hands? Just this whole thing.