TEMPE HISTORICAL MUSEUM

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW #: OH-297

NARRATOR: Peterson Zah

INTERVIEWER: Aaron Monson

DATE: August 4, 2008

PZ = Peterson Zah
INT = Interviewer
_____ = Unintelligible
(Italics) = Transcriber's notes

Tape 1, Side A

INT: Today is August 4, 2008, and this is the Tempe Historical Museum's Pluralism and ASU Renovation interview with Peterson Zah. Let's begin. I'd like to start by asking you some questions about your family life. Can you tell me when and where you were born, please?

PZ: I was born on the Navajo Nation, right in the center of the largest Indian reservation in America, at a place called Low Mountain. I was born into a family that was very traditional. My mother never went to school. She doesn't know one word of English. She's about 96 years old now. My father had maybe a tenth-grade education. And they were a family that were very cohesive and did a lot of community-type service and work for many years for the people that we lived with.
(from biography: born December 2, 1937)

INT: Who was the first member of your family to come to the Valley, and when did they come here?

PZ: I think I'm the first one. I'm the oldest one in the family of eight children, and I came into the Valley probably in 1954 or 1953, as a student at such a young age.

INT: Where did your family live when you were growing up? You mentioned you were born in Low Mountain on the reservation. Can you tell me a little more about your household, who you lived with, and years? Just kind of describe the home in general, if you can.

PZ: We didn't really live in a house. We lived in a hogan, a traditional Navajo hogan. It's just a little round place, a dwelled-in place, where we all lived. We did not have a car. There were no highways, roads. There were no stores. The stores were about maybe sixty or seventy miles away. We didn't have electricity, running water. And it was a

wonderful life. When you live that way, you learn how to depend on yourself. So, basically, that's what was the living style of the Navajo.
(interruption – telephone ringing)
So it was one of those situations where you lived the Navajo way. You learned how to depend on yourself. Early on, being the oldest person in the family, that meant that I had to learn how to take care of the sheep, the horses, the wagons. I had to learn where and how to find water, our drinking water that we used on a daily basis. So it was one of those situations where you were very self-sufficient, and all of your food and your daily needs was right there in the community. And you had to learn how to do dry farming, raise corn, squash, beans, watermelon, cantaloupes, and just your basic food, staples. So we did that on our own, so that was our living conditions.

INT: When you were younger and you lived with your family, how did they spend time together?

PZ: Well, there were always a chore for everybody, and it wasn't one of those things where you spent several hours sitting under a tree talking. You had to tend to the sheep, for example, and you had to let them out so that they could graze. You had to give them the attention that it needs so that they are properly taken care of. So when you say, "How did you get along with them" or "What was it like, living with all those siblings," well, everybody had a duty, and you went out and you worked hard. And the time you got together was probably during mealtime—at noon for lunch, and then dinner in the evening. And what you had for dinner was what you produced that day or what you found that day. So my life and my background was very unlike your general public down here in Tempe and Phoenix.

INT: How old were you when you started to do things like tending to the animals and chores?

PZ: I was probably six or seven years old when you had to start learning how to shift for yourself. And when I was nine years old, I remember I had to do all of these things that basically a grownup would do. For example, in the morning, the first thing you would do is you had to go find your horses, and you'd do that on foot. So that was almost like a daily chore, because you needed the horses for the wagon, to plow the field, and you needed horses for a lot of the work that needed to be done during that day.

INT: When you were a child, did you have any favorite toys or objects or things that you held dearly? Things that you played with, perhaps?

PZ: Well, even then, it was one of those situations where you made your own toys. All the toys that you see today that children have that you buy at the store, we didn't have that. You went to a pond, let's say, on the mesa. You went to a pond, and if it had some water, then you got the clay. Then you got the clay, and you had to make your own toy. You shaped it like the way you want your toy to be shaped. And you took care of those toys. And what that did to me was it taught me how to be creative. Toys were never made for you. You didn't walk into the store and bought toys, because there was no money to buy toys. And so you had to go out and find the clay and start making your own horses and

sheep and what-have-you. And, of course, you always had a favorite one, while you were playing with the other kids, as to which one you cherished. But you didn't have this concept about ownership of anything. They were all communal. So even the toys that you made, you had to share it with your brothers and sisters. So nothing actually really belonged to you as an individual, and you didn't think of things that way. It was all shared by everyone in the family.

INT: Can you share any interesting stories that your family might have told you, or interesting stories about your family in general?

PZ: I guess the interesting story is that when you become a young man—eight, nine, ten years old—your mind always wanders off into what the world is like beyond your own community, and you begin asking questions of your mother and your father. For me, the interesting one is that there's a different life out there. There's a place called Flagstaff, Arizona, there's Albuquerque, there's Phoenix, where there are a lot of people living there. And they live differently, they speak a different language, they communicate differently. They have cars, they have electricity, they have running water. And because of all these differences, they live differently. And I was always intrigued by that. I wanted to know what that all meant. I wanted to touch, I wanted to see and feel the way people lived. And so I was very inquisitive, I guess, in my own mind about those things, and I wanted to get out, I wanted to get out and see those things, and see what was meant by "there's a different world out there."

And when I began branching out into these little towns, I began seeing other kinds of people that were different than me. And, of course, I didn't know what they said or what they did, because I didn't know how to speak English. And so, school was another exciting or different stories that were told by my parents, how school is and how one has to learn English to get along with other people in the world. And so I became very interested, and wanted to go to school. And my mother and father wanted me to be a medicine man. They wanted me to be at home, because I was such a helpful person with our own family and in the community. So there was a little tug of war that went on, I guess, between my mother and my father. And my mother wanted me to stay home and learn all of the traditional songs, and the different herbs that grow in the community, and how those things could be used to cure illnesses, and basically become a medicine man. And because of that, she thought the only way for me to learn all of those was just to remain at home, not go to school. On the other hand, my dad wanted me to go to school and learn as much as I can at a young age, and learn how to speak English and learn how to communicate with other people. But, finally—I didn't necessarily take sides with my dad or anything like that—it was a natural evolution for me to tell my parents, in the nicest way possible, that I wanted to go to school, and that I wanted to learn how to speak the funny language that other people are speaking that I hear.

And so they sent me to a boarding school. And the boarding school was on the western end of the reservation, at a place called Tuba City. It was a federal boarding school. And from where we lived, it was about seventy or eighty miles away. No roads in between, no telephone. And once they sent you to school, you stayed there for nine months out of

a year, and you never had any communication with your parents, particularly my own mother and father, because they didn't have any transportation. They couldn't go to the boarding school, unless they walked that seventy or eighty miles to come and see me. But I always told them that I'm okay, I'm taking care of myself; you guys taught me how to be self-reliant, and so I'm using that and exercising that in my own daily life, and there's really no need for you to go through all the hardship of visiting me on occasion at the boarding school.

INT: What and where do you consider home today? I know that you spend a significant amount of time here working at ASU, but also on the Navajo Nation.

PZ: I always consider the Navajo Nation my home. And then when you come to the Navajo Nation, I built my own house at Window Rock, near the tribal government headquarters. But my mother still lives out at Low Mountain. And I consider both places as my permanent home, and that's where I feel comfortable. I want to live there with my own family and my grandchildren. And it's a place where everything that is around you is so comforting. The language that you hear, the tone that you hear, the people that you know. You know the land, the land knows you. Even the air feels different out there. So I always like to go back and feel those things and hear those things and feel them.

Down here, I'm living in Ahwatukee, around here, near Tempe. And it's a situation where it's not that I don't feel comfortable, it just doesn't give you the same kind of a feeling that it gives you when you're out on the Navajo reservation. I live down here almost because of necessity, because the work is here, the job that I'm doing here at ASU is here on the campus at Tempe. And then my grandchildren, they want to go to school where maybe they can receive a quality education. And so I try to make my place available to my grandchildren so that they can go to school at Desert Vista High School, for example, and go to some of these places where they provide quality education. And it just so happens that two of my grandchildren that were raised in that community by my wife and I are gonna be freshmen here, this coming fall, on August 25 they're gonna be coming to ASU. One's interested in Engineering, and the other one is interested in Architectural Design. So, to me, that's the result of giving them that quality education at such a young age, which I didn't get when I was young. And so, I didn't want them to go through the system that I went through, because it was hard. I wanted them to feel like they're needed in a society, so that that motivates them in the long run to do very well and to contribute to our society.

INT: I'm gonna change the subject just a little bit. What role does religious faith or spirituality have in your life?

PZ: You know, when people say "religion," there's a certain picture that comes into your mind. I guess for the people who live in the so-called melting pot in America, religion is something that is a little separate from what you do from day to day. On Sunday, people are very religious. It's a time to go to church, it's a time to pray, it's a time to worship, it's a time to be nice to other people, and that's the time you study the Bible and you memorize even some of those verses that the preacher might recite to the people that go

to church. So that picture occurs in people's minds. There's one day set aside to do all of that, and then on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, it doesn't matter, your life is a little different. So when you say "religion," those kind of behavior patterns doesn't really occur in my own mind. Because I basically feel that I'm at church, I'm within the religious part of my life, almost every day. You can't separate that out, between Sunday and Wednesday and Thursday. You're a part of your religion, you're really living it. And you're being nice to people, the students, and you're helping them, and you're giving them encouragement, and you're helping them with their struggles, in the same way you help your grandchildren and your own children. So that's something that is different in that sense.

And in my own way, I guess I basically still conform to and accept the Navajo religion, which is that you have to respect everything that you see and feel. And that includes the plant life, the animal life, the land, the sky, the mountains, and everything that you come into contact with, you respect their very existence, and they're all alive, even the trees are alive. So that when you pray, you pray when the spirit touches you. You pray when you feel like there's a need to pray. And it's something that I basically believe in, and I try every minute of every day to live those things that you really, really believe in. So I guess that's what you call a "spiritual" life? And so that's the way I look at religion. It controls a lot of what I do from day to day, and how I interact with people. For example, when the students come in, a young man comes in, I call him my son, because basically that's the way the Navajo elderly people treat the younger people. And all the Indian students that come to ASU, they're all your children, and you address them as such. And if you do that, and they hear you say that, then when there are problems, they'll come to you. And all kinds of barriers are broken when you address people that way.

INT: You mentioned earlier that you attended the boarding school in Tuba City. Can you tell me a little bit about your experiences there, what it was like?

PZ: I don't know if I can tell you all that much, because that was at such a young age that I went to Tuba City boarding school. I was nine years old, eight years old, when I went there. And I don't remember everything that was said or done at the boarding school. Yeah, there were a lot of things I saw happen, but I didn't really understand why those things were happening. But from Tuba City, I continued my boarding school life by going to Phoenix Indian School, which was also a boarding school. But I have a good understanding of what happened at the Phoenix Indian School and why things were happening like the way they occurred. So you have an appreciation of some of those things that you saw, and maybe in many cases, you didn't really appreciate some of those things that were happening.

So at Tuba City, I was just a young person, without knowing all of the details about why those things happened. But one of the things I remember vividly is when I enrolled, I was given a sheet, a sheet that you put over your bed. I was also given a nice white towel, and soap, toothbrushes. And the guy gave that to me and said, "Here, this is yours," and without saying why. And I thought it was really, really strange, that without explaining, a guy hands it over to you, when I didn't have the foggiest idea of how you

use sheets, and then how you use all of these things that you were given. Tooth powder, for example—they didn't have toothpaste back then. So I had to finally ask somebody, and say, "How do you use all of these things?" And the guy says, "Well, the best way to explain it is let's go upstairs where you're gonna sleep. You're gonna be sleeping on this bed, and your number is this number, and this is how you have to fix your bed. This is the way you place your blanket, and here's the way you use the two sheets." And it was very strange to, I guess, finally get those things that separated you from other family members. Because back home, you kind of shared even the blanket, the sheepskin that you slept on, with your brothers. But here was a situation where the guy was telling me this was gonna be your bed all by yourself, and these are called sheets and towels and all of that. So that was kind of a little on the strange side.

And then going go a classroom, people were speaking English. It was this funny sound that were coming out of people's mouth. And we had an interpreter there that always stressed that you had to listen, you had to pay attention. And they said that at some point, you're gonna begin using the very same words that they're using, and that's called the English language. They said that at some point, within the next few months, you're gonna learn how to say all those words. And so then, funny marks on the wall with a chalk, blackboard and a chalk. They said that this is your name, this is the way you spell your name, and all of that. And they said at the end of the year, you're gonna learn how to read, how to read those letters, and what it says. And I got all excited, because I really wanted to learn that. And so that was something that was very intriguing and interesting, those classrooms and the teachers that were involved in the different subjects throughout the day that we had class for.

And then going over to the cafeteria, the kind of food that was being offered there. There was bread, milk, vegetables, beans, there was some meat on occasion. And for me, the milk tasted kind of funny. And then all of the vegetables was not news to me. I had already experienced how to grow all of those things. But then, all the sweets. There were also a place on the table, to add to something that you eat, was also a little strange for me. Because back home, you didn't really have all that much sweets, and here was a situation where you could use a lot of sweets if your body desires, your taste desires.

And so that was boarding school, and many, many of the kids always played marbles, the game of marbles. They had activities at the school, baseball, softball, basketball, and all of that. And there were music that goes on, that also sounded very strange for me. And then how you were regimented into your daily activities. Before you go to dinner in the evening, you had to line up, you were given an assignment of numbers. So when the whistle blew, you all had to run to your numbers and get in line. And then you were drilled, like the way they do with armies, and you were marched to the cafeteria. And you weren't free to get out of your line or out of your platoon until you got into the dining room, or chow hall, and then you could get in line, get your food, and grab whatever it is that you wanted to eat. And so that was dormitory life.

And clothes that they gave us was all federal government clothes, very little of your own. I have a picture—see that picture right there, can you pick it up? That was my boarding

school days, and these were all my cousins that I went to school with. And here's me. And if you look at all the clothes that I'm wearing, they're too small. It's the clothes that came out of these other guys that they gave me, because I didn't have any clothes. My mother and father couldn't buy the nice clothes. It was a little cold, and if you see, they're all wearing jackets. I didn't have a jacket. I didn't have nice clothes, I didn't have a jacket. I probably wore one of these other guys' little jackets that they had. And so that was the boarding school.

INT: I understand that a lot of the education and teaching at the Phoenix Indian School was vocational training. Can you say a little bit about that? Did you undergo a lot of that vocational training as well?

PZ: Yeah. From Tuba City boarding school, I enrolled there in 1947 or 1948, I came to Phoenix probably in the early '50s, '52. And Phoenix Indian School was never designed to produce students that were high achievers academically. The school wasn't designed to send young people from the boarding school to college, for example, universities. It was designed so that young people can learn how to be carpenters, plumbers, painters, bricklayers, electricians, sheet metal workers. It was like a vocational education school, and they expected the students to be in that line of work when they left the school. There was about three or four of us that upset all of that when we decided that we wanted to go on to college. And the members of the faculty and staff were encouraging us not to go to college, because we weren't really cut out to do that, we couldn't do the college work. And so, basically, that was boarding school.

And at Phoenix Indian School, when I went there, we had probably around 2,000 students that represented all the different tribes in Arizona, all twenty-one tribes was represented. Some students came from Oklahoma and other Indian tribes away from the state of Arizona, many of them came from New Mexico, some came from California. But we always constantly had a student population of about 2,000 students there. And it was kind of like the educational hub for Indian children.

And what was happening back then was that the federal government had all these American Indian people on reservations, for example, like Navajo. And they decided to have these boarding schools in Utah, California, Oklahoma, Arizona, to have these boarding schools, and get the Indian youngsters off the reservation, and began putting them into cities. And if the federal government did that, then they would contribute to the city life, they would become members of the American general society, and they would live and work there, and they wouldn't necessarily go back to the Indian reservations. And I guess they were all trying to assimilate us, and that was the goal of the federal government. And many of the students were placed out on the jobs here, but eventually they all ended up back on the reservation, despite what the federal government did, after they worked for several years, because they were accustomed to life back on the "res." They could speak the language, they could practice their own religion, they could do all of that, they'd be close to their grandmas and their grandpas, the ceremonies were there, and all of that. And they missed all of those kinds of activities when they worked out here. So I would say also a good many of them went back and forth. Like Phoenix

was a workplace from Monday 'til Friday, and then on weekends, people went back, to be with their own family members back home. So, basically, that was the function of the boarding school.

INT: Can you tell me a little bit about your university education?

PZ: I left Phoenix Indian School in 1958. I enrolled at Phoenix College. I enrolled there without any money. There were no Navajo scholarships. My mother and father, these two people down here, they didn't have, they were not gainfully employed. And out of the eight children that they had, I couldn't write to either them or my grandparents and say, "Hey, I want to go to college, send some money." They didn't have a job. And so I had to figure all those out on my own.

And I went to Phoenix College, and my basketball coach was able to arrange for me to go to Phoenix College and play basketball. And so that's what I did, that's how my tuitions were paid for and I stayed there at the college. And so it was something that I wanted to do, because I already know how to work as a carpenter. I already knew how to be a painter. And here's our basketball team *(picture)*. And it was something that I wanted to do, was to go on to college, and I used my basketball skill as a way to get to where I wanted to go. Because I didn't have any money, my parents didn't have any money, but my tuition needed to be paid for, my books needed to be bought, and I needed a place to stay. So my goal was to make the team, and if I make the team, then I can do all of these things, all of these things would be made available to me. So that was my goal. And when I was at Phoenix College, the college was ranked fourth in the nation, and we were very, very proud of what we accomplished the first year I was there.

And I didn't have the foggiest idea about what I should major in, except I kept on remembering my teachers. Because my teachers were kind of like my role models, because they were helping students, they were teaching us how to learn English, they were really helping us on a daily basis doing all of that, and I always wanted to be a teacher. They were doing something that I liked to do, which is to help. And so, basically, I decided that maybe since I liked basketball so much, that maybe I should become a basketball coach, and so that was my goal.

INT: When you finished at Phoenix College, what path did your education or your career take after that? Where did you go afterwards?

PZ: When I finished Phoenix College and graduated in 1960—I got there in '58, I graduated in 1960—I decided that what I should do is look at ASU. At that time, it was just a small institution, that you could go from Phoenix College to ASU, and that's where you would get a degree that I was really looking at, which was to become a teacher. And I was so lucky, extremely lucky, that there was about one or two people that I had met in my life up to that point that were teaching here at ASU. And so one day I came over here during the summer. I took a day off from my summer job that I was doing and decided to come over here and see if I can enroll. And the people that were here, they were very, very helpful.

(interruption – telephone ringing)

INT: I'm gonna change the tape.
(end of recording)

Tape 1, Side B

PZ: So I was so lucky, I was so lucky, that people who were working here were the same people that I knew and I got acquainted with when I was in school. And they were very helpful, and they really, really encouraged me to come. Otherwise, it was almost like a dead end, after graduating from Phoenix College. I couldn't go out of state, because of the high costs, out-of-state tuition, and I wanted to stay in the local area. And so, in many ways, ASU was the only institution where I could come to. And then, when I got here, I also got acquainted with the financial aid people, and they were also very, very helpful. But they weren't in a position to give me anything or lend me anything until I officially got enrolled.

And so the first two days that I was on campus, I went to the football stadium, it was ASU Goodwin Stadium. And they had football practice there, and I sat in the bleachers and I watched, and I got acquainted with one or two Navajo boys. And one day we were there and we got acquainted with another guy, who said that he lived down at the bottom of this stadium. And there was just a little hotel-like thing, and he said they also had a café right next door. And so we put our heads together and put whatever resources we had together, and we started living there. And then pretty soon, the people who take care of the stadium said, "I need somebody to help me clean after games," and so we got involved in all of that. And that was to get by in the meantime, while all the financial aid was trying to kick in place.

I couldn't call my parents, couldn't call the Navajo Nation, they didn't have any scholarship money, and so you had to really learn how to shift for yourself. And I was so lucky that I learned that with my own family, when I was a young man. So all I did was apply whatever it was that we did when I was eight, seven, six years old, and then over there when I was twenty years old, apply the same principal, and that's what my mother and father taught me. So that's what happened at ASU.

INT: Let's talk a little bit about your career, then. You've done a number of different things, both here at the university and on the Navajo Nation. Can you tell me where you have worked and what positions you've held?

PZ: Yeah, I'll just talk about it very briefly, and then I'll give you a resumé that will outline where I've been. When I left the university in 1963, with a teaching certificate and degree in Education, I went to Window Rock High School as what they call a vocational education teacher. And the vocational education teacher was made available to me because I had the distinction of being trained in vocational education as well as with a college degree, and that was really, really a plus. That was really something that I wanted to do, because I was skillful in both. So I went back to Window Rock High School as a vocational education instructor. And I also became involved in a lot of the

school activities up in Window Rock, and even got my first political taste by getting involved in the school board function. And then on the side, I was helping the grade school kids with their basketball program. So that was something that I did on my first job, I worked there and at various positions at the high school.

And then about two years later, I went over to what they called Design and Construction, which was a company owned by the Navajo, they had a Department of Design and Construction. And my job there was to be able to read blueprints that the architects made, big huge pages of blueprints, and then be able to figure out the costs to build that facility—how much equipment, how much materials, two-by-fours, bricks, nails, all of that—how much would it take to build that facility. And I did that for about a year-and-a-half, being an estimator. And we had to list all of the materials needed, attach it to the blueprint, and that's how the construction workers figured it out, how to put those together, out in the field.

I did that, and then I came back down to ASU. And there was a professor here on campus that was basically overseeing the Peace Corps program, when the Peace Corps program came into existence under John F. Kennedy's administration. And the Peace Corps program was so successful that the United States government decided to have what they called the VISTA *(Volunteers in Service to America)* volunteers program, and it was a domestic version of the Peace Corps program. And so one of the professors got a contract here at ASU from the federal government to do the VISTA volunteers program. And the job that ASU was doing was to be able to select the volunteers, bring them on campus, train them how to become community development workers, how to be teachers, and all of that, and then be able to place the VISTA volunteers among the Indian people on the various Indian reservations all over the United States. So the guy who was running the project recruited me to come back from the Navajo Nation to help with ASU. And so I got involved with the VISTA program for about two years.

And then, after being involved with that program, a guy from the Navajo who came out of Harvard Law School, a non-Indian person, wanted me to help with the running of a legal services program for the Navajo. So I went back up to the Navajo and became involved in the running of the legal services program. And we eventually expanded the services to Hopi, Apache, and all the Navajo, and then to the indigent people at Flagstaff, Farmington, Gallup, New Mexico. So we had about eleven or twelve legal offices, and that meant we had to recruit lawyers. And so we used to go to Harvard, Yale, NYU, Columbia, John Marshall in Chicago, American University in Washington, D.C., UofA, USC, UCLA, we recruited everywhere, to bring in the new lawyers that were interested in poverty law. So I did that for about ten or eleven years, and the program got so controversial, really, really controversial, because of what the legal services program was doing. That put me before the United States Congress, testifying on issues in the United States Senate, and it got me into fighting with Barry Goldwater, for example, and the Navajo tribal leaders, the tribal chairman. It was such a controversial program, but I loved it.

That eventually put me into politics, and then from there, it was so easy just to become the tribal chairman. And then when I became the tribal chairman, there was a necessity to change the Navajo government, overhaul the whole government. So when I became the tribal chairman, at the end of my term, I said, "This tribe needs to be re-vamped, re-done," so I spent the next four years trying to shape the tribal government. And then when we made it into the Navajo Nation, with their leader being called the president, I became the first elected Navajo Nation president. And so I was the last tribal chairman, and I became the first elected Navajo Nation president. So that's my career.

INT: I understand that you also served basically as an advisor to the president of the university on American Indian affairs. My understanding is that you served for Lattie Coor as well as for President Crow today. Can you speak a little bit about the work that you do involving recruitment of Native American students at ASU?

PZ: One of the things that Lattie Coor told me right from the beginning was that we need more Native American students. He said that we get right up to about 670 Native American students, but that's where we stop; we don't seem to go over that number. And then, even if we do get them here, they always end up leaving us. So our retention rate is so poor that I need help in those areas. And can you help me recruit some Navajo students, and then once they get here, can you keep them here? And so I went to work as a recruiter, as an individual that helps make arrangement for recruitment of Indian students, and all of that. And then when Michael Crow came, he didn't want to change anything. He said to just keep on doing the things you're doing, and you seem to be doing it very well, because by the time Michael Crow came, we went from 672 students all the way up to something like 1,427. Let me get those numbers.
(pause in recording)
Yeah, we went all the way up . . . . These are student enrollment at ASU, right here. So by the time Michael Crow came, we were pretty well established among the Indian people in Indian country, what kind of recruitment we were making. And so because of that, he said to just keep up the work and maintain your level of visibility in the community, because that seems to be working very well for the university. And so, basically, that's what I'm doing.

How do I do that? I do that with visiting the university and being with the university, and then am able to go out and visit Indian tribes. We have twenty-one tribes in Arizona. I make sure I visit those tribes every two years, two to three years, because they have change of leadership. All I do is I make myself available. And then I go to the tribal council meetings, and I ask them, "Can I speak to the council? I want to talk about education." So they're always very happy and glad to see me do that. And then I talk to their education committee about making funds available for their youngsters, so they can have an opportunity to go to college. And then I also am always invited to the graduations at local schools at the Indian reservations. And then education conferences, they always invite me, either as a speaker or participant in some way. So, basically, that's my entré into those communities. And lately, the last two years, we've been visiting those high schools, particularly on the Navajo. We actually get ten of our students—a freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, and graduate student—ten of them, and

I go to these high schools on the Navajo. These are huge schools. I open up the session, tell them why we're here, and the students listen very, very carefully. And then I present the students from ASU, and they each have about five minutes to talk to the students. That's been working very well. And the students really like it, the ones that are listening as well as the students that go with me.

So that's how we recruit. I don't know how the other schools do it, but for me, that works. And I always tell the people here, the young Indian employees that we have upstairs and here, I always tell them, "Don't try to do things my way, because only me could do it." And people have a certain kind of reputation about me, so I do things in my own way, I use my own style, and I don't expect everybody else to have the same style.

And when I go out recruiting, for example, I get invited to these huge Navajo ceremonies, where you don't have only ten or twelve people, but you get nearly a thousand people come to those ceremonies or rodeos on the Navajo. And when people see me, they always hand me the microphone. And if we're there for a rodeo or we're there for a ceremony, I say, "The hell with it, I'm gonna talk about education and how we need more students." And so I get into the youngsters that they're holding at the ceremony, and I say, "All those little children that you have, there's five of them over here, ten of them over there, all these little children, I want to go to ASU." And, of course, the parents, particularly the grandparents, they really like it. Then I'll talk to the students about being good, being good citizens, being a caring person, and then becoming a leader in their own right, in their own communities. And the parents, they always want me to talk about this. They say, "Talk to our children. We don't want to lose them to alcohol or drug abuse and all of that. Talk to them, because they really listen to you." So I do that. And so, basically, that's kind of like my message to them, and as a result, they come, they come.

And the family that came in just before you, they came unexpected. I didn't even have an appointment with them. Because they know that they can just walk in. And so I take the time. The man said, "I want you to motivate my daughter." I don't know if you heard that. He said, "My daughter's having a tough time, and she doesn't really know if she should continue her education." That was his thing, that he came all the way from Albuquerque, and she's gonna be a student here, in two weeks she's gonna come, and she's not so sure that that's what she wants to do. So this morning's session was just to really talk to her about setting her goals and being able to go after that goal, and that's how you motivate yourself. And people do a lot of things for different reasons. And I told her that she should weigh all of those options. But, anyway, these people, they know that they can just come in, and that I would be available, and I would take my time to talk to them. So thanks for letting them in, because I sent them upstairs where all the students are, and they can get acquainted with some of those other people.

And so that's my recruitment. My style is unusual. Not everybody can do that. And I take professors to the Navajo Nation, and we go over to Canyon de Chelly or Grand Canyon, especially the new professors. While I am there, there's always some Indian people that recognize me. So while my visitors are just awed at the Grand Canyon, looking down in there, I'm talking to these other families about their young kids, how

they should come to ASU. I give them my card, I give them brochures about our P.R., and say my address is in here, my telephone number is in here, what kind of programs we have at ASU, I give this to them. So, basically, other people, I guess they go in groups, they recruit in groups. I kind of do that all by myself, because I love doing it. And I just walk into these situations.

This year, something happened that was really, really neat. Because we're putting so much emphasis on graduation rates, for the first time, we had 305 graduate, American Indians. When I came here in '95, we were so lucky to get to that number *(on a paper)*, so lucky. Now, these statistics came out when the students applied for graduation, so there were some more that came in during the summer, they also add onto that number. So from here on out, it's gonna be around 300 students, all in one year, three times that. So this is gonna be the trend. And that's all as a result of what we do, in recruitment, talking to the parents, talking to the grandparents, talking to the tribal leaders.

And this guy that just called while we were talking, he's interested in doing a wind farm on the Navajo. He wants to use the force of the wind to produce wind farms, to produce electricity. Now, over where they want to go, I know all the people there, and so he wants to FAX me some information about what they want to do. But while I am helping him, I talk to the parents about education. So I have education coming out of my mouth, probably coming out of my ears, every pocket, when I go see people. That's the only way to recruit. And so, the statistics that you saw here, the statistics that I'm giving you here, those are all as a result of what you do.

Now, people out here, in the dominant society, would say, "Well, maybe the job that Pete Zah is doing is not really all that hard," they might say. But what they don't know is that the majority, a good majority of the Indian people, when you try to have their kids come to school, they can't afford it. Unemployment on those reservations is over fifty percent. So the good kids may come from families that are unemployed. And, therefore, I had to create a situation so they would get a scholarship, which means I have to go to their tribal president, tribal governor, and then to the education committee and to the tribal council, and have them create a scholarship program. And then I get my families and the Indian children and say, "Hey, they just created a scholarship program; you get in line and get a scholarship; I'll see you at ASU this fall." So I have to do that. And that's why I'm saying that not everybody can do what I do. And this year, we created three scholarship programs for three Indian tribes out there. And that seems to be the average, during the last several years. So out of the twenty-one tribes, I think there's only one or two that doesn't have a scholarship program—yet. But I'm still working on that, to help them.

INT: Can I ask you a couple questions about some of the work that you've done here? What would you say is the biggest challenge that you've faced working here at ASU in recruitment?

PZ: Despite all the good things that we do now, the biggest challenge is to try to improve that. We still . . . . I'm not happy with the 1,427, I think is the highest we got. The biggest challenge is, I'd like to get it to 2,000, that's my personal goal, get it to 2,000. And right

now, I think we're sitting number two in the nation for American Indian programs. If we get it up to 2,000, by far we're the largest university in America that has the largest number of American Indian students. So the other school is just around . . . . Sometimes they beat us by ten students or eleven students, twelve students; the next year, we come in and we beat them by that many. I'd like to have it way up to 2,000, so it's not even a question of who is the number one in the nation for American Indian students.

That's the biggest challenge, because people around here, they know we're doing good, but they don't want to go that one extra ummph to make it better, you know what I mean? The ASU Sun Devil football team goes 10 and 0 and everybody is happy, but we'd like to see them go 12 and 0 and win the national championship; but you'd be surprised how many people are satisfied with what they did. The same way here. We should have our retention rate such that everybody who enrolls ends up graduating, five years, six years down the road. So that's the highest in the nation last year, but I'd like to see it 400. The biggest challenge is because these guys all know what we have done. For me to go back out there and say, "Hey, we can do better," they say, "Oh, jeez, I worked my tail off this year and we made it to here, and you're still not happy!" (laughter) So that, to me, is the biggest challenge.

INT: Okay. And then, conversely, is there one specific accomplishment from your work here of which you are particularly proud? Or maybe would you consider your work as a whole to be an accomplishment of which you're proud?

PZ: Specifically proud, I would say, is the visibility of ASU to the American Indian people, the American Indian students. Despite what people may say about ASU, the visibility among Indian people everywhere is right up there. And when you have that visibility going like the way it's going, people are going to come, students are going to come. People want to send their children here because of its visibility, its reputation as a good institution for their children to come to. I think that's something that ASU really, really needed.

I always look at the two leaders, Lattie Coor and Michael Crow. Lattie Coor made ASU a great university. Michael Crow comes in, and he's given it more visibility, a greater institution that has its impact around the world, has a global impact of what he's doing. So when you look at these two leaders, you can't really separate the progress that they made between the two, because Lattie Coor had to do what he did in order for Michael Crow to succeed. And I think that's something that people need to recognize, among the Indian people, the Indian programs that we have here on campus.

INT: Let me ask you this. You've obviously focused most of your attention and work here on the recruitment of American Indian students. But what would you say, or how would you say, the university does in terms of attracting diversity in other terms, the Hispanic or Latino community, African Americans? How successful would you say the university is in those respects, from your perspective?

PZ: Receptive? What do you mean?

INT: From your perspective, how successful has Arizona State been in recruitment and retention of other communities, other minority students, particularly African American and Latino students? Do you have any experience with that as well?

PZ: Well, I don't know all that much about the statistics in those other areas. My only thing is that we took advantage of the opportunity that was given to us, extended to us, by ASU, and I just happened to be standing with the Indian people when that happened, and I just really took advantage of it. And I kind of said to them, I said, "Well, Lattie Coor's willing to do this, Michael Crow is willing to do this," so I just simply took advantage of those opportunities. Now, if those same opportunities were made available to the other minorities, the Blacks and the Hispanics and the other people, and if they did not take advantage of that, it's the fault of the leadership of those groups, that they didn't take advantage of it.

So I think ASU was really, really good to the American Indian people. Somewhere I read that of all the minorities here at ASU, the Indian students gained the most, the Indian population gained the most; of all the minorities, we gained the most here. Which is probably the truth, but it really didn't give any numbers. That's in an official publication of ASU. And we also gained the most in retention. But if you compare us to these others, numbers-wise, we're still not there. So because of those numbers, I think ASU has been an excellent partner to the Indian nations here in this state, because we taste it, the success that it's now producing. And the children want to be identified as part of that success, and that's the reason why they keep on coming.

INT: I'd like to ask you one question about the university in a general sense. What would you say that ASU excels at the most today, what do they do best today?

PZ: ASU is into this dilemma between quantities and quality. And it's pretty hard to achieve both, and then move at the same pace in both of those categories. It takes a guy with a vision and great leadership to achieve that. And I think because of the leadership of Michael Crow, it has achieved that.

I think ASU is also extremely good in working with people around the world. Globally, its presence is being felt by what ASU does. I think they do that very well. And I think that's a definition of a new American university, that has its global presence throughout the world, and I think they do that very, very well.

There are a lot of institutions where they may not have the numbers, but they have the quality. Stanford is probably a good example.—the quality is good, the number is not all that good. You look at these other universities, they can go the other way—quality is not that good, but the numbers are high. I think ASU may just be the appropriate balance between the two. And if you are to have a good balance, ASU probably represents the best of all the institutions, when you balance those two.

INT: What would you say are some of the major weaknesses or challenges that the university faces today?

PZ: Weaknesses and challenges, I would have to say, is some of the things that we still need to do—not only in one discipline, but in all of the disciplines—is to have students, faculty, and staff buy into what ASU really wants to do, what it represents. There are still some people who question what happens and what goes on around here, and I think we need to still reach out to those that question what happens, to take more time, give them the quality time that they need, to bring them in, and to be able to do more of that.

The other thing that I think ASU probably needs to do is, if you look at all of those eastern schools—Columbia, Harvard, Yale—those institutions run on endowed funds, the money that people give to the university and then they create an endowment program. And the people who become the presidents of those universities just rely on the endowments and they don't have to beg the states, they don't have to get into that competition with other programs within the state. When you have to do that, the presidents spend all of their time lobbying and begging for money at the state legislature instead of being the president. ASU is not there yet; we still need to do better in that area. I think that's the biggest challenge. And I think the administration knows that, and they're working hard at it, so that each year, Michael Crow is the president at the university, exercising all of his power and authority, and not necessarily sitting in the hallways at the state legislature, waiting for him to see the appropriations committee or subcommittee.

INT: Okay. I want to take this opportunity to change the tape once more, and then I'll ask you just a couple more questions about your civic and social life in Tempe, since we're the Tempe Historical Museum, and then we can wrap up the interview. So this will conclude Tape 1.

(end of recording)

Tape 2, Side A

INT: Let's continue. I'd like to ask you about your involvement, if any, with organizations within the City of Tempe. Can you tell me, have you ever been involved in any civic or social service or political organizations in the City of Tempe?

PZ: I haven't really. On occasion, I would talk to the leadership, the mayor, the former mayor, and then on occasion, the people that run the city by committees. I would simply just communicate with them about what some of their plans are. But I never really actively participated in any of those, because what I do here, there's a lot of work. It's time-consuming, what I'm involved in. And the lack of participation doesn't mean that whatever they're doing is unimportant. Whatever they're doing, in planning for the city and all of that and the population here in Tempe, those are very, very important. But I have all these other—twenty-one tribes and the Navajo Nation and the Indian students—

to tend to, and I don't really have that much time to be helping out with the local civic organizations.

INT: Okay. Has there ever been a time that you have experienced any form of exclusion or discrimination in Tempe?

PZ: Not really.

INT: Has there been a time where you maybe felt misunderstood, or someone has made an assumption about you, in Tempe?

PZ: Not in Tempe, no.

INT: Have you ever felt unsafe or unaccepted in Tempe?

PZ: No. The people in Tempe, they treat me very well, with respect, and so I never have felt any of those kinds of things here.

INT: Okay. How would you define your identity? Consider maybe in terms of ethnicity or class or gender, or anything of that nature, how do you define yourself?

PZ: You know, one can only guess, and I get my clues, and what I guess the way that people think of me is an American Indian leader that has had a lot of experience during my lifetime working with American Indian groups on issues that affect the American Indian people and students. And much of the things that I do really is based on that.

And because of my previous work with the Indian people, there seems to be a lot of respect that I hear from people and, basically, the way they treat me. And I go to these restaurants to eat, on occasion, with some students and other faculty members, and there's always somebody there that recognizes me. And they always to offer to pay for my meal, for example, or if I don't mind, they want to pick up my ticket at noon, for example. Those are the kind of occasions that signify to me how people feel about me. And so, I'm pretty lucky; I'm pretty lucky in the sense that all these people react that way to me, about my presence. And I haven't felt any kind of discrimination or anything like that, and so, basically, I'm pretty happy, I'm a happy person here.

INT: Can you tell me about your fondest memory working here at ASU and in Tempe? Something that really stands out for you, that you feel is significant, either in your life or the development of the university or the city?

PZ: I think one of my fondest memories is when I took part in a ceremony—and I don't even remember what year it was, it was sometime in the late 1980s—when three of us that came from almost the same class, back in the early 1960s that graduated from here, my Indian friends and brothers that used to be my better friends here on campus, we all became leaders of our own Indian tribes. There was Josiah Moore from Tohono O'odham Nation by Tucson; there was a Hopi person, Vernon Masayesva, that became

one of the great leaders of the Hopi Nation; and myself. We all went to school together here, in the early 1960s. And then this certain year, I believe it was in the late 1980s, we were all honored at the same time, and we received our trophies and our plaques and whatever it is the university was extending to us as the Alumni Association, at a football game at Tempe. Then the speaker, over the P.A. system, was talking about what we all did, that we went to school here, and then we went back to our respective Indian tribes, when we were elected, and then basically what we had accomplished. All the people in the stadium cheered, I thought that was awesome.

Not that you glorify all those kinds of things, but that kind of indicated to me that people care. People care about what one does, and people care and they know when you care about other people. And so that was something that I really didn't expect. I thought we were into this thing all by ourselves, and sometimes we were trying to sail our canoe against a storm and that we weren't really going anywhere. But when you hear something like that, and the events that took place like the way it did that year, it really makes you think about how other people care so much about the rest of the other human beings that they come into contact with on a daily basis, that was that message. The Alumni Association probably had their own criteria of why they did what they did, but there was a lot of sense of community feeling when all of that happened, so that was something to remember.

INT: Okay. I would like to finish up the interview by asking you if you can share any funny stories, anything that you consider silly, I suppose, that's happened to you since you've been here?

PZ: Hmm. I think one of those is where, personally, something happens to you, and you don't really know how funny it is until you really think about some of those occasions. And for me, they were all personal, the funny things that happened to an individual here. But I guess I have a lot of sense of humor. I like to tease people, and people kind of treat me the same way, because they know that I say funny things. But sometimes you don't even know that you say those kinds of funny things, but it's something that I guess one has to recognize. So I don't really have any incidents where those kinds of things stand out in my own mind. There's a lot of them, and they're all important, and I don't want to say which one was the funniest thing.

INT: Okay. I think we can wrap up the interview here; I've gone through my entire long list of questions. But before we go off the record, are there any last remarks or comments that you'd like to make about your service here or your life and work in the Valley?

PZ: Not really. Except when you wrap this whole thing up, the work that I do is done with so many people. I don't try to do things all on my own, because I really basically believe that in order for us to succeed, there has to be lot of people that help what we do, and the challenge is to make them understand why we do those things. And it's more of a gift that one has, when you try to get other people to do things that are necessary. Yes, you could plow in there and get things done, but it's more meaningful, it's more permanent, if you're able to convince others that they should do what you're capable of doing.

And in my work, I have a lot of people that really believe in some of the things that we do here on campus, so I always try not to tackle a problem alone. And I will challenge myself to say, "These other people should really, really know what happens here." Because I don't plan to be here for another hundred years, and it's better to work with the young people, it's better to work with others, so that these kinds of necessary work continues to live beyond your presence here at the university.

I'm blessed with so many young people. I think Janie, my assistant, is a real good example, where she's just a young kid that graduated here from this institution, and I asked her to come and work with me because she was really interested in what I do. And so my job now is to kind of let her know why I do these things, and why I do things differently, and then let her know some of those skills, and try to teach her some of those skills; so it is with all of the other people that I work with.

And in many, many ways, I'm blessed with those kind of people, that really help and accomplish those kinds of things. I feel like, sometimes, that I think of things and the way we should do it, but then you have to get other people to do it. That, to me, is something that a lot of people don't do. And the only way to accomplish and to do that is if you work with those people and convince them that they should come along and do the things that should be done. That's it!

INT: All right. Well, I and the Museum would like to thank you very much for your time, for your participation in this project. This will conclude the Tempe Historical Museum's renovation interview with Peterson Zah on August 4, 2008.

(end of recording)

Transcribed by Susan Jensen
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