

Interview of Joe LeBlanc, Andy LeBlanc and Mike Willis

Marquette, MI

No date available

Amy Spurzley: "What is it like growing up on a reservation?"

Joe LeBlanc "Growing up on a reservation; I don't know. On our reservation, we are all related. That is the only difference, I guess."

Andy LeBlanc: "Pretty much."

J.L. "Related to everybody, the police, everybody in administration; there are like, probably close to 1,000 people on our reservation all together and we are related to just about everyone."

A.S. "Okay, I know where it is, Bay Mills..."

J.L. "Bay Mills: 20 miles west of Sault St. Marie, Michigan."

A.L. "Upper Peninsula"

J.L. "We're all Yoopers."

A.S. "Any prejudice or racism?"

Mike Willis: "Oh, hell yeah."

J.L. "In the schools, it isn't really open, but you can almost sense...you can feel the tension."

M.W. "They were going to open up that thing...remember, where they were going to put all of the Indian students?"

J.L. "There was a close call; we go to Brimley School, which is the next town, and something happened there where the teachers were a little prejudice and they were going to pull the Native Americans students and there would be a Native American school right in Bay Mills. Close call; that was all it was."

A.S. "Any problems you see in the reservation community?"

A.L. "Alcoholism, drug use..."

J.L. "All drugs and alcohol...that is all it is, I'd swear to it. I don't know... people don't want to recognize the problems, so there are other administration problems; there is a lot of favoritism. It doesn't matter how well you can do the job, if you are this one person's friend, then you get the job. That is how it is. So, really people aren't willing to recognize the problems so they just build up."

A.L. "I'd say most of all, its drugs and alcoholism."

J.L. "Well, that is the cause of it; people don't want to recognize it, so they don't see it as a problem. They don't want anybody else butting into their..."

A.L. "Yeah, but we don't do that."

J. L. "That is why we are up here to get away from it; get the better life."

A.S. "The role of traditions and elders and things like that?"

J.L. "I'm a traditionalist."

A.L. "I am."

J.L. "Andy is a traditionalist. Mike, geez, he's there. He knows more traditions, don't you?"

M.W. "A little bit."

J.L. "He knows a little bit. The role of it...it is coming back. The traditional ways are coming back. I don't care what...I've heard some professionals say that there are no more 'Indians' so to speak..."

A.S. "I've heard that."

J.L. "Well, Indians and Indian, we don't just stay so primitive. That is what they expect; a true Indian is primitive, you know, but it is not. Indian goes with the times too, but we still have our traditional values and they are coming back and we are getting our language back...we are just getting started. Now, we want our land back. Starting out with Northern Michigan University..."

M.W. "I know we would have used technology a lot better if we hadn't been, if we had the compound rules, this would still be our land."

J.L. "Air missiles..."

M.W. "Yep!"

J.L. "But it's coming back, our tradition is coming back."

A.S. "I can't read this..."

J.L. "Is it in English?"

A.S. "Sort of..."

J.L. "Well then I can't help you."

A.S. "Oh, I think, is there an awareness of Indianist the people?"

J.L. "Of Indianist among what people?"

A.L. "On the reservation?"

A.S. "I don't know."

J.L. "No, for ourselves, we are Indianists. I am proud to be an Indian. I guess, we are pretty much proud, all of us here, we are proud to be Indian."

A.S. "You're incredibly cocky about it."

J.L. "God damn right! We are proud of it for ourselves."

A.L. "There are others on our reservation who just admit to being Indian to get the free benefits from the programs, but other than that..."

A.S. "Chris's roommate was like that last year..."

A.L. "They won't admit it unless they..."

J.L. "You're only Indian... we call them government Indians, that's what they are."

A.S. "They're only Indians when it seems important."

J.L. "Yeah, that's right. Other than that they want to be..."

A.L. "I don't know..."

J.L. "Just not Indians. We're proud, we are sponges."

A.L. "Just like Mike..."

J.L. "That's a different, that's a sponge drag."

M.W. "A sponge challenge."

J.L. "But we are proud to be Indian, because we can dance."

A.S. "How familiar are you with...I can't read it, it's something..."

J.L. "Which one is it?"

A.S. "Oh, its fishing rights!"

A.L. "Oh, fishing rights!"

J.L. "Oh, that's a heavy topic! That's what sparks the most of them, the racial tension right in our reservation and downstate. Sporting...our role is...I don't know, it is so hard for anyone of our culture back home to make a buck. So, it is our right, and I think it should stay our right. After all, we were here first."

A.L. "They are really trying to take away a lot."

J.L. "Yeah. They are trying every excuse to get control over how we fish and they say we are fishing out the lakes. That is a bunch of bull. Money from our fishing goes towards..."

A.L. "Hatcheries."

J.L. "Hatcheries, which go and replant those fish again. So, we are not neglecting our lakes. Why should we, that is...in our reservation, that is how you survive, how people survive. So, we are not neglecting the lakes, as people say, it is false propaganda, that is all it is, it is nothing."

A.L. "It is a way of life for a lot of people."

J.L. "Yeah, it is a way of life. And I don't see how anybody can say 'You can't fish,' and you know...just because we are making money on it and they're not, so they're going to have arguments on it."

A.S. "The guy that was talking to my internet class was saying that he had been there and that he was getting stones thrown at him and everything and they had stuff like high force gunshots and they were shooting little pellets in them and they had signs that said something like 'Save a walleye, spear an Indian.'"

J.L. "Of course, if I see one of those, there is going to be a riot. One person up here at Northern had one of those hats, and a friend of mine hit that hat right off his head."

A.S. "I would have hit the guy!"

J.L. "He hit the hat off...it was just a little guy. He kept that hat off!"

M.W. "That sure pissed him off...we got some thieves out there."

J.L. "We don't, you know, I am sure I wouldn't care if somebody else could spear. We are spearing, but they are trying to take that away from us just because they cannot do it...whites, so to speak, you know. That is just a bunch of bull. It is just so they can have control. If they can't do it, nobody else can. It pretty much just shows how society is. If society as a whole can't do it, the minorities can't."

A.S. "Do you think it was as bad around here as it was in Wisconsin?"

J.L. "We don't really...we do have spearing rights, I believe we do, but we don't use them here."

AL. "It is easier with nets."

J.L. "Yeah, it is easier with a gill net; they're not smart Indians up there! I guess we don't really use our spearing rights here. Fishing rights did start in our reservation, with my Great Uncle and the law, that is where the fishing rights started. That is where everything was brought to court, an agreement was made and the laws were started. I am very proud to say it."

A.L. "Until Parish everything up."

J.L. "Yes, Colonel Parish went and messed everything up."

A.L. "Total mess."

J.L. "Sold our rights under the table."

A.L. "She was travel chairman elected to sell our rights, basically. Nobody elected her, she just did it on her own...bitch."

M.W. "It was a woman after all."

A.S. "Hey!"

J.L. "You can tell there is a lot of tension there, on my side of the family. Families kind of stick together on the reservation. When it is Indian issues, pretty much the reservation will stick together as a whole, but when it is in inner tribal issues, that is where the Indians, so to speak, split up the families and large families. There are a lot of large families, and we are all related, but the large families will split up. It is really, the people who want rights say, 'Well, let's bring commercialism into our reservation, let's bring hotels, casinos', everything else' they want to bring that into our reservation and then there are people saying, 'Well hey, we just want our rights, we want to make a living,' so when they say, 'Let's do this, let's spend lots of money,' they've failed in the past and they keep trying, they try this spur of the moment idea and I don't think it is going to work. What do you think, Mike? They are thinking of building, I don't know what it is, a dock and a hotel and everything. What do you think?"

M.W. "I think they should put that in there."

J.L. "Yeah...they spent...we have a softball field that they spent over \$100,000 on, because they fixed it up...new fence. They've got these great big lights so you can go at night. And they use this place once or twice a year; Fourth of July, whatever, some other tournament. Other than that, that is all they use it for."

M.W. "Waste of money."

J.L. "Yeah, and we used to have a gym, a pool, a games room, a store...everything on our reservation, all gone. The gym is used for a bingo hall. The pool is filled in and they put offices in there. The games room is no longer, the store went out of business, we are relying on this other store."

M.W. "That is not even owned by anyone in the tribe...owned by whites."

J.L. "Yeah, it's not even a tribal store. So, the prices aren't bad, but it just...mismanagement on the reservation, that is all it is. It is just total...it is upsetting at times. That is how I picture it. This year's election was just favoritism...that is all it was: people who cannot run the administration on the reservation, just favoritism. To use an example, my Uncle Art was tribal judge, and it cost him like \$25-\$30 thousand of training as a judge. That comes out of tribal money; that is a lot of money. So I figured, well, geez...and he is a good judge. It is just that people judge him by personal biases, not on how he does his job. He does his job well. But, personal bias got the best, so he is out and we have another person in who is going to cost close to \$50 thousand to train this lady, because she has no substance

abuse background whatsoever, no tribal, no law background, just completely from scratch going to train her. I think it is total...the reservation just digs itself into the hole, that is why our reservation is...it looks nice on the skin, but if you look on the inside, skin deep, it is just..."

M.W. "Terrible."

J.L. "Terrible...internal bleeding, that is all it is. And it boils right down to drug and alcohol abuse. That is all it does. People don't want other people in their business; they think they don't have a problem. That is how it boils down. But the fishing rights, that is just right on the top of the pyramid."

A.S. "That is because everybody knows about it."

J.L. "Yeah...mismanagement. That is why fishing rights are so bad right now. Tribal law is like, if we can't fish, you can't, you know, they were fishing with kill nets. And then again, we wouldn't be in any kind of problem if it wasn't for bad administration, it boils down to drug and alcohol abuse."

M.W. "Just like all that vicious sexual abuse that is happening now."

J.L. "We are getting real bad. We are just a small reservation, 1,000 people at the most, it is just real bad. People taking sides...it is just bad. What is the next question?"

A.S. "Interaction with State Police...? There is another word there..."

J.L. "Interaction with State/Government police? They don't really bother us, and we don't bother them. So we just...it isn't bad. I can get bad, racially. Mostly, it is under...mostly, I should say, it is under the table. Nobody wants to drag it out, but it can easily be brought out by one little spark. If it is said in front of certain people who are willing to confront the racial slurs, so to speak, then it'll be brought out. Other people...some of my cousins would just let it pass by and wait for a second hit. If someone said a racial slur to me, right there I would confront them on it. I might try to just wring their neck. But as for the State Government and the State Police...the State Government, we are really in with them because of the fishing rights. They are trying to get state regulations on us. A lot issues go with the Federal Court...they decide, the State Federal Court, maybe even up to the Supreme. State Police...we get along."

M.W. "Except for the sheriff."

J.L. "The sheriff we have, one of our own, we call him Don-ho, because Don-ho is gung-ho. He is from the reservation. He used to be a reservation police officer, which is a federal officer, but he put in for the job as county sheriff and he is real strict on everybody. He is prejudiced against his own people. He is embarrassed to be Indian because nobody else wants to recognize their own problems, not willing to get help and he is not willing to give help, he is just willing to punish them and what they can't help to be because of the situations that they were raised in. That is why...but the State Police, we have no problem. We get along, actually."

M.W. "I even like a few of them."

A.S."We got it I think! Just if there is any sort of revision so we don't use your name in a bad way..."

A.L. "Oh..."

J.L. "It is bad, don't go on our reservation!"

A.L. "We'll kill ya!"

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