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Karen Schmidt and Meg Miner on the Ames Library Exhibit, Native Voices

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WGLT Radio Sound Ideas interview with Karen Schmidt and Meg Miner, January 18, 2019

Laura Kennedy: The great native tradition of oral history highlights a unique exhibition that's currently up through February 14th in Ames library on the Illinois Wesleyan University campus in Bloomington. Native voices, native people's concepts of health and illness examines health and medicine among contemporary American Indians, Alaska natives and native Hawaiians. Meg Miner is the University Archivist and Special Collections librarian and she says this exhibit uses a combination of interviews, artwork and interactive media. Karen Schmidt is the University Librarian and she says this exhibition is cross-disciplinary.

Karen Schmidt: And we have a lot of students here who are either pre-med, or some are in School of Nursing and so the connection for them, in particular, seemed really strong to us. This is a joint exhibit from American Library Association and National Library of Medicine, and playing together, we know... the – the voice of our Native Americans.

Meg Miner: There's art. There's – there's talk about cultural heritage in addition to healing practices and wellness – attitudes towards wellness.

Kennedy: And it's high-tech because we have iPads here with headphones so that people can listen.

Interactive Video: The Pow Wow is an ancient Native American tradition that still serves to gather the community. Elders lead the grand entry, followed by military veterans and then by other honored members and organizations. The gathering of the community is a cherished practice because in a traditional society, the community is a source of support and healing.

Miner: The bulk of the exhibit are people telling their stories, so it really is the voices of these people in these communities and what the National Library of Medicine did was curated so that it's around six different themes, which we have banners that go along with all of the iPad stands, on different themes. So there is the individual, there is community, there is nature, healing and the sort of overview –

Kennedy: -tradition-

Miner: -mm-hmm... of different traditions, right. So the iPads themselves, all have the same app on them. They can be launched into any number of different ways looking at the art or timeline of native people and their interactions with other communities.

Kennedy: Were you able to consult with any local Native American people to ask about their input?

Schmidt: Absolutely! And we have two of the Lakota sisters, Alvida and Carol, who are local in this region who have been incredibly helpful to us. Our opening ceremony on Friday night was a spirit of the rainbow singers which certainly are native Americans from – from this area. So we mined and connected with our population here.

Miner: And we were fortunate too that Rebecca Gearhart is on our Anthropology department here, has a established relationships with some of these communities, too, so these are groups that come to our

campus frequently and when we first started planning this, we had Dr. Gearhart and the planning session, we also had Dr. Noel Kerr, who is in our Nursing department.

Kennedy: Can you tell me about the associated events you have going on all through this exhibition, Meg?

Miner: Sure. So we started with our opening ceremony on Friday and that was the spirit of the rainbow singers, phenomenal event and really helped us, I think, ground our understanding of song in these practices and the role of song in healing, and it was very educational I thought, too. And then next Thursday at 7pm or 6pm here in the library, we'll have the medicine wheel teaching.

Kennedy: What is a medicine wheel?

Miner: ...which is what the Lakota sisters help us with. So it's a way that ... I'm actually going to be learning about it myself.

Kennedy: [giggles]... Okay

Miner: umm... but I understand that they'll have different stations set up and people will be able to put together different artifacts from the tables that are gonna be part of the medicine wheel. I've never actually taken part in that myself.

Schmidt: It's – it's part of the four directions. They pull – they pull the four directions together into the healing bundle.

Miner: So... and then the final event that we have scheduled is an Illinois Wesleyan Alumna who took on a research project based on a book that she read in our old book library on campus when she was a student here. She's a member of the class of 1960.

Kennedy: Oh, so that's before the Ames library was built?

Miner: ...the ames library... she found a book about Native Americans who served in the Civil War and was fascinated by this and she had a completely different career. She was a chemist and never lost her interest in this topic and actually lived in a place in Michigan where this group had come from, and so started doing research on her own and published a book in 2017 about a sharp shooting unit in the Civil War, and she published biographies on all of these people. So I think it was 140 people in this unit and part of what she found out in her research was how they – the healing practices of the US Army were quite different from what they received in their native communities and so she's gonna be able to tell us some stories about the kinds of treatments they received while they were in the war and then also the effects of being away from home and community.

Kennedy: So does this exhibition address perhaps traditional western medicine and how it has impacted native peoples and how their medicine developed?

Schmidt: This is really, I think, helping us understand how native American healing practices are grounded in certainly the whole person, the spirituality, the connection with nature.

Interactive Video: For native peoples, healing is more than the treatment of physical symptoms. It is intertwined with larger concepts of health. They're derived from balance in nature, community support, positive tribal identity and individual self-respect. Traditional healers spend large amount of time with their patients working to discover the root causes of their illness. This process often involves a spiritual journey.

Miner: Of course, the people who are participating in these groups today are of our society as well, right? So there is some discussion in some of the videos about the interaction of modern culture and traditional ways and how you find identity and bring your practices into those types of situations as well, so I think it's a good blending of very much being centered on the native people's voices, which is what it's called, and then how those people interact with the western society that we have around them

Kennedy: Does the exhibition address how there was inhibition of culture for native people and how that would affect their wellness?

Miner: There is a segment on boarding schools, certainly that I have seen. There is something on the Native American code talkers who served in World War II. I think that that would probably be woven through all of it, yeah... I think the interconnectedness of the colonial cultures on native people is certainly part of this.

Kennedy: And certainly loss of land, as well, because with loss of land, there might have been – there would be loss of identity.

Schmidt: In our opening ceremony, our Chaplain Elyse Winger, very poignantly pointed out that even the land on which this particular building is built in in this campus once belonged to Native Americans and we – we need to recall that and to honor that and to give that space.

Kennedy: What have you learned from this exhibition so far that has really surprised you?

Schmidt: I would say that I'm very touched with the people who have been coming in to listen, who are not Native American but who seem to be called to listen through a different perspective and it's been very gratifying to watch community members come in and we're hoping – we've invited all of the school districts to come in. there's – there are curriculum plans that go along with this. We're hoping to see some children in here too who will come to understand this whole heritage and how it is woven into the—into our prairie.

Kennedy: That's Karen Schmidt and Meg Miner from Ames library at Illinois Wesleyan University. *Native Voices: Native Peoples Concepts of Health and Illness* runs through February 14th. I'm Laura Kennedy.