

**Title: interview with Chief Lady Bird
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Samantha Martin-Bird (S.M.B.)

Aanii, Bozhoo, Samantha nitishinikaas, Hi, my name is Samantha, and I'm here with Chief Lady Bird. We are at the OLA super conference and we're going to just chat a little bit about your work.

Chief Lady Bird (C.L.B.)

Cool.

S.M.B.

Yeah. Thanks for joining us.

C.L.B.

Yeah, for sure. Aaniin, Boozhoo ,Ogimaakwebnes nitishinikaas. Mnjikaning miikwa Moose Deer ndoonjibaa, migiziin nidoodem. So my name's Chief Lady Bird. That's my spirit name, that I got in ceremony from my grandfather. I come from both Rama First Nation and Moose Deer point First Nation. But I grew up in Rama and registered there and I sit in the Eagle Clan. And I'm an artist, illustrator, street artist, muralist, all of that.

S.M.B.

Awesome. Yes. So you're an artist. And recently you illustrated a children's book. That's part of why you're here at OLA. Do you want to talk a little bit about that book?

C.L.B.

Yeah, sure. So I illustrated *Nibi's water song*, which is a book written by Sunshine Tenasco. And it was released by Scholastic, which was crazy, exciting. When I got the email that was like, hey, do you want to do a scholastic book. Because we all grew up with like scholastic book fairs. And we know that Scholastic is like the big, like, children's book place. And how could I say no to that? And it's it's about this little girl named to be who she tries to get a glass of water and the water comes out brown, which I think is something a lot of Indigenous folks can relate to. Even at my parents house, like sometimes turn the water and it has a smell or, you know, you can't drink it. Like we can't drink our water at my parents place at all. We have to have bottled water, which sucks for the environment, or have one of the coolers with the jug. So that was in the in the book like a moment that even I could relate to. And I mean, even more northern communities or fly-in communities can, you know, everything that's going on with the water there.

S.M.B.

The community you're talking about is in southern Ontario. Just for those listening to this podcast, it's kind of crazy to think about a community. That's only how far is it from Toronto?

C.L.B.

Like two hours.

S.M.B.

Yeah. So a community that's only two hours outside of Toronto doesn't have clean drinking water.

C.L.B.

Yeah. And there were if you look online, there's like a map that gets updated of who has boil water advisories and there are reserves near Toronto that are closer than mine that are on boil water advisories, too. I think people don't realize that because we often talk about more northern communities because of the severity of that and because the government obviously doesn't give the resources there. But it's like it's also happening here, too. It's like all over, it's everywhere. In the book, she tries to drink some water and can't. And she's very thirsty. So she decides to go on a quest story, a hero's journey to find clean water. And she tries all these options and she goes to like a more urban place with big shiny houses and one with a green roof, which is like a metaphor for parliament and continually like gets rejected or is given solutions that aren't really solutions. So are really tiny water bottle, for instance. And she drinks it all really fast. And it's like, gee, thanks. That did not help. I mean, she has a little sidekick. That's a little French bulldog who is based on my dog, Ludo. So I had to I had to put him in and he it's totally gone to his head.

S.M.B.

That's amazing.

C.L.B.

Yeah. He he knows that he's in it and he flaunts it. Sometimes my dad looks them and goes, you're in a book, you know.

S.M.B.

That's amazing.

C.L.B.

And then Nibi is actually based on Sunshine's daughter, one of her daughters. She has a few. Yeah.

S.M.B.

Sunshine is the author.

C.L.B.

Yeah. And she's from Kitigan Zibi.

S.M.B.

Oh, O.K.

C.L.B.

Yeah. I've never met her, which is crazy.

S.M.B.

How do you say her community's name?

C.L.B.

Kitigan Zibi. Don't quote me on that.

S.M.B.

Kitigan Zibi.

C.L.B.

Don't quote me on that.

S.M.B.

That means something - water - hey? Zibi means like a river.

C.L.B.

River. Yeah. I'm not sure what Kitigan means.

S.M.B.

Do you know where that is?

C.L.B.

Uh, near Ottawa.

S.M.B.

Okay.

C.L.B.

Up. Up that way.

S.M.B.

Okay. So I'm curious because so I've read, I've read your book and then I've read *Water Walker* by Joanne Robertson and Josephine [Mandamin]. Yes. She's here. Yeah. Yeah. I was with her last night.

C.L.B.

We're both Eagle Clan. We hugged each other. She was like family!

S.M.B.

So I'm curious, do you have any personal experience with water walking ceremonies or other traditional knowledges that you grew up with around water protection?

C.L.B.

When I was a teenager, actually, we did a ceremony, strawberry ceremony in June, and it was my first time doing something like that. And then the community asked me to, like, carry the water down after we did the ceremony and give it back to the lake. And that was like a really pivotal moment in my learning about the sacredness of water, because it's like we grow up hearing, that it's always sacred. But then really being a part of that and having that personal ceremonial relationship to the water in that moment... it's like me and another Kwe [woman] from my community. We're walking down carrying this big sorta, I guess it was like a copper bucket of water. And the whole community is like behind us, like drumming and singing us down to the water. And I remember just that that feeling of like, oh, yeah, we need to. This is a living thing that we need to have a relationship with. And that's a big thing to realize as a teenager, because, you know, teenage priorities are not always that. I mean, unless you're Autumn [Peltier].

S.M.B.

Yes.

C.L.B.

She is, like, incredible. I'm like, wow.

S.M.B.

Yeah. I feel like she has an advantage on us, though, because she comes from this like these matriarchs who like her aunt was Josephine Mandamin.

C.L.B.

Yeah.

S.M.B.

She's raised in it.

C.L.B.

Goes to show the power of our matriarchs. Right? And how we need to uplift and encourage that for sure. Yeah, she's amazing. She inspires me. I'm really proud of all of them. I got to see Lake Superior for the first time this year. I had never gone up that way.

S.M.B.

Where did you go exactly? Did you go to Thunder Bay or were you somewhere else?

C.L.B.

We drove through. Because me, my partner were driving told Alberta to see his family.

C.L.B.

So you would have gone around the whole lake?

C.L.B.

Yeah, we went up and around it all. And it was fall, so we caught it right when the leaves were all. And, you know, it's just you get that for a second. We just happened to make it for all the colored leaves. And it was like the most beautiful introduction to Superior I probably could have ever had. You feel the power from Superior for sure. Wow. Yeah. I was, like, stunned. I was like, this is so beautiful. We drove through Thunder Bay because we got Alberta in three days.

S.M.B.

That's faster than I would have done it.

C.L.B.

We were all wild and in the fall because we had a week to get there, do our stuff and get back.

S.M.B.

Oh, wow.

C.L.B.

We are so tired.

S.M.B.

Yeah.

C.L.B.

And on the way back, we we weren't planning on staying there, but we couldn't make it any further. We were so tired. And that place is a racist!

S.M.B.

Yeah.

C.L.B.

Like I mean I definitely have some not privilege but I'm pretty fair. I'm like white passing so but my partner is not. And it was just like glaringly obvious. And when people are being like that, I get so defensive. I'm like, oh, Thunder Bay. But yeah, it was hard to even just get a hotel. Like there was two hotels across the road from each other. And there was one that had a lot of people sitting outside of it, like a lot of Native people, and it was like 2:00 in the morning. And I don't know just because I don't like getting out of a vehicle at night when there's like a bunch of men outside. I wasn't comfortable going there. So we went

across the road and they refused us and said, why don't you go cross the road? And I was like, oh, I see. Is this the white side? And that's the Native side? Okay. And then we had breakfast this morning and people were coming in and getting served right away. And we waited like over an hour for eggs, for eggs! I was like, let's go get out of here.

S.M.B.

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Anyways, tell us a bit about your art. Yeah.

C.L.B.

Okay!

S.M.B.

It's really open, and I got more specific questions.

C.L.B.

It's such an open ended question because I also do like a lot of different things and I'm kind of like floopy where it's like I like I can't do the same thing for a long period of time where I'm always changing. So some of the things that I do are like street art and murals. So I have like a lot of murals around the city [Toronto]. On like buildings and doors and the underpass as well that I like collaborated with people on. And then I've got some murals that are like sort of in different, I guess, institutions is the right word to say, like I recently did when I Ryerson.

S.M.B.

Oh really?

C.L.B.

Yeah. Got one at OCAD as well I did a few years ago, I can't even I can tell you there was a year where I did like over 20 murals so I can't even remember half the time were there. Unless I look at my Instagram and I'm like, oh yeah, I forgot I did that. And then we did one in Montreal a couple years ago as well. It's been tagged, but I think it looks cool tagged. So I'm like, that's the risk you run when you do like street art and stuff is like you've got to expect that someone's going to add to it. And but I think that it gives it life, you know, as long as it's not like a racist or whatever, because there was some, like, racist tagging that happened with some other folks from that project that we did. But yeah that's, that's like just a reality of doing work like that. But I also do digital illustrations, which has my heart right now. I love it so much. I bought my iPad just to do sketches for murals because that was my main practice at one point. And I needed something that was just quicker to get get the drawings done and to be able to project it or do whatever or just to have it and hold. And it's better than having a bunch papers, but ended up being very

it was intuitive. So I just was like, oh, no. Here we go. So I taught myself how to do digital illustration. And in the last four years, I love it so much. I'm doing Inktober right now, which is usually a drawing project every October, but he's doing one that's all year. So it's one drawing a week for the whole year. Based on, like prompts that he gives, I am participating in that for this year because it makes you a better artist when you're forced to draw something you wouldn't normally like. One of the words was Brick. And I was like, what, I don't want to draw bricks! So, yeah. And I also do a lot of illustrations that are like more on the erotic side about Indigenous sex, Indigenous erotica, love, all that good stuff.

S.M.B.

Why is talking about are creating art about Indigenous erotica and sexuality important to you? Mm hmm.

C.L.B.

Well, the first reason why it's important to me is that I found that there was this narrative that I think can be easy to fall into because at one point when I was younger, I kind of was like, yeah, I guess, you know what I mean, in a disheartened way, like, okay, that if we're portraying ourselves in a sexual way, that we're contributing to the hyper sexualization of Indigenous bodies. That contributes to the national issue of MMIW (missing and murdered indigenous women.)

S.M.B.

Oh, interesting.

C.L.B.

And I hear that a lot. It's like we can't sexualize ourselves. We can't let ourselves be sexualized, because then we're gonna, this is gonna happen to us. And at one point I was like, "Okay, so we have to portray ourselves as traditional or we have to portray ourselves as whatever." But then, you know, you, you grow up a little bit. I thought about that all the time because I've drawn or written erotica since I was like 13. Like, I've always been sort of very connected to my sexual side. And in a way, I felt shamed by that statement. I felt like it wasn't fair. So I thought critically about it for a long time. And I was like, why do I feel so much shame for being a sexual person while I'm an Indigenous person where that's just a natural part of who we are? I was like, okay, no, this does not contribute to that narrative. That's a whole shameful thing. And shame comes from like a colonial mindset, right? That was never our way. I remember Sage Petahtegoose posted "Shame is not in my bundle," and I was like, yes, thank you. That's right. We can't be ashamed. You know, we just have to be ourselves. And so I wanted to honour that side of myself.

You know, there's also a lot of people out there like Tenille Campbell, who does Indian love poems, and they're sexy and they're amazing. And I think there's a bunch of us working in this kind of medium. And we all kind of started doing it at the same time, which was really nice. So there was like that support the

conversations my artwork can have with Tenille's poems or Adrienne Loon's Pole Dancing or Midnight Wolverine's burlesque shows. It's all different, but it's all kind of creating this really healthy narrative that is really positive for all of us because we love ourselves. Colonization was like, hey, you can't love yourself. You suck, we hate you.

S.M.B.

There's something about Indigenous women loving their bodies and feeling comfortable in their sexuality that seems completely antithetical with colonialism like it is the the undoing of colonialism for Indigenous woman to that to have that sort of freedom and pleasure.

C.L.B.

Yeah.

S.M.B.

Yeah. How would you say your personal relationships influence your art or vice versa?

C.L.B.

Oh, that's a hard question. I think it does, definitely. But I'm not thinking about all the different people in my life who influence my work because obviously there's family strength that's there. And I'm always painting or drawing from this lens of the love that I've received my whole life from my family. But Dad's a medicine man. You met my dad.

S.M.B.

I did.

C.L.B.

A lot of my inspiration comes from, like, either stories that both him and my mom have told or like medicine teachings and stuff like that. And, you know, obviously, I like really love my my brother, too. I have his anishinaabe name tattooed on me and I guess always thinking about those relations and how a lot of the times family structures because of colonization and the sort of trauma that's happened with residential schools and stuff like that, thinking about how a lot of family structures were harmed by that. Do you know what I mean? And then also thinking about how we are doing our work to, like, become this healthy unit. And we're not perfect. Some shit happens. But I guess being grateful for that and thinking also critically about how to carry that forward in my life as well.

S.M.B.

Would you say ceremony influences your work or in what way to ceremony influence your work?

C.L.B.

I would say it does a little bit, but it is important to note that, like, I don't do ceremony a lot. Like, I haven't done it for a long time because I've been here in the city for so long. And also I just I'm kind of close knit with who I do ceremony with. So I won't go to like institutions that are holding ceremonies here, although I do think that that is a good thing that is being done for the urban community, for sure, for people who don't have access in their own communities or don't know where the communities are or can't get there or something. You know what I mean? I think it's like really great. But for me personally, it's like I like going up north and doing it.

S.M.B.

And you mean two hours north [of Toronto]?

C.L.B.

Yeah, I know. Me and someone were laughing about this the other day because we called that up north, but it is not north at all.

S.M.B.

For those listening to this podcast who are librarians, kind of throughout Ontario who want to have more Indigenous art in their libraries. Do you have thoughts about that? How should they go about that?

C.L.B.

Oh, that's a good question!

S.M.B.

Tips for including more Indigenous art, like local Indigenous art?

C.L.B.

Well, I mean, there's the obvious choice of like supporting local Indigenous artists and purchasing artwork that they've already created. I think that would look really nice. But there's a lot of muralists in our community to. I'm not just saying that because I'm a muralist.

S.M.B.

And libraries have walls! And I don't think that's a coincidence.

C.L.B.

I just I love how murals can transform spaces like they make it so warm and they make you feel like one of the reasons that I do murals and street art is to represent us in places where our presence has been obscured. So like in urban centres or universities, colleges or like libraries or any sort of institutional type building where we wouldn't have been present or that has kept us out or whatever, and just giving us that presence. So presencing us is really important, especially on stolen land. You know.

S.M.B.

If you're not going to give us our land back, at least put our art up!

C.L.B.

At least pay us to paint you something.

S.M.B.

Yeah.

C.L.B.

Yeah, for sure. So, I mean, I love the idea of having murals in libraries, I think. And I don't like cheesy murals of like a bunch kids reading books or something. I always see stuff like that. I'm like, oh man, let's just decorate it. Like it doesn't have to be like here's us reading a book. It could be like because books are filled with all sorts of imaginary stuff or not imaginary, but like stuff from your imagination or really fantastical stuff like that... That was a big part of my survivance as a young person was indulging in fantasy and allowing myself to escape into these worlds. That also would remind me that I am magical.

S.M.B.

Yeah, I love that. I love that.

C.L.B.

So I feel like we could it'd be nice to capture something like that for the young people who access libraries and make them feel seen in a way, even for myself. In my late 20s, I'm going to places that I'm always like, if there's no mural I'm like, "Why isn't there a mural?" We're sitting in this room, with this big white wall. And I'm like, "That could be something, you know?"

S.M.B.

Yeah. I think my personal experience of seeing Indigenous art in public spaces always makes me feel more comfortable in the space.

C.L.B.

Safer. I painted this Thunderbird down in the underpass on like a project I did with [Monique] Aura and people have told me that they've come down like from like Thunder Bay and other places and they put tobacco down at that Thunderbird and it makes me so emotional. So I'm like, yeah. Like we. Yeah for sure. I get it. Yeah.

S.M.B.

So yeah, I think so, just in summary then, for our listeners, you should all buy Chief Lady Bird's Book *Nibi's water song*.

C.L.B.

by Sunshine Tenasco.

S.M.B.

Yes.

C.L.B.

Illustrated by me.

S.M.B.

Illustrated by Chief Lady Bird. And you should all get Indigenous art in your library. Find out who the local Indigenous artists are in your community and figure out ways to purchase their art and make your libraries safer spaces for the Indigenous people around.

C.L.B.

Yeah, definitely.