

An Interview with
Molly Tovar

at the Historical Society of Missouri St. Louis
Research Center, St. Louis, Missouri

5 September 2013

Interviewed by Dr. Blanche M. Touhill

Transcribed by Valerie Leri and edited by
Josephine Sporleder



Oral History Program

The State Historical Society of Missouri

Collection S1148 International Women's Forum DVD 5

NOTICE

1) This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17, U.S. Code). It may not be cited without acknowledgment to the Western Historical Manuscript Collection, a Joint Collection of the University of Missouri and the State Historical Society of Missouri Manuscripts, Columbia, Missouri. Citations should include: [Name of collection] Project, Collection Number C4020, [name of interviewee], [date of interview], Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, Missouri.

2) Reproductions of this transcript are available for reference use only and cannot be reproduced or published in any form (including digital formats) without written permission from the Western Historical Manuscript Collection.

3) Use of information or quotations from any [Name of collection] Collection transcript indicates agreement to indemnify and hold harmless the University of Missouri, the State Historical Society of Missouri, their officers, employees, and agents, and the interviewee from and against all claims and actions arising out of the use of this material.

For further information, contact: State Historical Society of Missouri St. Louis Research Center, 222 Thomas Jefferson Library, 1 University Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63121, (314) 516-5143.

PREFACE

The interview was filmed using a Canon XH A1S A camera using a HDV digital tape and on a placed on a tripod. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets []. Any use of parentheses () indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks [""] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [] indicates a proper title of a publication. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [(??)] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Josephine Sporleder.

Molly Tovar 9-5-2013

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
SEPTEMBER 5, 2013
MOLLY TOVAR INTERVIEWED BY DR. BLANCHE M. TOUHILL

Blanche Touhill: We're talking today to Molly Tovar. Molly, welcome to this interview.

Molly Tovar: Thank you.

Blanche Touhill: And I'd like you to talk about where you were born and your parents and if you had siblings and where you went to school, was there a teacher that did something special that really attracted you?

Molly Tovar: Well, I was born in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. I come from a family of 12 brothers and sisters. I am American Indian and Hispanic. My tribe is Comanche so I always address myself as Comanche and Hispanic descent because my father was a migrant worker, he went back and forth from Wisconsin to San Antonio with all 12 of the children at all times. So we would stop throughout the states, San Antonio, Texas, Missouri, wherever he could find work and then our home base ended up being in Wisconsin. If anyone influenced me, I think, growing up, it would be my father, really was the inspiration. As a child, I believe I was around two years old when my mother passed away so he raised all 12 children. When I say "raised," it meant the older brothers and children took care of each other because that's the way that we just did things or that was our culture. There was a time in our life when there was the Western kind of cultural perspective where Social Services thought to divide us up or take us away but he was very clear in making sure that we stayed together as a family unit. So he worked out a system with the community members where we lived, would take each one of us and then at nighttime, we would all gather back together to make sure that we always had dinner together. But if anyone inspired me, it would be my father.

Blanche Touhill: And is he still alive?

Molly Tovar: He isn't. He passed away a few years ago at the age of about 97. We say "at the age of about 97" because he was never sure how old he actually really was. He was full blood Comanche. It was my mother who was

Mexican from Mexico where he met in Texas and what he wanted was for all of his children to have a better life so he decided to stay in an area away from a lot of Indian reservations to stay connected with family but also to teach his children about a very strict value system, of what we call “reciprocity, redistribution, relationships and respect,” and it’s a value system we’ve always kept with us that, I think, really made all of us stronger and hard-working people.

Blanche Touhill: Do your brothers and sisters come together every once in a while to celebrate?

Molly Tovar: There’s so many of us, there are so many of us... but we’re very close and we’re very connected and because we all have such different skill sets and experiences and areas of interest, it really works well together, how we can take care of ourselves. We’re very quite self-sufficient, even today. We’re very self-sufficient. A brother-in-law who is a cobbler, sisters who are professional seamstresses, sisters who are welders, the only female welder in Wisconsin for many years. We have quilters, we have artists, so when we need help, we just go back to our family to provide that kind of support system for any of the needs that we have. We still live pretty much the way, I think, we were brought up. We have about 300 acres in Wisconsin where our family hunt and fish so, again, we pretty well sustain our own lifestyle which we believe is very healthy. It’s hard work but, yeah, we all support each other and see each other. Do we ever gather at one place? Typically not because it’s hard so we might have small areas that we might meet, in California or Arizona, St. Louis, Wisconsin, just depends.

Blanche Touhill: You went to college?

Molly Tovar: I did.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get to college?

Molly Tovar: The way I got to college, again, as our cultural way is, which many cultures are, is everyone takes care of each person so I was the one...many of us went to college, one year vocational schools, two-year schools, welding schools, vocational kinds of professions. I was the one that chose to go on to a four-year college. My father used to call it “We’ll send her to...” ...he said “the white man’s school to see if we can get her educated.” So in order to do that, all the family had to come together to

support me. Now, we didn't have the financial support but the support that they could give was, because my sisters were seamstresses, they could make my clothes; they were gardeners so they could provide the food; they were mechanics so they could fix the car. So that's the way that they all got together to support me to get through the undergraduate part of my education in Wisconsin. Then, as I finished my four-years program, I went into a two-year program and moved back to Oklahoma because Oklahoma is where the Comanche people are. So, as I finished my undergraduate degree in Special Education and Vocational Rehabilitation, I really wanted to go back to help my people. So I went to Oklahoma at that point, became very successful quickly and was put in a director position quite readily, then realized I could go back for a Master's, and so I went to Oklahoma City University to complete my Master's Degree and after the Master's, again moved into a quite high level position after and then it was a few years later, I decided to go back for the PhD but all through those degrees, the family helped me get through the school.

Blanche Touhill: Now, when you use the word "family," are you talking about the wider Comanche family or are you talking about your family?

Molly Tovar: Really, for me, because we had such a large family, it literally was my family, my 12 brothers and sisters. In Indian country, because I became connected, yes, with the other Indian people in Oklahoma, it was very easy for me to reach out to our Indian community people when I needed financial aid, and as a first generation college student, I was not familiar with what a financial aid package was or what FAFSA was or what taxes were or any of that. So I did reach out to a lot of extended family members to help me through the bureaucracy or, you know, the paperwork that needed to be done. I just never knew you could get a scholarship. I never knew you could apply for loans. I never knew that those things existed because, growing up, we were taught that you pay for everything yourself, so didn't even know those were options at all.

Blanche Touhill: Was your father proud of you when you graduated?

Molly Tovar: He was proud of all of us. He was proud of all of us, but, yes, he was proud that we had an individual in the family...because the way it works, again, is this reciprocity piece, that what's given to you, you have to give back. So what we knew as a family was that if I learned these skills, then

these skills I will help my brothers and sisters and their children to figure out how they, too, then could get an education and how to apply for scholarships, so much information I was not even aware of. So that's how we work in our families. If someone has a skill set, you reciprocate and you share that knowledge and that skill with not just people in your family, but with anybody that you can help and that was the piece that it was very strict that you absolutely...you help and you give back. So if there's something that you don't need or you have two of, then you share it with somebody else in the family.

Blanche Touhill: You mentioned several goals. You've had reciprocity...

Molly Tovar: There's four value systems.

Blanche Touhill: Four values, and how did those affect your life?

Molly Tovar: It's very similar...these four values are very common in Indian country. I was mentored through American Indian Comanche woman, Ladonna Harris, very well respected individual. Her husband was the senator in Oklahoma. She is Comanche. She really was my mentor while I was growing up but also it's the value of respect, reciprocity, redistribution and responsibility. Also with part of that is that relationship which can be a fifth one. But it's about being responsible for taking care of self and the environment and the world. When we talk about responsibility and respect, as native people, we talk about the rocks and the water and the earth and the trees and the sky and the people. It's, we're responsible for that and redistribution is, again, the sharing of knowledge or skills or anything that you have that you need to give back. Redistribution is, one should never own anything. One should give away...does not feel comfortable giving away. It's really against our culture. You should not accumulate things for yourself so if you are given things and at some time someone needs it, it's your responsibility to redistribute and reciprocate and give those material things, knowledge, skills, and I believe having those values has really helped me in my workforce, in my career, to stay focused with those because it's not about competition. It's about consensus and building stronger relationships and sharing and I still think having those values, it may have taken me longer to get to where I am today, but I'm at peace with how I got there. I didn't hurt anybody on the way.

Blanche Touhill: When you meet other people who have some background in this Indian culture, do you find that you can immediately relate to them with those values or is it a Comanche...

Molly Tovar: No, I think it's so common, that we don't even have to talk about it. It's just so natural in our lifestyle.

Blanche Touhill: Is it an all Indian lifestyle or is it more in the Comanche than the others?

Molly Tovar: It's probably in most native lifestyles. I can't speak for all tribes and they may not use those four words, but there might be other terminology that's similar to those value systems, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Do you know the languages of both? Do you know Spanish or some Indian languages?

Molly Tovar: I know a bit of my Comanche language and I know a little bit of the Hispanic language because all of my brothers and sisters, most of my brothers and sisters...we were talking about this this weekend...spoke the language, were very fluent but, as you may or may not know, during this period when Indians were removed, we were not allowed to speak the languages. So I was talking with my brother just this last weekend, that when we went to the one-room schoolhouse which all 12 of us went to a one-room schoolhouse, including myself, we were punished to speak our language, whether it was the Comanche language or Spanish, so we really lost a lot of that language. For many years, we were not allowed to speak it.

Blanche Touhill: When you went to Oklahoma, was it more prevalent there?

Molly Tovar: Yes, when I went to Oklahoma, of course, I was an adult and it was predominantly, there were 36 tribes in Oklahoma and it was more common because there were lots of native people so it was during the AI Movement, American Indian Movement and during the '60s and '70s and '80s where native people were coming back to say, "We need to be proud of who we are" and that's when a lot of these social programs started to exist, specifically for American Indian people on being proud of who we are.

Blanche Touhill: So the social revolution that took place in the '60s and '70s and the '80s, you took part in that in a way? You were part of it?

Molly Tovar: We were but, for us, it was the American Indian Movement, yeah, absolutely, and there was equality and there was all kinds of different terminologies of sex discrimination and all kinds of movements that were happening at that time. At the same time, the Indian movement was very prominent. So for me, the combination of both is, American Indian women have always been at the forefront. It's been our culture. It's who we are. It's what we do. They're highly valued in their tribes so, although that revolution was happening, the tribal men and people were coming to the Indian women for help and guidance because they respected and admired this kind of balance of getting a woman's perspective but for many years, American Indian women, even today, are highly valued and respected, of what contributions they make to society. I remember thinking back then, I was very young but I became the director of the American Indian program in Oklahoma City and Buffy St. Marie and several other activist women came and asked me, "Could I put a concert together" for an individual who was in prison and so our school put together a concert for helping American Indian people in the prison systems because at that time, they weren't allowed to do any ceremonies when they were in prison and those ceremonies is what kept them strong and stable and feeling like they needed some guidance from their spiritual kind of beings but during that time, native people were not allowed to do ceremonies in the U.S. prison systems.

Blanche Touhill: And did you succeed?

Molly Tovar: We did, we did succeed and Rita Sufnonine, Buffy St. Marie, many people much older than I came together...Floyd Westerman, all of these people gathered in Oklahoma City and I was in charge of kind of finding the venue and I just did what I was told, number one, because you respect your elders and you do what you're told to do. Probably not until 10 years later did I realize the impact that I was truly part of in making some changes in the prison systems and in some of the situations in the environment and reservations that were happening where there was significant pollution and all kinds of chemicals were being on Indian tribal lands. So these concerts were to gain money so people could see what was happening in Indian country. So it was happening at the same time, but yes, we had a very separate movement going on.

Blanche Touhill: Now, if you had been born 50 years earlier, would those kinds of movements have been going on or was it just that you came to Oklahoma City at the right time as an educated woman with a value system that gave you strength and guidance?

Molly Tovar: I think whether it was 50 years earlier or not, there was something in me, again, probably from my upbringing that said, if something needs to be worked on, you need to do something about it.

Blanche Touhill: Would you have had the support of the community to do it?

Molly Tovar: Probably but at that point, Indian communities were asked to not be Indian. We were asked to be not Indian, so it would have probably been very secretive as many things were still happening 50 years earlier, but they were secretive, yeah. I think there was always a pool of people who were activists and I was fortunate to know many of them and work with many of them in Indian country.

Blanche Touhill: Now let's go on and talk about your professional life. So, after your Oklahoma City, what happened then?

Molly Tovar: After Oklahoma City, I went ahead and pursued my Ph.D., my doctorate and I made a decision early on, as I was doing a lot of work but I wasn't getting credit for the work I was doing and realized, you know, back to the revolution or to, during that period of time, when I asked myself, what is it that I want that I don't have and what is it I have that I want to keep? And my answer to that was, what I don't have is I don't have a doctorate because I'm doing so much of this work but I'm not getting the credit, not that I want the credit, but also that I could probably make more of a difference and an impact, and again, back to, for my Indian people. I could probably make a difference if I got that because I used to watch people with their degrees and how they could move up and that they were the decision makers. But then the other question that I asked was, what is it I have that I want to keep, that I don't want to lose and I remember always knowing I don't want to lose those four value systems. I need to hold onto those and I still can get to where I want to get to without hurting people or doing anything that I wasn't comfortable with. So I decided to get my doctorate, I just really did wake up one day and say, I'm going to get my doctorate today. I'm going to do it.

Blanche Touhill: Where did you go to school?

Molly Tovar: So I went to school at Oklahoma State University and by that time, I knew you could apply for fellowships and scholarships. I applied for a scholarship and I was granted a full scholarship for four years.

Blanche Touhill: What was your field?

Molly Tovar: My field was higher education administration during my doctorate level. Quickly, soon after, I received it. I moved up in director roles and vice provost roles quite quickly at Oklahoma State University and the University of Oklahoma and then the Bill and Melinda Gates' program. They started this new scholarship. They realized quickly, after Bill and Melinda put it out there for a year, they really needed to identify four ethnic groups to run these scholarships. They tested it the first year. It didn't go as well as they thought it might go so they started to seek out specific individuals who had a particular profile for this particular position. So at that point is when the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation hired me to be the American Indian director, to oversee the program for the United States, two years after that is then when I designed and helped create and build the program. They asked me if I would oversee all four of the programs in a leadership role and asked if I would then move to the headquarters in Fairfax, Virginia and that was my role. I worked with them for about seven or eight years.

Blanche Touhill: And did you enjoy it?

Molly Tovar: I absolutely enjoyed it. It was phenomenal to be at the start of beginning a program and seeing it to the end and building and designing and creating and watching these students today to see where they are without that incredible funding that the Gates Foundation has given them.

Blanche Touhill: What kind of programs did they go into, did these students go into?

Molly Tovar: With the Foundation, they go into five particular programs and it's engineering, education, library science, science and library science was one of them. So library science because Bill Gates said because that's where he spent most of his time so he wanted to make sure library science was one of those fields. Those are for the graduate levels. For the undergraduate, the students can go into any program they want to but as they pursue their graduate programs, there are five particular programs they select.

- Blanche Touhill: How many students take advantage of these kinds of programs?
- Molly Tovar: They select 1,000 Bill and Melinda Gates scholars every year, 1,000 students from the four ethnic groups: Asian, American, Pacific Islanders, Hispanic, American Indian and African Americans.
- Blanche Touhill: Wonderful.
- Molly Tovar: Yeah, it's an incredible program.
- Blanche Touhill: Where did you go after that?
- Molly Tovar: After that, then I went and applied for a position at the Washington University in St. Louis as the director of the American Indian Studies program and was offered that position and I've been in St. Louis, this will be going on my fourth year. It's a very wonderful program. Kathryn Buder founded this program and wanted more American Indians in the social work field so provided this foundation and trust to the University to build a program for American Indians in social work.
- Blanche Touhill: I know Dave Cronin and Dave was instrumental working with...was it Mrs. Buder?
- Molly Tovar: Yes, Kathryn Buder, mm-hmm.
- Blanche Touhill: So talk about what you do.
- Molly Tovar: I learned a lot actually from David who really gave me the history and in his experience or interest...he's very passionate about this...and he was part of talking with Kathryn Buder about, "Why not develop a program right here in St. Louis?" Doesn't necessarily have to go to what we call Indian country which are states with high native populations. David and Harriett had this vision that if you design this program, they will come and it's absolutely true. We recruit American Indian people across the United States to attend Wash University to go to school and get their Master's of Social Work right here at the university and they come from all across the United States. Currently we have 21 American Indian Master's-level students at the School of Social Work and we have five current enrolled American Indian Ph.D. students in the School of Social Work.

Blanche Touhill: Are you one of the largest Indian centers in the universities in the United States, with this Master's and doctoral program?

Molly Tovar: There are many hundreds of American Indian Studies programs in the United States at many universities but this is the only one that is housed in the School of Social Work. So I think that's just phenomenal and that's what makes this program unique and special. It's right here in St. Louis and it's the only one of its kind in the United States.

Blanche Touhill: Are there many Indians in St. Louis?

Molly Tovar: There are, there are many Indians in St. Louis. We have 10,000 according to the U.S. Census in the State of Missouri and just in the metropolitan area of St. Louis there's about 3,000 American Indians. There used to be an American Indian Center here in St. Louis which unfortunately, about 10 years ago, closed. It's unfortunate because there's a large number of native people here in St. Louis but they don't have the resources to go to. They don't have a center that they can go to for their needs.

Blanche Touhill: I remember that. There was a woman that ran that.

Molly Tovar: Sherry Eckelhawk was her name at that time. There were various different leaders but I remember Sherry being one of them and she's (funny?). It was a valuable center so what tends to happen now is the community members, the native community members called the Buder Center. It isn't uncommon I'll get three or four calls from the St. Louis area from American Indian people needing some assistance and "where do we go?" So they really use the Wash U Buder Center as the center because St. Louis no longer has an Indian center, which is common in most high populated areas. People aren't aware that there's a lot of native people right here in St. Louis.

Blanche Touhill: Well, they used to have Pow Wows or dances.

Molly Tovar: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Do you have the dances now?

Molly Tovar: Yes, they did used to have...they used to sponsor and host the Pow Wows, the gatherings. Now the Wash U Buder Center really handles and has taken that responsibility and has a Pow Wow every year. Our next Pow Wow will be again in the spring and we get over 5,000 individuals

who attend the Pow Wow and it's amazing when people come, and we'll get over 100 dancers and all kinds of singers but if there's an Indian gathering, we call it, "the Indians just come out of the woodwork." We just come and if there's an Indian gathering, we all come together and it's a great time to celebrate and dance.

Blanche Touhill: Do you do other cultural events, like, do you have speakers in?

Molly Tovar: For the center, we have many speakers. It's a whole series. We have all kinds of speakers who come in and present, do professional development. This Friday, we're having an Indian individual come in for the National Indian Child Welfare speaker, deputy director, Sarah Hicks, who happens to be a Buder alum who has moved up to the top position in this organization. So she will be a speaker. We have speakers; we have performers. Last year we brought in a Navaho ballet dancer from New York City so we collaborate and we host many American Indian programs here at the University and we invite the community and we invite the Indian community, we invite the St. Louis community, to all of these events.

Blanche Touhill: Is the Indian culture alive and well?

Molly Tovar: Very active, very active. It isn't uncommon, again, next week we'll have a traditional storyteller come and tell our students some stories. We usually have an elder that we invite on campus. So we're very active and very traditional and, although we have 21 students, they come from eight different tribes so it's very diverse within the tribes and the cultures and kind of events that we have because they're so diverse, we want to respect what their ceremonies are or speakers are.

Blanche Touhill: Have you forecast what you want to be doing in 10 years?

Molly Tovar: You know, where I see myself in 10 years...and part of this is listening when we do the gatherings with the International Women's Forum members here in St. Louis...I see that when they retire, they really don't retire. They move into these other positions which is phenomenal. So I think of when I retire, it's really not going to be a retirement. It's probably going to be creating a 501C3 or expanding on my current LLC or being a chairman of a board of directors or being a CEO which is a position I have not had in my life but it's one that I think I would like to do. So I see myself probably shadowing and listening to our current IWF

fellows so kind of their journey and their path, when they say they're retired, they truly don't retire.

Blanche Touhill: Do you know Bill and Melinda Gates?

Molly Tovar: I know of them. I've met them several times. My job in that position was to ensure that when Bill and Melinda needed students or wanted students to speak, my job was to identify the students wherever they needed them. I might get a day's notice. I would have to look at all of their background information and organize and get them there. Also, Bill and Melinda and Bill senior's responsibility, or what they did because they're so involved with the Foundation, they attend the events with the students so one of my responsibilities was to ensure that they arrived and that they got the information that they wanted, to give them the framework and logistics of everything. So, yes, I've met them and they're very involved. They're very hands-on. It's not, "I'm giving you the money and give me a report." They...

Blanche Touhill: I just wondered if they kept up with you?

Molly Tovar: With me, personally? Probably not, but they keep up with the programs because they want to know what the impact, they want to know the results. They review the research. They're involved in all of the programs that they do.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I know the Buder position is a very important position and I think they would be very pleased if they thought you had gone on to the Buder position.

Molly Tovar: When I am in Seattle, I do stop into the Foundation, always, and when any of the Gates Foundation members, as they were here about a month ago, they called me at the Buder Center and said, "We're going to be in St. Louis. Could you please show us around? This is where we want to go. Here's some areas we want to meet," so we stay connected regularly. They do, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: When you talk about someday being a CEO, do you have any particular area that you'd like to be a CEO?

Molly Tovar: No, not at this point. I like to stay informed about the International Women's opportunities that the headquarters offer so when they're

offering some kinds of fellowships or opportunities on the board, I apply to them because I think those kinds of experiences will just help me build upon the skills that I need to be on an executive board of directors or to be a CEO. So I do apply for any kind of opportunities I can with the International Women's Foundation headquarters.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get attracted to the International Women's? Who told you about it?

Molly Tovar: Actually, my story is probably different than the other individuals because I was actually a fellow. I was selected as a fellow from New Mexico, the New Mexico Forum nominated me and I was selected and honored. I didn't comprehend...as much of my life I don't...of how competitive things are so I was selected, one of, I believe it was, fifty fellows across the world and studied at Cambridge and Harvard and New York and learned a lot from that training. I was the first American Indian fellow ever selected at the international level. So, again, I was not aware of that until I was told that so I feel very honored to be that person and then once you're a fellow, you then get invited to be a member and Lou Kerr then invited me in Oklahoma to be a member of the Oklahoma Forum so I stay very involved with the Oklahoma Forum as well and stay very connected to Lou Kerr regularly as well and I'm on one of her boards.

Blanche Touhill: As to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, you really took part in it as a woman with an Indian heritage, didn't you?

Molly Tovar: Yes, because it's, again, our history and it's who we are and what we know and where we come from and what we do. Even when I think about the entrepreneurship, I go back to Sacagawea and I go back to that period when the Spaniards came and how it was the native women who really were the negotiators and the barterers that said, "We've noticed you wear all this garnishment and have all this silver. Well, you know, we could make you some beautiful pieces" and they used their art and their skills to barter with the Spaniards to get supplies. So it was the women who were really at the forefront to figure out how to negotiate and be these entrepreneurs way before entrepreneurs existed.

Blanche Touhill: No, I understand how that heritage has enriched your life and given you values to focus on and it's fascinating. What is the plight of the Indian today in America?

Molly Tovar: When I think of the plight, I look at the literature and I look at the research, we have moved up so significantly at every level, every level: education, being proactive and bringing the Indian culture back to being proud of who we are and where we come from, and Indian tribes across the country are being successful, are being sovereign nations, are sustaining their own, are building their own corporations, are designing economic development, are political. We have them at every level at every agency that I believe we're gaining but we have a lot further to go. When we still look at American Indians in higher education, it's still 1%. It's 1% of American Indians in higher education. That's there, so we've come a long way but we still have a long way to go.

Blanche Touhill: Do you want to talk about your family in some way?

Molly Tovar: My family, I have, again, my 12 brothers and sisters. We stay very close. I have three children, two of them are in Oklahoma and my daughter is in Baltimore, Maryland. Really, again, she, as a daughter, as a female, she really...when I talk about her, probably has more connections than I have and I say that because when we teach our children as I was taught, we teach them younger about what is important. So I introduced her to a lot of very prominent American Indian people when she was young, such as Lou Kerr, LaDonna Harris, Helen Sherbeck, many prominent people that she worked with and at a very young age, I also wanted to embrace her with international travel. So she, at a very young age, as I, myself do, travel and work with indigenous women across the world. She's been to New Zealand, Panama, South America; all over the country because our passion, on the side of what we do besides our work, is we work with indigenous women in very poor parts of the world. One area we work heavily is the **Nova Kublai** women in Panama. I know you want me to talk about my family but I'm really kind of focusing on...

Blanche Touhill: No, I think that's a wonderful topic. Talk about the indigenous women around the world.

Molly Tovar: We learned that, much like the native women here in the United States, it's not any different across the world. The people in New Zealand and

the people in Panama and the people in Canada and South America, they got pushed aside as well and were given these lands that were difficult to survive on. So we focus on particular women, the **Malriz** and the women in Panama, to help them with, "How can we help you have a better life?" We do this all on our own. We go there three times a year, go into the village and we really work with them right down in the village, help them pick the coffee beans, take what we can to them, take them sewing machines so they can make items so they can sell so they have a better life. So we've been doing that for about 10 or 11 years.

Blanche Touhill: And your daughter goes with you?

Molly Tovar: My daughter goes with me. She's become, at a very young age though, where she travels the world by herself. Probably at 16 she was travelling the world by herself and going into the villages and she's very confident and knows how to work with the Indian women and knows how to respect the ways in different cultures.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get into the going out of the country and working with indigenous people? Did you just decide to do it one day? How did that come about?

Molly Tovar: Because when we travelled, we would travel as a family for vacations and when we travelled, we'd never do the tourist, what tourists do. We would stay at a hotel or an area or a place that probably most people wouldn't stay at because we really wanted to get to know the people. We were able to do that probably because of the color of our skin, because we could fit into these cultures very easily. Now, when we spoke, that was different because they knew we were then Americans but we were probably more accepted into these villages and we learned there that these individuals in these communities needed support and what could one person or two people do or three people do to make a difference for them. So, in some of the villages, there would be a school and the school would be one teacher and a room that was maybe the size of an 8 by 12, but that's the school. So we would go there and do what we could to help the teacher teach. Maybe she was teaching English. Well, we could help her with that. So then we would start going back to the communities and we would bring things people throw out: note pads, pens, pencils, anything that we could provide. So instead of going to 100 places, we really focused on three or four different countries and go right into the

village and because we go into these villages regularly, we developed these trusting relationships and when we go there they know who we are and we're very safe. Not most people would feel safe but we were very safe and feel very comfortable and welcomed. So it was just something, you know, that your heart kind of tells you, that you can do. Do we get recognition? Does anyone know about it? Do we tell anyone? No, we don't. We just do it.

Blanche Touhill: Do any of those children come to the States to study or is that just beyond all expectation?

Molly Tovar: That's beyond, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: So, you help in the everyday lives of these people?

Molly Tovar: Yeah, we help them with how to take fabric with sewing machines so they can make clothing for themselves, or shoes so they can survive when they're picking the coffee because many times when we do take items, I can go down the next day and the sewing machine or the fabric that I brought will be gone because they will have sold it because they need the money to eat. So we've learned different systems, how to work with them. That's more common than them producing the product. So we've had to figure out, how can we go back in with different strategies to help guide them.

Blanche Touhill: Have you ever written about any of this?

Molly Tovar: No, actually, we haven't written about it. We were asked to write a book, "American Indian Women Entrepreneurs" and interview American Indian women across the United States, not internationally so we were asked to write a book and we published it a couple years ago and it was a fabulous experience. We traveled all over different reservations.

Blanche Touhill: What's the name of the book?

Molly Tovar: "American Indian Women Entrepreneurs," and it's part of a series of books and it's, again, driven by Lou Kerr who wanted a series of books, many from International Women Forum members who are in these series of books across the United States but this particular one was about American Indian women entrepreneurs but it's a series of books that she has put together and has asked different people to write these books.

Blanche Touhill: Well, have you thought about writing about you and your family going to these Panama, New Zealand...and what was the third?

Molly Tovar: South America...

Blanche Touhill: But mainly Panama?

Molly Tovar: Yes, mainly Panama and...

Blanche Touhill: ...and New Zealand.

Molly Tovar: Mm-hmm. We've been asked to write stories about our experiences sometimes. You may have asked that, but we haven't done that yet. If I were to write a book or a story, I think it would be probably a very...it would be a story about my personal life growing up with 12 children and my father and the inspiration that he gave to us which I think is probably what helped me be what I am today. I think that would be...and not so much the difficult times, but the great times. I think people can look at that glass half full or half empty and I always look at, yeah, we were poor but so were a lot of other people. So I always look at, what...I would write a book about that if I were to write a book.

Blanche Touhill: What other experiences have you had in your life that you really think are important for posterity?

Molly Tovar: I would say, probably as many people say, is raising your family, raising your children. That's one proud thing that you have to do, and another piece that I...I don't know if I take for granted but maybe it's because I hear from people later...is how much mentoring we do as women without really noticing that we're mentoring other people but because it's what we do and what we know and that we know it took people to mentor us to help us get to where we are today, or help me. It's a very natural instinct for me to mentor women at all different ages. All my life, as long as I can remember, I've always sponsored children. I've sponsored five Pueblo children; I have sponsored them for 15 years. Since I've moved to St. Louis, I always find young women that I could help so right now I'm sponsoring two young native women here in St. Louis, and what do I mean by that? I mean that when they're interested in going to college, I help them with their application; I help them with books and supplies; I meet with them in the summer and check on them to see how they're doing. So that I continue to do. Does anyone know I do that? No,

but it's just something that you do because it's important to do that. There are these individuals who need a support system but might not have it at home or in the community and that's one contribution I can do. So I just met with one of them last week and she started her classes and she's shy and didn't ask, but I just wrote her a check. I said, "You know, here's a check for you to go buy some supplies, a parking permit, and then let me know how you're doing; keep me informed," because I think that's important.

Blanche Touhill: And how did you find these women?

Molly Tovar: I found them through the American Indian Organization. There's a Native American women's circle here in St. Louis. It's a very active organization and its native women who get together once a month and they just meet, again, to support each other. They do fundraising and they bring this money together to help American Indian people in the St. Louis area who can't afford a doctor, who might not be able to have the taxi money to get to the doctor, who might need some food and groceries. So I joined this organization and within this organization, these women work so hard to help other people, are still struggling themselves and it's their children that I've met through these women. So I selected these young women here. I met them when they were 17, 18 years old, helped them through the application process, I helped them apply for scholarships. They're now in their first year of college here in St. Louis so that's how I met them and got connected.

Blanche Touhill: Are there Indian programs in universities? I know you said there were hundreds across the country but in places like the University of Chicago or Harvard or Stanford, do they have Indian Studies programs?

Molly Tovar: Many of them, yes, they do. Those institutions, many universities across the United States have American Indian Studies programs. That is very common, very common, but again, what is different about Wash U is the American Indian Studies program is in the School of Social Work. That's different and it's at a graduate level. American Indian programs typically are at the undergraduate level and they're for all disciplines. So that's what...this one, again, is kind of a special program.

Blanche Touhill: How can the society encourage bright Indian children to go on to college and get professional degrees? Do you have any ideas on that?

Molly Tovar: That's a question, how do we increase American Indian youth to be interested in pursuing academics, is a question that has been asked for years. One way that that's happening is through the Gates Foundation. They have put the scholarship out there to say, "If you want to go to college and you work hard in high school, there is a full scholarship for you at any university in the country that you want to go to." So the financial support system is there. The other piece of that is, the family, the family who has that value system, and not that education is for everyone. It isn't, but if there's a family value system and a support system in place...and when I say "family," extended family and community people such as me helping these two young people, young women go on to college, to give them that motivation and incentive and really self-confidence to say, "You can make it." I've been there. I know what it feels like to be told, "You'll never make it in college." We've been there so to be able to go to these young people, to say, "You don't listen to that. You go where you want to go and there's a lot of people out there to support you to do that."

Blanche Touhill: Well, I think your future is fascinating. Is there anything else you want to talk about?

Molly Tovar: If I had, again, anything to add to this conversation, it would be that the fellows program, the International Women's Fellows program, is a phenomenal program because I believe if I hadn't been a fellow, I would probably be where I am today but it would have taken me longer to get there because when I am around the international women at our meetings, what I hear from them is that confidence, how they manage conflict in whatever work that they're doing, with confidence and when I hear them talking, I'm not even sure they understand, for someone like me who still wants to grow and develop, how those comments impact my career and my drive, that if I hear them say that, it helps me reach these goals because during my whole professional career, I've identified myself as an isolated splendor, that I've always been in my own job at a certain level but I've never had, like, a support system around me. So it's like isolated splendor where I'm so honored to be in this blended environment but I'm very isolated. I don't know who to reach out to if I'm having a situation as a director, a vice provost because I don't see other people like me. So where IWF comes in is, I can go to these meetings and I can get information and say, "Here's my situation. Can you give me

advisement” because I feel very isolated in most of all the positions I’ve been in. I feel like I’m probably either the only women or minority woman at that particular level. Does that make sense?

Blanche Touhill: I think it’s beautifully stated.

Molly Tovar: And that’s what IWF really has made an impact for me.

I attended a vocational school in Wisconsin. The reason I went to a vocational school early on was because...I may have mentioned this earlier...is, by a high school counselor, I was told, “You probably aren’t college material so just do a vocational school with a two-year program.” I finished the program in probably a year and decided, well, maybe I could go to a four-year school. So I went to University of Wisconsin-Stout, in Wisconsin. There, there was actually...Wisconsin has a large number of native people. There was a large number of native people at the university and me and another individual decided we needed to start a Native American student association. So, we just decided one day that’s what we were going to do. We had no clue how to do it. We didn’t have any idea. We thought we could just start this club and then we learned that there were processes and forms and all these things that you have to do. So that was my first very active kind of role as a young person, to start this student association club which still exists today. So I’m very proud of that particular one, organization or accomplishment. Then I moved to Oklahoma after my undergraduate experience because I wanted to work with native people and shortly after I arrived at Oklahoma, I decided to pursue a Master’s Degree, Masters of Teaching and went to Oklahoma City University to do the Master’s Degree there.

Blanche Touhill: It seems to me that in this interview, you have told a lot of things that I had no idea you were active in those activities. Talk to me then about your splendid isolation.

Molly Tovar: The splendid isolation is a word I thought about when I was the vice provost at the University of Oklahoma because I would move up into leadership roles and either I was the only female in a particular level or minority. I enjoyed my jobs. I was good at everything, I felt I was good at what I did, but I was very isolated. So I identified that as “splendid isolation” and the way I worked with that is, I could reach out to the male colleagues that I had and knew in other organizations when I have

situations, to help me figure out, how do I get through this particular situation, number one, because I was generally younger than the people I was supervising. The people I was supervising were typically males. So, one of the ways I always looked at things was, I always knew I had surrounded around me people who were believers, people who believed in me, people who believed in my ideas and my vision because I created programs and thoughts. Then I had the fence straddlers, those were the individuals who I knew would learn, if the program and idea went well, they would say, "I helped Molly do it. I helped her create it. I was on her side." If the program didn't go well, I knew they would be the ones to say, "I told her it wasn't going to work but she didn't listen to me" and so I knew that was that group, and then I knew there was the group that were the skeptics. They're there. They're everywhere. So when I would create these projects, I always created an advisory board. I would put these kinds of people on my board because I wanted to make sure I had those skeptics at the table because I wanted to know how and why they thought the way they thought. Would I change their mind? Probably not, but I wanted them close to me. The fence straddlers was the group that I knew I could have a pretty good chance of changing their mind to become the believers. So the way I dealt, again, with my splendid isolation, is that I would gather this group of team members to help me get buy-in, whatever projects that I was organizing or facilitating, and I don't know if other women or people feel like that sometimes. You're in positions where you really are the only kind of position because you don't quite fit; you're not a faculty; you're not a president; you're just kind of in the middle. So that's just the term that I remember using to keep me focused, that I understand I'm in this position but what do I need to do to deal with that? How do I work with it?

Blanche Touhill: Talk to me about your father's attitude toward bragging.

Molly Tovar: In native culture and growing up with my father, we were taught very early, very early...and people sometimes perceive me as very difficult to reach or connect with sometimes, but it's probably more of my demeanor as my father taught us, you should never brag about yourself because the native people call it good medicine and bad medicine and what he meant by that is, when you speak and you share information, those words aren't your words anymore. They don't belong to you. They belong to the universe. So listen. It doesn't mean you have to talk all the

time. Listen because people can use those words any way they want to and be selective of who you share the information with. Also, he said, if you are upset, the key is, when the timing is right, you don't need to do anything about it right now. It could be a week; it could be tomorrow; could be two years. Then when you want to share your frustration or information, do it when the timing is right and I would ask, "But I don't know when is that because I'm so upset right now. Can I just do it now? What do you mean, when the timing is right?" and he would just say, "You'll know. You'll know when the timing is right," because you really should be humble and you should never wear, what he would say, information and your skills and your knowledge on your sleeve. You shouldn't flaunt it. You don't need to flaunt it. When you have it and it's ready to share, you'll know when it's time to share and who to share it with, but don't brag about who you know and what you know and where you've been and what you've done because people will figure that out.

Blanche Touhill: Did you always feel you had leadership ability?

Molly Tovar: I never knew what leadership ability was. I didn't know what that was. I didn't know what that word, "leadership" was. I just knew that if something had to be done, you just did it. You just figured it out and you did it. You were resourceful and you utilized the resources, whatever those were.

Blanche Touhill: And you did that in your family, when you were growing up?

Molly Tovar: Always, always did that in our family, as a child, always.

Blanche Touhill: So your father's influence was paramount?

Molly Tovar: My father's influence was paramount because he barely spoke, literally. He did not speak very many words.

Blanche Touhill: When he spoke...

Molly Tovar: But when he spoke, you listened and they were very firm words.

Blanche Touhill: And he was really your link to your values?

Molly Tovar: Yes, and he never yelled but he seldom spoke, so modeled a lot of...probably was a lot of modeling that behavior, without knowing it, just modeling that behavior in life.

Molly Tovar 9-5-2013

Blanche Touhill: Well, thank you very much. It's been a marvelous hour.

Molly Tovar: Thank you.