Mill Valley Oral History Program
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Greg Sarris

An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2018

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In this oral history, author, scholar, and chairmen of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria Greg Sarris tells the story of his life as a journey of self-discovery and social commitment. Raised in adoptive family in Santa Rosa, Greg did not know about his Coast Miwok/Pomo ancestry until adulthood. Greg recounts how he recovered his tribal identity and, in the process, became a successful author and academic. Greg explains that the historical territory of the Coast Miwok extended from Sonoma County to Southern Marin, while the contiguous territory of the Pomo extended north of Sonoma. Greg discusses his work in attaining recognition from the federal government for his people and the environmental and social justice commitments that inform his tribal leadership.

Oral History of Greg Sarris

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Oral History of Greg Sarris
July 21st, 2018

Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by Greg Sarris, who made minor corrections and clarifications to the original.

0:00:00 Debra Schwartz: Today is July 21st, 2018. My name is Debra Schwartz and I'm here on behalf of the Mill Valley Library and the Mill Valley Historical Society. I'm at Bear Valley in Point Reyes National Seashore area and, specifically, I'm in the Red Barn. I'm sitting with a wonderfully interesting, thoughtful man, Greg Sarris. Greg, thank you so much for taking the time today to sit down with me to share some of your story and to share your experiences and the importance of your position in life.

0:00:39 Greg Sarris: Well, thank you for caring about all those things, Debra. It's an honor to be here.

0:00:44 Debra Schwartz: Greg, for the sake of those listening and reading what will be a transcript and audio recording of this interview, I'm going to introduce a little bit about you. Correct me if I get anything wrong, or you'd like to enhance it a little. I have this information, of course, because you were our First Wednesday speaker at the Mill Valley Historical Society. You came and you spoke at our First Wednesday presentation.

0:01:11 Greg Sarris: That was a great night. I remember that.

0:01:12 Debra Schwartz: That was a magical night.

0:01:14 Greg Sarris: Right, yeah.

0:01:15 Debra Schwartz: You received your PhD in Modern Thought and Literature from Stanford University, where you were awarded the Walter Gores Award for Excellence in Teaching, correct?

0:01:26 Greg Sarris: Yes.

0:01:27 Debra Schwartz: You were formally a full professor of English at UCLA.

0:01:30 Greg Sarris: Right.

0:01:31 Debra Schwartz: And then the Fletcher Jones Professor of Creative Writing and Literature at Loyola Marymount University. You hold the leadership position of Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria. You are the Endowed Chair of Sonoma State University, where you teach a number of courses in creative writing and literature and American Indian literature, is that correct?

0:01:56 Greg Sarris: That's right.

0:01:57 Debra Schwartz: You have published several books, including *Grand Avenue* in 1994, an award-winning collection of short stories, which was adapted for an HBO miniseries, co-executive produced by Robert Redford, correct?

0:02:15 Greg Sarris: Mm-hmm. And I wrote the script, all three hours. Yes, that's right.

0:02:19 Debra Schwartz: And you regaled us at the First Wednesday presentation with a couple stories from your wonderfully evocative, magical, brightly alive book, *How a Mountain Was Made*, also a collection of stories, which was released in 2017. And I'll say, finally, yet again, something I think that is so important: this is your 13th elected term as Chairman of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria.

0:02:54 Greg Sarris: Hard to believe, but yes. [chuckles]

0:02:56 Debra Schwartz: You're a busy man.

0:02:57 Greg Sarris: Yes, yes.

0:03:00 Debra Schwartz: You speak all over the county and other places. You're involved politically and with business. I'm honored to have a few minutes with you.

0:03:08 Greg Sarris: It's good to be here and to talk about the things I care about. So often these days, leading the tribe and having the business end of it, the stuff I really love is literature and teaching — regardless of the books, the movies, or the tribe, I'll always teach. I think I'm here to make the best of the opportunity that life has given me, of my life. Life is a gift and I've been given a lot. A lot of it has been somewhat difficult, especially in my earlier years. I always remember what the medicine woman Mabel McKay told me when I was 19. She said, "With all that's happened to you, you still have two choices."

0:04:00: As a young girl, she had seen the diseases and all the difficult things that she would have to heal when she grew up to be a doctor. I'm sort of making an analogy that maybe she didn't intend, but I see it that way now. She said to me, "With all that's happened to you, you still have two choices. You can let poison and hatred fill your heart — have holes in your heart and fill it with poison and hatred, and you can poison yourself and poison other people — or you can take all of that and use it as a medicine to doctor, that those experiences are an opportunity for you to understand or see something."

0:04:46 Greg Sarris: And to be honest, Debra, I didn't understand really what she was saying. But it's true. We have those choices, and whatever difficulties you've had, they could become opportunities to grow empathy for difficulty and pain around you, because you are living it and part of that sort of thing. She also said at that time, which was pretty interesting, she gave me my prayer basket to protect me wherever I go, and she said, "One day, you're gonna be a leader among the people and this is to protect you and guide you where you go amongst the crowds and so forth." And I felt like saying, "Oh sure,

lady, like I'm gonna be a leader." Well, lo and behold, [chuckles] 13 terms, as you mentioned. When I'm up for my 14th [term] unchallenged, I guess it's going to be more.

0:05:38 Debra Schwartz: Greg, you speak about the challenges you faced. So, in order for us to get a little context about your life, and the experiences that help forge you into the man you are today, can you share a little bit about your earlier life?

0:05:54 Greg Sarris: Well, I had a pretty lonely, difficult childhood. I was adopted. My mother was a 16-year-old Jewish girl from Southern California and my father was Indian and Filipino. I guess there's some Mexican in the Indian there too, so it's a mix. But in any event, in the '50s when I was born, nice Jewish girls didn't get pregnant and certainly not by dark people. Her mother, ironically, brought her up here to hide her out while she was pregnant with me — but to Santa Rosa, which ironically was the homeland of my father's people. My grandmother had married a Filipino and ended up down there in Laguna Beach, where my grandfather, my Filipino grandfather, worked in a kitchen in a restaurant. My father was this big handsome dark guy, and he got other girls pregnant besides my mother.

0:06:54 Debra Schwartz: Can you give names, if you're willing to share?

0:06:56 Greg Sarris: Yeah. My mother's name was Bunny Hartman and my father was Emilio Hilario. Anyway, her mother brought her up here to hide her out and make arrangements for my adoption. A family, a Catholic family who'd been trying to have kids for seven years and couldn't, made arrangements for my adoption, and I was born obviously. Interestingly enough, I tell people today, our friends that are doing hormone therapy and all that to get pregnant, all you have to do is adopt and you'll get pregnant. Well, by the time my adopted parents, George and Mary Sarris, got me home, they were pregnant, two months pregnant, with their own.

0:07:44: So anyway, that was okay that they still decided to keep me and all of that. But the sad thing is that two days after my mother had me — she was very young, 16, she was in Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital — right before they let her go home, the doctor thought she needed some blood and they mismatched the blood and gave her the wrong type blood and it killed her. Her mother secretly buried her in the pauper's section of a Catholic cemetery and told family and friends that she'd fallen off a horse and died.

0:08:17 Debra Schwartz: The shame was just too much for your grandmother.

0:08:22 Greg Sarris: Yes. And when I finally found my grandmother, she was not too happy to have me surface. She said to me, "I believe in letting sleeping dogs lie." And I felt like saying, "Well lady, you've got a barker." But in any event, I was raised by the Sarrises, who had their own family. They had their son and then they had two more children for a total of three. And my mother, Mary Sarris, to this day, will always be my mother. I loved her dearly. In fact, I always felt more like a parent in some ways to her. George Sarris was abusive, a drinker, very difficult.

0:08:58: And partly because of my will or whatever, Mary Sarris started putting me out on ranches and farms to keep me away from him. So, from the age of five until 12 or so, until she divorced him, I often spent long days, weekends by myself as a kid, roaming first a dairy ranch, and then a thoroughbred racehorse ranch, where my best friends were the animals and the managers. Then I'd go to the fair and I was pretty vulnerable. I was a lone kid, and there are those that prey on kids and all that kind of stuff. I always felt badly for all what my mother was going through, so I never talked about that. In fact, I would always say to her when she dropped me off, "Don't let him hurt you, don't let my father, or my adopted father, George, hurt you." So that was tough. And then by the time she divorced him —

0:09:54 Debra Schwartz: So you're saying, "Don't let him hurt you," while you're taking the punch.

0:10:00 Greg Sarris: Yeah.

0:10:00 Debra Schwartz: Oh dear.

0:10:01 Greg Sarris: And as a kid, it's funny, you don't think about it. You don't think, "Oh, it's hard getting through this," or "This is terrible," or something. You cry. You don't think, "I'm a victim." You don't think any of those things. You just think, "How am I gonna get through the next hour? How am I gonna get from this end of the barn down to the next end of the barn? How am I gonna get over here without so-and-so seeing me?" So you learn early on to negotiate the best you can. And it wasn't all bad. I loved the animals. They became my friends — the horses and what have you.

0:10:38: I saw a lot by the time I was very, very young. And by the time she got him out of the house, and went back full-time and was there, I was pretty messed up. I ended up pretty much, from eighth grade on, eighth and ninth and tenth grade, really not going to school — really, on the streets, sniffing glue, hanging out with Indian and Mexican kids. I didn't know I was Indian. My mother would never give my father's name. He was 20 and she was 16. She was white, and he wasn't. God bless her for not having an abortion as her mother, it turned out, wanted her to have.

0:11:20 Debra Schwartz: Even a Catholic?

0:11:22 Greg Sarris: No, my —

0:11:27 Debra Schwartz: For your birth mother?

0:11:27 Greg Sarris: My birth mother, yeah. She never gave the father's name. So on my birth certificate, it just said "unknown, non-white," because they gave the race of the parents in those days. My grandmother, my mother's mother, my natural mother's mother, was always there when [my mother] was being examined, so she wouldn't let him ask her anything. She was very domineering, my grandmother, my mother's mother. The only time he was alone with her was on the delivery table, and she said something

about the father being Mexican or Spanish or something like that, and at some point I guess she pointed to a Mexican stable boy where she kept her horses, 'cause she didn't wanna give up my father. Obviously, he would be hung. He'd already gotten some white girls pregnant down there.

0:12:18 Debra Schwartz: So your birth father would have been —

0:12:21 Greg Sarris: Yeah, they would have hung him for sure and she protected him, God bless her. At 16, she had that wherewithal. But anyway, the narrative on the adoption record said that the father was probably Mexican. And remember, here in California, particularly in those days, Mexicans and Indians, most all of us had Spanish last names. So anyway, I just always thought I was half, part Mexican. Never did I think I was necessarily Indian or Filipino, although I grew running around with a lot of Indian kids who turned out, some of them, to be my relatives. But I didn't know it.

0:13:00: But anyway, I didn't get serious. I didn't read a book till 11th grade. I'd gotten a car between 10th and 11th grade and got a job as a busboy that took me away from the gangs, gave me some distance, 'cause I had to support the car that I had. And I saw my friends' parents working as dishwashers and banquet waitresses and coming in pretty banged up after weekends and so forth, and it became very clear to me, Debra, that if I didn't change things, this was gonna be the end of the road for me.

0:13:39: I really didn't wanna be digging ditches or picking up trash for a bunch of waitresses screaming at me about tables. So I went back to school, all remedial classes, never having read a book, and it was one of the loneliest, most difficult times of my life. But I knew I had to do it. I knew I had to do it. My idea was to be a businessman or something of some sort so I could make some money, or get a job or whatever. But along the way, I started studying and did very well; along the way, I fell in love with literature. Stories and so forth kept me company.

0:14:24: The stories kept reminding me of what I heard on the streets from the old people telling stories, the Indian folks and all the others that I used to hear stories from. It kept me company and I thought, "Wow, these are stories. These are just like what I used to hear on the streets." The stories about things or people you didn't know before. And my intellectual curiosity then just bloomed and it didn't seem necessarily at odds anymore with where I was or had come from. But it was tough and it was lonely, and the kids that I grew up with didn't quite understand what I was doing, becoming a nerd, and the nerdy kids that I got into class with said, "What's this hoodlum or hood doing here?"

0:15:06: So what I've told you, Debra, is the outline of someone who was always on the outside, no home. Where do I belong? By birth, two different races that weren't supposed to get together — I mean everything. And then I wanted to be a teacher 'cause I always thought, "Well, I'll give back, I'll try to be a writer or be a teacher." And then one thing led to another. It was a long struggle, and I've learned so much along the way. And then when I found out who my people were, when I found my family, my mother's

mother and my uncle, her brother, and then my father, I found out who they were and I thought, "Oh my God, okay." I was at Stanford just beginning graduate studies.

0:15:56 Debra Schwartz: We're glossing over a segue here that's rather interesting. You're basically going from semi-street boy to Stanford University.

0:16:04 Greg Sarris: Well there were stops along the way. Because even though I graduated from 11th grade being in all remedial classes, I worked so hard, Debra, that I graduated in my senior class of about 400 students one of the top 10.

0:16:19 Debra Schwartz: So you had the core intellect, which you are now stimulating and giving back to —

0:16:24 Greg Sarris: Yeah, I guess I did. But I still didn't have enough of the college prep courses to go right to a good college. So I went to the JC [junior college] and I got straight As there.

0:16:35 Debra Schwartz: At Santa Rosa JC.

0:16:36 Greg Sarris: At Santa Rosa JC. And then from there, I got into UCLA and I moved to Los Angeles and did well there.

0:16:45 Debra Schwartz: And you graduated what year from UCLA?

0:16:47 Greg Sarris: I believe it was '76 — '75, '76, right around in there. And then, because I was out for a couple years, running around, doing Hollywood/New York kinds of things, that was crazy. It was a wonderful time. It was that crazy period between the pill and AIDS, and everybody was doing everything.

0:17:12 Debra Schwartz: I remember it well. It was a lot of fun. [chuckles]

0:17:13 Greg Sarris: Yes, yes. And if you're young and attractive and all of that, and you're in Los Angeles, the world was at your feet. Debra, to this day I never had more power in my life than having not a cent in my pocket but a body and a smile and charm, and it just took me to New York. I stayed with Michael Bennett.[1] I was there when they worked on *Dreamgirls* later on. I ended up at Studio 54 and —

0:17:48 Debra Schwartz: You caught the wave.

0:17:49 Greg Sarris: I caught the wave big time.

0:17:51 Debra Schwartz: And what a crazy wave it was.

0:17:53 Greg Sarris: I caught the wave big time. But always in the back of my head — and why I'm still friends with so many of those people who are celebrities and so forth —

[1] Michael Bennett was an American musical theater director.—Editor.

was that I didn't want to be them. I knew there was something else. I knew also that the original reason I was there was because of how I looked. And that's not gonna last.

0:18:11 Debra Schwartz: No.

0:18:11 Greg Sarris: And also, there was something bigger, and that went back to Mabel McKay and the Indians that I knew, Debra. Because Mabel always reminded me that there was something bigger than what I could see or know, and that these things — the glitz and the cars and Bianca on a white horse and naked Andy Warhols — none of that could open the fog or do the things that Mabel did, that I'd seen her do, that I'd witnessed. And so there was always something bigger. There was a purpose.

0:18:45 Debra Schwartz: So you had a trill, it sounds like you had a trill within that was sounding somehow —

0:18:49 Greg Sarris: And again, that whole thing, where I've always been somewhat of an outsider — I knew I was somewhat of an outsider; I was a hanger-on. I was pretty, and so I didn't write and direct in *A Chorus Line*, or choreograph *A Chorus Line*. I didn't write all the Stones songs and get up there and sing them. I didn't do any of that. Who am I? What am I supposed to do? So, to make a long story short, I went to Stanford, got a degree. I was in the creative writing program, a master's program, and then I went on to get another master's and a PhD.

0:19:29: I figured I would become a writer. Again, was smart enough to know I didn't wanna dig ditches, so I thought, "Well I'll become a professor. I love to teach, I love people, I wanna give back. And that's a good way to feed myself while I'm trying to be a writer." So all I was hoping for, Debra, was maybe to get a good job at a community college or a state college and feed myself and maybe publish a couple stories. Well, after a couple daunting experiences at Stanford, where the professors — a professor said, "Who are these people?" I was writing about people in South Park[2] — Indians, Arabs and Indians.

0:20:08 Debra Schwartz: At that time, there was no Native American Studies in any of the major universities.

0:20:13 Greg Sarris: No, no, no. This was 1979, 1980. There was nothing. Their idea of Indians were Plains Indians on horses, and I was writing about street people, hanging out and all that kind of stuff.

0:20:28 Debra Schwartz: But you had other authors that preceded you like Angulo, *Indians in Overalls*.[3]

0:20:36 Greg Sarris: Yeah, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* had just come out.

[2] South Park is a neighborhood in Santa Rosa.—Editor.
[3] Debra is referring to the writer Jaime de Angulo.—Editor.

0:20:42 Debra Schwartz: Wonderful book.

0:20:42 Greg Sarris: N. Scott Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Those were there. In fact, Scott was a professor of mine at Stanford in one class. I took a seminar from him.

0:20:51 Debra Schwartz: Oh wow. And Sherman Alexie.

0:20:53 Greg Sarris: Oh that's much later. He came after me, or we came out about the same time. So that was later. But Louise Erdrich was a little before me too. But at that time Louise wasn't around either. So in those days, they were trying to have you write the story, the minimalist story, which is starting to get popular again, about a woman named Sally who goes to Martha's Vineyard one summer and has an epiphany and decides to part her hair on the other side of her head. Well, I didn't know people like that to ever write about.

0:21:30: So, as I jokingly say, I did what a lot of scared and frightened writers do: I became a professor. But things really went well. And the lesson is that your life experiences — back to Mabel again, back to Mabel. Your life experiences are your power. Of course, professors said, "American Indian literature studies, you'll never get a job, you'll never get a job." And again, so many blessings in my life. I got the top job that year, UCLA, a tenure-track job at UCLA, and a two-year postdoc at Berkeley to sit and write.

0:22:09 Debra Schwartz: Your good looks didn't get you that, Greg.

0:22:11 Greg Sarris: My good looks had nothing to do with that. It was my experience and having faith in my experience. So I went to Berkeley for a couple years. Then I was able to get to UCLA, published my first book in a year, got tenure in a year, and became a full professor in three. I broke all the records.

0:22:29 Debra Schwartz: And you're young here.

0:22:31 Greg Sarris: Well, 30s, yeah, mid-30s or something.

0:22:35 Debra Schwartz: I guess that's legit.

0:22:36 Greg Sarris: It's legit. But remember, I had all that kind of fun in between, which I think a lotta scholars didn't have, right? [chuckles]

0:22:45 Debra Schwartz: Poor guys.

0:22:45 Greg Sarris: As I always say, lucky me. I was writing the stories, and once I had the good job at UCLA, I kind of relaxed and picked up the stories again, and they became *Grand Avenue*. In the same year I published *Grand Avenue* and the Mabel

McKay book. And Michael Dorris, Louise's husband — Louise [Erdrich] had been out for about five years at this point —

0:23:16 Debra Schwartz: She was an instant hit.

0:23:17 Greg Sarris: She was an instant hit with *Love Medicine*, and so was Michael when he did *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*.

0:23:24 Debra Schwartz: And there's another major influence, as far as fetal alcohol syndrome —

0:23:29 Greg Sarris: Fetal, yes — *The Broken Cord*, yeah. So Michael made my career. The luck came. He happened to review both of those books and it made the cover of the *L.A. Times Book Review*. Wow! So I had that. And then he told me it would never happen. He said it happened to him and Louise, and I've watched it happen to Sherman — of course, Sherman rode the wave until recently. And now, to some extent, with this new Tommy Orange —

0:24:00: He said, "You're a big hit. You're a star. Enjoy it, savor it, because it only happens once to a writer, and then you just keep writing. But you are the new thing." I was the new kid on the block. I don't know whatever happened to that professor at Stanford, but I got a lucrative two-book deal. HBO and Robert Redford ended up buying the book, turning it into a hit miniseries on HBO. I kept writing books, and the rest is history. But now I'm skipping again 'cause it's so hard to tell the story. In 1992, my first year after the postdoc — after the few years of postdoc there in '91, '92 — I got a note from somebody up here. I had found my family. I knew all my relatives and all that —

0:24:49 Debra Schwartz: We haven't really said much, but at some point maybe you can explain how it is that you did identify with your —

0:24:57 Greg Sarris: Yeah, let me jump if we can, and you can somehow weave it all together.

0:25:01 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, we'll weave it in, yes.

0:25:03 Greg Sarris: My adopted mother knew the doctor, so when they brought the baby home — we're going way back to the beginning, Mary Sarris — they didn't cut off the bracelet, and it said, "Baby Hartman". And she just cut it off and threw it in the thing, but she said that about eight or nine days later the doctor called and said, "You better get your attorney, you better go to the hospital, something's happening to the baby's mother, and they have to sign, the attorney's gotta get over there." She didn't know exactly what was going on, but she called her attorney and he went to the hospital, and a couple days after that, she, my mother, saw an obituary in the paper for this 16-year-old girl, Hartman.

0:25:52 Debra Schwartz: Oh, so that's how you found —

0:25:54 Greg Sarris: And she said to the doctor, "Was that the baby's mother?" And he said, "Yes, but you're not supposed to know." So eventually, she told me. I always knew I was adopted. Those kids were blond and blue-eyed and all that. And probably being adopted help save me, because I could always say to myself, "George Sarris was not my father."

0:26:18 Debra Schwartz: You were able to connect the dots back.

0:26:20 Greg Sarris: So I went to Dr. Hanslick, the doctor who delivered me, a nice Jewish doctor, and I go walking in. I made an appointment. I'm 19 years old at this point, Debra, and I said, "I'd like to know — " Obviously, I wasn't there for a gynecological examination. And he's looking at me, and he's getting ready to retire, he's older at this point, and I said, "I'd like to ask you about a former patient." And he said, "Well, sure. Who?" And I said, "Bunny Hartman." Now I had a friend who'd been in the microfiche — 'cause Mary told me her name at the hospital — and the friend who was a nurse called me up and said, "Oh my God, they killed your mother." There're big stamps all over her records, "Do not inform press, do not inform press."

0:27:09: So I went to the doctor, knowing this, and I said, "I wanna know about a former patient," and he said, "Sure." And I said, "Bunny Hartman." And he goes, "I don't know any Bunny Hartman. I never had a patient by that name." And I said, "Doctor, I'm not here to sue you. I'm just trying to find my family, to trace my family." At which point, he collapsed on his desk crying because he delivered the blood. Obviously, the lab, Debra, mismatched it, but he delivered it, and he described to me how he was giving her the transfusion and he noticed she started breaking out in hives, which means there was some allergic reaction. He stopped it fortunately, or unfortunately really. It wasn't enough to kill her immediately. It dragged out for eight or 10 days, and she had toxic uremia and she died.

0:28:00 Debra Schwartz: A painful, poisonous death.

0:28:00 Greg Sarris: Painful death, a horrible death for a young girl.

0:28:03 Debra Schwartz: And he felt complicit, even if it was inadvertently.

0:28:06 Greg Sarris: Yeah, he gave the transfusion. The interesting thing, Debra, as a side note, when I met my grandmother [she told me] — the doctor then confirmed this — [my mother] was in a coma for two days before she passed away apparently. They used to have them in the oxygen tents in those days, and all at once she kinda opened her eyes and sat up a little on her elbows — and this is what my grandmother said — and she said, "Mom, I feel like I'm going to another world. Is it okay if I go?"

0:28:39: And of course, my grandmother was pretty cold and tough, and she said, "They told us not to cry in those days, so I didn't cry. I just looked at the doctor, and at the doctor on the other side of the bed who said, 'Yeah, just say, "Bunny, it's okay, you can go."'" And I guess my grandmother said, "It's okay, you can go." And my mother

looked at her and said, "Mama, we're so alone here on earth." And she closed her eyes and laid down and died. What a girl, what a person she must have been, and to have the wherewithal under all that pressure not to give away my father. Now on top of that, she could have been very angry. I was conceived two weeks before he married my half-brother's mother. Probably, by the time she found out she was pregnant, he was already married.

0:29:28 Debra Schwartz: So I suppose she carried her own burdens by herself in her own way, just like you had been doing.

0:29:33 Greg Sarris: As I had. But she always used to say to her friends, she always used to say, and her friends would always say, "Bunny, why are you having sex? My God, you're gonna get pregnant." And all she would say to her friends, who I met and interviewed, all she said to them was, "That man is my fate. That man is my fate." And my God, look. So what a person she must have been. What a rebel and a person and a bright, wild, fun spirit. She loved horses; she was a horse person. She was musical. She played the violin and the cello. And she was, I guess, a brilliant kid.

0:30:18 Debra Schwartz: She's not in your life, but yet you have this other mystical influence, magically she touches you, Mabel.

0:30:28 Greg Sarris: Always, yes, that is my blessing. I have been surrounded by these remarkable people.

0:30:37 Debra Schwartz: Maybe you could describe Mabel a little bit because people listening may not really understand necessarily.

0:30:41 Greg Sarris: Well, Mabel was the last of they say the real Indian doctors here, she was a sucking doctor.

0:30:47 Debra Schwartz: And she was Coast Miwok?

0:30:47 Greg Sarris: No, she was Pomo.

0:30:49 Debra Schwartz: Pomo.

0:30:50 Greg Sarris: I was not related, blood related, to her. She's from Lake County, but she lived down here, and I knew her early on. I took her around. I loved her.

0:30:58 Debra Schwartz: You knew her from Santa Rosa.

0:31:00 Greg Sarris: I knew her from Santa Rosa as a young man. I knew her because I knew her adopted son, Marshall McKay.

0:31:04 Debra Schwartz: And how old was she at that time?

0:31:06 Greg Sarris: Well when I first knew Mabel, she was probably, I don't know, mid-50-ish, and she died at I believe 85 or something like that. But anyway, yes, she was always sort of in my life, and I was around other Indian people. The older Indian people for some reason always kinda took an interest in me. She told me things, and so she's always been there as sort of a guide. She was my greatest teacher.

0:31:36 Debra Schwartz: Another divining rod, it seems like.

0:31:37 Greg Sarris: Yeah, a divining rod and my greatest teacher. Here's a woman who had hardly a second grade education. In fact, all she could do was sign her name until she was 60 years old. She had to learn to read and write a little bit so she could pass a driving test. And here she wove the baskets in the Smithsonian, she doctored the sick — probably the finest basket weaver of all the basket weavers on earth. The Pomo were the best, and she was the best of the Pomo. She doctored the sick, wove these baskets, worked hard, and never complained.

0:32:14: And she had more wisdom in her little finger, Debra, than all the professors at Stanford. She was so smart about so many things, and always kept me in awe, always made me think, always made me think about my thinking with her often flippant answers about things. I remember I opened the book *Mabel McKay* with the story that — I'm laughing at the students at Stanford who are asking her about what does she do for poison oak and she says, "Calamine lotion."

0:32:48: But then later on that day — and I write about in the book — we went to see where her grandmother was buried, Sarah Taylor. And I said, "Oh so this is where it ended for Sarah Taylor." And Mabel started laughing and she said, "People don't end in a cemetery." She said, "Is that what they teach you in the university?" She said, "Maybe it's a good idea. It's cheap. You could just die and it's said there that that's where it ends." And I realized what she was really saying: it only ends when we forget. That's what she was telling me all along. I was always a fool.

0:33:26: And I remember, too, one of the latter trips that I took with her, where she said, "The Earth is gonna go dry." This was in the '80s. "The Earth is gonna go dry. Everything's gonna dry up. Everything's gonna go on fire. It's gonna burn top to bottom." She goes, "That's my vision. I see that coming." And of course, I'm a young guy and I'm going, "Oh my God, Mabel, what do we do, what do we do?" And she starts laughing, and I'm thinking, "My god, this is serious." I said, "No, Mabel, really, what do we do?" And she goes, "That's cute, what do we do?" I said, "Well no, Mabel, really." She took a silent beat, as we say in the theater, and she said, "You live the best way you know how, what else?" So there it is.

0:34:13 Debra Schwartz: Talk about a grounding influence.

0:34:15 Greg Sarris: Yeah, I was so blessed. Again, there were difficulties, but I can't complain. The blessings I've had — and therefore the obligation to give back and to help my Indian people, and all Indian people, and to help all people.

0:34:32 Debra Schwartz: So let's go back. I see that she's a real leveling influence for you. It's good for somebody hyper and bright like you are.

0:34:43 Greg Sarris: Yeah.

0:34:43 Debra Schwartz: I see how your brain goes out here and there, like on roam, taking a lot in, but she seems to be this leveling influence. You're teaching now. We'll go back to UCLA. You're teaching, but yet you've been away from UCLA for a good long while, away from teaching in that capacity, and quite involved in major things going on with the Indians here in this area.

0:35:10 Greg Sarris: Yes, we'll go back to that, Debra, 'cause that's where we sort of were. I get a note. I'm a brand-new professor, UCLA. I should be worried about tenure and all that. I get a note from a relative, Kathleen Smith, and her friend Bev Ortiz, that there was we, the Coast Miwok, my people, were illegally terminated in 1958. We had no rights, no anything, no reservation.

0:35:35 Debra Schwartz: Not recognized as a tribe.

0:35:36 Greg Sarris: Not recognized. Basically, we were, as I like to say it, on my birth certificate —

0:35:39 Debra Schwartz: Disenfranchised.

0:35:41 Greg Sarris: Well, the term is on my birth certificate: Unknown, non-white. [chuckles]

0:35:45 Debra Schwartz: Unknown, non-white. But for those who don't know Native American history in this country, the government recognized a certain number of tribes, even though there were so many tribes across the continent and —

0:35:56 Greg Sarris: That's right, and those tribes were the only ones that had the benefits, even shoddy reservations out in the middle of nowhere, or whatever, but they were recognized as American Indians and had the rights thereof. They were able to apply for certain grants for housing, for health, different things. So we were illegally terminated in 1958.

0:36:13 Greg Sarris: So anyway, we were together and I was talking to folks, and I got a note down at UCLA that a tribe that was recognized was coming down into our aboriginal territory, to Tomales Bay over here. They were being financed by the Japanese to build a 300-acre casino with big water boats on the bay.

0:36:36 Debra Schwartz: And what tribe was that?

0:36:37 Greg Sarris: I believe that was the Cloverdale Pomo, under a guy named Jeff Wilson.

0:36:43 Debra Schwartz: I have to clarify one thing: you're Coast Miwok?

0:36:46 Greg Sarris: Yes, Coast Miwok and Pomo because my great-great-grandfather was both.

0:36:50 Debra Schwartz: Okay. So for those that don't know, Coast Miwok and Pomo, kind of contiguous tribal areas.

0:36:54 Greg Sarris: There was never anything such as Pomo or Coast Miwok. Those are language classifications. But basically, the Coast Miwok language family goes from Cotati, or south of Santa Rosa, all the way down to Sausalito, and the area is all in there. Pomo is north. So I'm mixed with Southern Pomo and Miwok. My great-great-great-grandmother was from the original village of Petaluma, which means Sloping Ridge. She was taken in by General Vallejo, and then escaped him and went up to Fort Ross as many Indians did to get away from the Mexicans up there.

0:37:35 Debra Schwartz: We're talking 1834.

0:37:37 Greg Sarris: 1830, right, yes.

0:37:40 Debra Schwartz: 'Till Americans took over.

0:37:42 Greg Sarris: This is probably 1840-ish, 1839. She gets up there, and she has three children from what they would call a Creole, whose name was Comtechal, which is some kind of bastardized Russian, but he was probably Aleut, Russian and Kashaya Pomo.

0:38:03 Debra Schwartz: And so for those that don't know, the Russians brought in Aleuts from the north to come here and —

0:38:08 Greg Sarris: From their colony in the north, yes, to work. To hunt the sea otters, basically.

0:38:14 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, right out.

0:38:15 Greg Sarris: Right, yes. And so, in fact, when they kill the sea otters, when they killed all of them, I think there was one left, 'cause they're starting to come back. But anyway, when there were no more otter hides to get, they abandoned the fort in 1842. She had three children, one of whom was my great-great-grandfather, Tom Smith. And his real name isn't Smith, it's Comtechal. And some of the story of her is remarkable. She went down and became the maid/mistress of Captain Stephen Smith, who in Bodega had the first steam engineered sawmill. And she had children by him and named her three

previous ones Smith, so that they wouldn't get stolen and sold as slaves as kids 'cause they were doing —

0:39:00 Debra Schwartz: Some people may not know this, but some of the very first slaves in this North American continent were Native Americans.

0:39:08 Greg Sarris: Yes, especially here. First of all, the missions are pretty horrible, but the Mexican Rancho period, remember, they used the same system that the Spanish used throughout this hemisphere in their colonizing. Ironically, the Pope, of course, forbids slavery, but the colonizers got around that with indentured servitude, with vagrancy laws, and convict leasing. Basically, it's a way to own people.

0:39:38 Debra Schwartz: Or if you find a parent-less child.

0:39:43 Greg Sarris: Child, yes. So you just kill the parents.

0:39:45 Debra Schwartz: Even if you kill the parents —

0:39:46 Greg Sarris: Or if a parent gave permission. Anyway, the vagrancy laws basically said that if you don't belong to somebody, you get arrested. You get arrested, you get put in jail. You get put in jail, your labor is sold.

0:40:00 Debra Schwartz: Yes, right, exactly. So you might be standing at the wrong place at the wrong time —

0:40:04 Greg Sarris: At the wrong time, without any way of identifying yourself or whatever —

0:40:08 Debra Schwartz: With no legal rights because you're Native American. Next thing you know, you're working on a version of the chain gang.

0:40:15 Greg Sarris: Slavery, yeah. And so anyway, General Vallejo used that on us here — basically, that system. It's ironic, the revolution came about in Mexico to throw off Spain, but the leaders of that replicated the same slavery. It's weird how we don't learn.

0:40:38 Debra Schwartz: From mission to ranchero, it's a basic plantation type.

0:40:44 Greg Sarris: Well, listen, it doesn't get any better. It gets, again, somewhat ironic, because when there was the Bear Flag Revolution, where the Americans defeated Vallejo, and then we became a state in 1850, the first piece of legislation that was enacted in the state, in Monterey, which is where the capital was then, was called the Act for the Government and Protection of Indians. It legalized Indian slavery using vagrancy laws, using the indentured servitude, as well as convict leasing, and as you mentioned, permission to have children from parents. Now what's ironic, Debra, is the man who was

defeated by the Americans helped them draft those laws. Vallejo helped them write the laws, showed them how to deal with the Indians.

0:41:37: That was not repealed until 1868, three years after the end of the Civil War, and convict leasing was going on with Indians until 1934. And of course, we weren't citizens till 1924, so one might understand why today the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, of whom I'm chairman, we're comprised of Southern Pomo and all of the Coast Miwok territory. At the time of contact, it was anywhere from — and these are conservative estimates — 10,000 to 20,000 of us.

0:42:13 Debra Schwartz: In this region.

0:42:14 Greg Sarris: In this region, yes, Marin and Southern Sonoma. Today there are little over 1,400 enrolled members who are all the descendants of 14 survivors, all of whom were women who had been concubines or wives of earlier Mexicans or Americans.

0:42:31 Debra Schwartz: We've done a little walkabout away from how you got to become in the position.

0:42:38 Greg Sarris: Okay, let me keep going.

0:42:39 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, but I just want to say that you make a very important point, which is that when people study the history of California, and the history of Native Americans in our country, some may think, "Well that's a story that is written and it has ended, and there's no real Native Americans or anything to speak of. A little of this, a little of that." But your tribe is alive and well.

0:43:10 Greg Sarris: Yes. It's amazing that everybody thinks, "Oh there's no full-blooded Indians. They're really not Indians." Well remember, blood never presupposes a point of view: Condoleezza Rice, case in point. But the remarkable thing is that the stories and culture and much of the history was passed down from these women survivors to their kids.

0:43:34 Debra Schwartz: 14.

0:43:36 Greg Sarris: 14, yeah.

0:43:36 Debra Schwartz: 14 out of a population.

0:43:38 Greg Sarris: Of minimally 10,000, but probably more like 20,000.

0:43:41 Debra Schwartz: And 90% of the demographic loss probably within the first 50 years, probably over 100 years, but certainly major decrease in population with the Spanish —

0:43:53 Greg Sarris: Yes, from the Spanish-Mexican period.

0:43:56 Debra Schwartz: Diseases.

0:43:57 Greg Sarris: Yeah, and then the outright slaughter. See, one of the things the federal government did, and Ben Madley has done a good book on this, the federal government financed vigilante groups here. We had some in our area but it was really bad in the gold country, where they were digging. But anyway, so here we are, we're back. I'm a professor. We're back at that starting point, Debra. We were put on a little reservation. They didn't know what to do with the homeless Indians of California. They didn't even classify us by tribe. And many times there were just survivors, handfuls from here and there, left. So what they did is in the early part of the 20th century, they created these little rancherias, where they put Indians together and de facto created tribes. So for us, for instance, they put 15 acres aside for, and I'm quoting, the so-called "homeless Indians of Tomales Bay, Bodega Bay, Sebastopol and the vicinities thereof." So anybody that was there, even if you were a Navajo and you were here and you were on an Indian roll, you became a designee, you became a member of that rancheria.

0:45:02 Debra Schwartz: But with none of the rights of the sovereign nation?

0:45:04 Greg Sarris: No, you did, you did.

0:45:05 Debra Schwartz: You did? Okay.

0:45:06 Greg Sarris: Yes.

0:45:07 Debra Schwartz: Because that's something else people listening may not know, that Native American tribes, especially the recognized ones, are considered sovereign nations.

0:45:14 Greg Sarris: We're considered a sovereign nation, although we did not have the big tracts of land like the big tribes in the plains or in the southwest. We did have these little rancherias that were modeled after the bigger ones, where they're little sovereign nations. But then in the '50s, in an updated version of the Dawes Act, they said, "Oh well now what are we gonna do with all these Indians on these — it's problematic. Why don't we offer them their own their land and they can pay taxes? They won't be Indians, they won't be recognized anymore. We'll just give them the land, make the deal."

0:45:46: Well, some tribes bought the deal and some didn't. When they came to our rancheria, it was in August, everybody was out picking pears and so forth, there were a couple older men who didn't understand the law very well and they said, "Sure, we'll sign here." Well the hitch was, Debra, the government said it had to be by consensus of the tribe. Well, it wasn't, but of course, in many ways, I am sure they screwed a lot of Indians. Anyway, we lost the land. More importantly, lost our rights as a sovereign nation, as an Indian group with any rights.

0:46:21: We were wandering once again, homeless, really homeless. Anyway, 1991, ’92, I get this note where this tribe that was recognized, Cloverdale Rancheria — Cloverdale was down in Tomales Bay. And they sent me this article in the newspaper about them wanting to build a casino down there. I called some folks, some of the elders, and they said, “Will you come help us?” So we took them on, scared the Japanese who feared Indian wars, they didn’t realize that we were totally powerless because as a non-recognized tribe, you have no power. You’re like a Saturday afternoon card club, you’re politically dead. You’re not an entity.

0:47:00: So we started the long battle. I started the long battle, wrote different versions of legislation, and it was pretty tough. I tried to get a bill through Congress, and nothing much was happening. And then in 2000, we saw that Bush was elected, and I knew then that after nobody’s gonna give any Indian anything, and who cares anyway about this little group of Indians in Northern California? Well luckily, I had finished making a movie with Robert Redford, *Grand Avenue*.

0:47:34 Debra Schwartz: You had some traction.

0:47:35 Greg Sarris: I had some traction. So we got a hold of Barbara Boxer, and put pressure on her. She attached it as a rider to a bill. To make a long story short, President Clinton signed that bill on December 27th, 2000, two weeks before he went out of office. And to date, Debra, we’re the last tribe in the United States of America to be restored by an act of Congress. Well that gave us our rights back.

0:47:57 Debra Schwartz: Right under the wire.

0:48:00 Greg Sarris: That gave us our rights back but it didn’t give us automatically land back, and this is expensive. It didn’t say how we were gonna get it. We tried various things — to deal with various cheese groups and organic things.

0:48:13 Debra Schwartz: And how many people are we talking about when you say “we”?

0:48:16 Greg Sarris: At this point, there’s about 400 or 500 of us gathered.

0:48:19 Debra Schwartz: So that’s significant.

0:48:21 Greg Sarris: Yeah, but maybe only 100 who are active, 80 to 100 who are active. But anyway, nobody was willing to put up the land, and then they started to discuss the “C word,” which is casino. And as an academic, Debra, I had never been in a casino. As Mary Sarris, my adopted mother, said, “You can’t leave your father’s people now. They’re probably gonna go this way without you. And there’s so many good examples or bad examples of people getting ripped off by lawyers and other people. You better stick there.”

0:48:53 Greg Sarris: So I did, and I made a very good deal with a casino operator to lend us the money. I took such a beating at home in Santa Rosa when I came back to lead my people, saying oh various things: "He's just a Jew from Los Angeles. He made up a tribe. He found a bunch of Mexicans and made a tribe."

0:49:18 Debra Schwartz: This was from the tribal people?

0:49:20 Greg Sarris: No, no, no, from the opposition up there.

0:49:22 Debra Schwartz: Oh, so they were discrediting you.

0:49:23 Greg Sarris: Yeah. And the Indians wanting a casino, they don't want a casino up there. I kept saying to my tribe, from day one, the only reason I'll get involved with this is if this will provide an opportunity for us to be a platform for social justice and environmental stewardship, and be something that will benefit Indian and non-Indian alike. I wasn't going to go this route —

0:49:47 Debra Schwartz: Just for the bucks.

0:49:50 Greg Sarris: No, no.

0:49:52 Debra Schwartz: Were you worried about that?

0:49:54 Greg Sarris: Yeah, I was worried, and not only among my people. I wasn't sure how it would go, but also, nobody would believe me. The non-Indians outside my families and groups here, they all said, "Oh a casino and environmental stewardship, he's just saying that crap to get his casino and make money." Well we've been open now, we eventually opened in 2013, November 2013, I think, and we have given more money to environmental organizations and social justice organizations than anybody in the history of Sonoma County to date. Rohnert Park gets $12.5 million a year, the county gets 9. But in addition to that, we are now funding all the environmental programs up there — the measures for the parks. By the time this gets out, the news will get out, the latest thing we've done — there's so many — a million dollars for fire relief. The latest thing we've done is $285,000 or $290,000 to the food bank to feed Rohnert Park for a year.

0:51:08 Debra Schwartz: And this is not like through tax citations.

0:51:12 Greg Sarris: No, this is charity.

0:51:13 Debra Schwartz: Charity.

0:51:13 Greg Sarris: Yeah. And by the way, speaking of taxation, they can't tax us 'cause we're sovereign. But you have to do a compact with the governor. And one of the things I did with the governor is he allowed me —

0:51:23 Debra Schwartz: And this is Arnold [Schwarzenneger].

0:51:24 Greg Sarris: No, no, Jerry [Brown].

0:51:25 Debra Schwartz: Jerry, okay.

0:51:25 Greg Sarris: Jerry Brown. He allowed me to give — once our debt is paid off, and even now — to give the bulk of the revenue share back to the county, instead of to the state.

0:51:39 Debra Schwartz: So it stays home.

0:51:39 Greg Sarris: It stays home. And we're in a position to say how it's gonna be used.

0:51:44 Debra Schwartz: So my next question was gonna be, do you have a right to say where you wanted —

0:51:48 Greg Sarris: I'm very smart. I've learned how to do that. So for instance, once the debt is paid off, Sonoma County will get up to $25 million a year for environmental restoration. That means organic farming and the restoration of aboriginal lands. Okay? But they have to do what we do in the casino. In the casino, we have 2,000 people working, all of whom just work 20 hours a week and get the Kaiser gold Cadillac plan. You pay nothing out of your paycheck for full coverage, $10 deductible for brain surgery or aspirin. $2,500 dental a year, an eye check a year. We feed you in a 24/7 restaurant where you get breakfast, lunch and dinner. We're doing lunch at this hour right now. And we have a health section there on the buffet: American section, Asian section. We do all your uniforms, we clean everything. Dignity in the workplace. Spanish to English classes, English to Spanish classes.

0:52:43 Debra Schwartz: What hourly wage?

0:52:44 Greg Sarris: Good, the best hourly wages. In fact, we have to keep raising them 'cause the cost of living's so high.

0:52:49 Debra Schwartz: How about housing?

0:52:50 Greg Sarris: We have not done housing, but it's on the books. We're looking at places to do housing not just for all of our elders in the tribe, but for our team members over there.

0:53:01 Debra Schwartz: Childcare?

0:53:02 Greg Sarris: We don't do childcare there. And I'll tell you why. You can't. It's very tricky having kids at casinos. You don't wanna do that. For instance, a lot of people, even our guests, get upset. "Why don't you have childcare?" Well the trouble is, if somebody's gonna gamble, and say if they are an addict, we're stuck with the kids and

the kids don't have their parents. So I said, no, I don't want any chance of that whatsoever. We can't hire undocumented people 'cause it's federally regulated. We have the real names. But what we're doing with our organic farms and gardens, and we're just starting that five acres —

0:53:46 Debra Schwartz: Is it contiguous to the casino?

0:53:47 Greg Sarris: Yes, and we have another 360 acres out here on [highway] 37.

0:53:51 Debra Schwartz: And do you use that food for your casino?

0:53:53 Greg Sarris: We are going to use it for the casino and we're also going to sell it at cost in low-income neighborhoods. But equally important, we're gonna do what we do in the casino. We are going to pay the workers, who can be undocumented 'cause it's not the casino, we can pay them the same wages and benefits that we pay in the casino. So just as I've screwed the hospitality industry in the wine country, Sonoma and Napa —

0:54:20 Debra Schwartz: Because, basically, you're so attractive that they're losing their workers to you.

0:54:25 Greg Sarris: They're losing all their workers. They're exploiting particularly the Latinos — it is something awful — working them 48 hours over the weekend and then dropping them.

0:54:33 Debra Schwartz: So they either have to buck up and —

0:54:35 Greg Sarris: They're all bucking up after they lose their employees. I'm gonna do the same thing to the vineyards that exploit the Latinos, 'cause they all come work for us, and the county. So guess what, Debra, this vision, the social justice and environmental stewardship, it's happening. I'm just glad I lived to see it. It does sound antithetical: a casino and social justice? We bought Joan Baez's, the entire set of her paintings. She did 16, 17 paintings of the folks she worked with throughout the '60s and stuff. We bought those for a significant amount of money, donated them to the Social Justice Center, Sonoma State, where they'll be archived in perpetuity.

0:55:15 Debra Schwartz: So you are a political, social presence big time. Your reach is extended far and wide. From how many acres originally?

0:55:26 Greg Sarris: 15.

0:55:26 Debra Schwartz: To?

0:55:27 Greg Sarris: Well, we have probably, collectively, I don't know, 600 acres. But we have a big casino. We're one of the largest — I think the second largest, next to Kaiser, employer in Sonoma County. We have the best set of benefits and wages.

0:55:44 Debra Schwartz: And who's your healthcare?

0:55:45 Greg Sarris: Kaiser.

0:55:46 Debra Schwartz: Kaiser?

0:55:47 Greg Sarris: Yeah.

0:55:47 Debra Schwartz: So I'm sure you hear this all the time, because understanding Native American culture in this area, that one of the most preferred ways of recreation is gambling games.

0:56:00 Greg Sarris: Gambling, yes, that we were always gamblers and stuff like that. But gambling — I wish there were some other way. I'm not a big fan of gambling. But you know what, Debra? That's an arrogance, an arrogance that so many of the liberals don't understand. How damn arrogant is it to say how you can have fun?

0:56:21 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, right, yeah.

0:56:21 Greg Sarris: I love what Barney Frank said to me years ago when there was all this opposition. He said, "Yep, that's all my liberal friends up in Sonoma and Marin County." He said, "They're all liberal about the things they wanna be liberal about, and nothing else." They decide. Who are you to decide how Asian people and other cultures in the Bay Area want to spend their time?

0:56:41 Debra Schwartz: Well actually, it's a broad term, gambling, because if you really look at the games that different people play, for example, with the Native American games, with the teams, it's so much more than just throwing money down or something.

0:56:56 Greg Sarris: The psychology —

0:56:57 Debra Schwartz: There is psychology in the communication.

0:56:57 Greg Sarris: The psychology, Debra, is endemic in our culture and in all cultures. It has something to do with consciousness. We're separate. We don't know. Will I be able to get that deer over the ridge? Will I be able to dig up all these bulbs by the time it's night or by the time a bear comes after me? Everything is "if," "can I? "will I?"

0:57:18 Debra Schwartz: Probability and outcome.

0:57:19 Greg Sarris: Probability and outcome, exactly. Well said. And so those things are endemic. Now yes, we're making money, there is gambling addiction, but much more work is lost to alcoholism, and so forth. But I'm not gonna compare that.

0:57:36 Debra Schwartz: No.

0:57:36 Greg Sarris: Because I don't wanna go there. If one life was lost to gambling or one life lost to drinking or drugs, it's one too many. But these people are gonna do it anyway, they're gonna go other places. And if you can take that money to change the world and create a business model for all others who have this money and this opportunity, you know what, no pun intended, I gotta take the gamble, Debra. [chuckles]

0:58:05: That's my gamble. I don't gamble, I don't drink, I'm a bore. So what's happening is it's become a bastion of social justice, we have more languages spoken there. We have people from different cultures. We have so many people from Nepal, from Latin America who have escaped horrible situations, who are building families and foundations. We also help people finish getting their citizenship. So we have graduation programs. We pay for them to do all the paperwork they need. And we have big Latino dances there every couple weeks — there'll be one next weekend — 2,500 Latinos. And I love to get up there and say, "*Bienvenidos todos*. You're all welcome here. Come and enjoy yourself. You're on sovereign land. I.C.E. [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] can't touch you, and F Trump."

0:59:01: So they go crazy and it's wonderful. But yes, to your point, I'm in a wonderful opportunity, which is why I don't stop to make a difference, to become a model. But at the same time, the great changes, the psychological changes, the spiritual changes that need to happen, perhaps they're academic. I can deal with that in my books and my lectures, but I can't just be a writer. So many writers and philosophers, they stay in universities, they stay at their desk and write books and do book readings. Indian writers — Louise and many others, Sherman — what do they do? I can't do that. If I have the opportunity to fix and save lives, the lives of my tribe, in my tribe and elsewhere, I've gotta do that as well as write. It's gotta be a many-pronged approach to change.

0:59:50 Debra Schwartz: We've been talking for a while and I've been watching you as you describe your story. You were describing yourself when you were younger as a lonely boy out there, but you don't seem lonely when you're talking about this recent stuff, what you're doing with the casinos, what you're doing with the community. It seems like you're passionate about it, you're engaged.

1:00:22 Greg Sarris: Oh yeah.

1:00:25 Debra Schwartz: I can see how this can feed and heal you and then provide you with ultimate purpose too.

1:00:32 Greg Sarris: Well it goes back to what Mabel was saying, you do what you can, what you have an opportunity to do. She used to say, "If you mean business, do business. And if you do business, mean business." So yeah, I'm finally getting to a point I think in my life where I'm seeing how all the parts are okay. They all seemed even to me very antithetical. You know, the classroom, this. But I have the gifts, the gifts of being

able to do so many things, and I need to do those kinds of things. If you have different songs for different purposes, you gotta sing all those songs.

1:01:16 Debra Schwartz: You're right. We talked earlier about the importance of the stories, the traditions of your people, keeping those traditions alive, how pertinent they are to what's going on today. Can you talk a little bit about that?

1:01:31 Greg Sarris: Yeah. My latest book that you mentioned at the top of our conversation is basically a cycle, a reimagined cycle, creation cycle. We used to tell the stories late at night in the winter nights, and the stories would go round and round and round. And the listeners would all know the characters and all of that. Well today, when you don't know that and you're separated from that, you've gotta change them up a bit and you've gotta have independent units so that each story in the cycle kind of works as an independent unit or story. I've had to mess with the narrative form 'cause I'm textualizing it. I'm making it literal, when it was an oral tradition before.

1:02:09: So there are changes, but the most important thing is to realize that as long as the ancient ethic and aesthetic of place and responsibility for place and for living is still there and endemic in the work, I'm okay with it. People say, "Well they're not really traditional." Well if they were traditional, they wouldn't be written down. And people then laugh. A lot of even my own people, they go back to traditions. They find pieces of stories that anthropologists or ethnographers collected, and those are all taken out of context. And the folks often told them just to get a dollar a day or 50 cents, and who knows what they told. They just told little charts that the ethnographers or linguists translated. That's not traditional either, that's broken up. So you take what you know to continue what's good.

1:03:01 Debra Schwartz: One of the things I really love about your stories is how you do a lovely job of interweaving all the living creatures together. Somehow or another, one does one, and another is affected, and then another comes in from the side and they get involved, and pretty soon, everybody's going in and out of the story in the most evocative way, and with purpose and meaning and morality being tested and questioned and discovered.

1:03:30 Greg Sarris: And isn't the world like that in reality? We're all connected so any one thing you do, when I turn on a light bulb or when I drive down the road, or when I buy a certain thing in a grocery store, it's connected to everything else in the world. And so it's kind of a reminder of these stories as the stories always were for us, that every action begets another action and came from another action, and that we're all connected, that there's larger consequences that we can't see, that will always be happening. And one of the dangers of modernity in the modern world is this absolute disconnection, this notion that if I do something, it ends here, but it doesn't. We don't see what happens to the animals we eat, we don't see any of that. So it's we who live like animals in a cage where we don't see anything.

1:04:29 Debra Schwartz: Which is why Mabel laughed at you and said it doesn't end in the cemetery.

1:04:32 Greg Sarris: Exactly. Precisely. She always is laughing at me saying, "Oh that's cute. Maybe that's a good idea. You can save money that way." And then, of course, she had to hit the universities. "Is that what they teach you in the schools?" [chuckles]

1:04:45 Debra Schwartz: But your stories do a wonderful job of weaving, and furthermore there's a lot of different people in the stories. When I say "people" I mean the characters, whether they be mouse or bird or whatever, with very different personalities.

1:05:02 Greg Sarris: Yeah, and different motivations, different needs.

1:05:05 Debra Schwartz: Diversity, in the true sense.

1:05:06 Greg Sarris: Diversity in the true sense. And remember, that's what is so important. In the indigenous worldview, or in the indigenous world, heterogeneity, Debra, was honored. The more different you were — because we needed diversity. We understood diversity. Everything's connected. When you understand everything's connected, you have to understand and value how each thing is diverse and interdependent. You get nation states and we become very homogenous because we become very purpose-oriented. We need a bunch of soldiers to win the war. We need a bunch of workers to pick the tomatoes for the people who eat the tomatoes but don't know where the tomatoes came from.

1:05:46: And so the modern world is predicated on a system of nation-statehood. We're separated. We're separated from everything, and our big job in coming home is to reconnect. If we're not connected, how in the world can we ever be responsible for everything else? If you don't know anything, you're no longer responsible. And that's the way corporations and others — inadvertently, I'm not even saying they try — that's how inadvertently they have control over us. We don't know what happens.

1:06:21 Debra Schwartz: So do you believe that part of your job, certainly as a literal visionary, is to help people grow new eyes to see the world as it really is?

1:06:32 Greg Sarris: Well, I don't know. There's a million ways of seeing the world as it really is. Mine is just one. We're rootless, and the Indians have become this way. And we live by our stories. Let's just take the ancient story of the Israelites escaping slavery and wandering in the desert, and they have this new belief and we can understand it. It's a nationalistic belief. We're owed a home and were chosen. That's a very toxic combination. "I'm chosen. I'm better than somebody else 'cause God chose me, and I'm owed therefore or entitled to take what I want, a home" — forgetting, of course, there might be somebody else there. That pattern, as it morphed into Christianity and

Mohammedism, continued so that this group became chosen, this group became chosen. Nation-states use those religions to be chosen nations.

1:07:49: And when it got here, just in our territory, we reacted too. We started the Bole Maru or the Dream Dance movement in the 1870s, which was a nationalistic movement. After we were decimated, this movement came about whereby we reorganized our religion and we started the secret centralized kind of religion in our roundhouses, where we preached the white man was the devil. In Lake County, there was even the infanticide of mixed blood children. "We're chosen, we're good. There's gonna be a new world that's gonna save us. The white man is the devil." And what happens? The end or the beginning for us as it happened to Jews, as it happened to Christians, everybody else, all of a sudden, instead of a "we" philosophy, we're adopt an "us-them" philosophy.

1:08:55: As soon as you have the us-them philosophy, you're at war with the world around you. There's us and there's them, rather than we.

1:09:03 Debra Schwartz: Before we began this interview, I asked you —

1:09:09 Greg Sarris: Does that make sense? It's really important to understand that we're still plagued by that.

1:09:13 Debra Schwartz: Absolutely.

1:09:15 Greg Sarris: It's gone mad now, this polarizing. Everything's us-them. And I may be a lone wolf crying in the wind, Debra, but we've got to work in every way — me as a political leader, me as a writer, me as a teacher, to make us at least aware of the possibility of *we*.

1:09:37 Debra Schwartz: Well see, I studied Native American studies, and there's different ways — even through the way that we navigate in our space, where there's cardinal directions, different cultures have different ways of being in the world, and it doesn't necessarily seem that way now because so many of those cultures, their voices are of the past or they don't have the major influence in the media and whatnot. But there are other ways to be in the world rather than self-centric, going out taking what you want. There are many cultures like the Miwok, where you wouldn't necessarily just go grab the spirit to work with you. You show yourself using your dance, and the spirit may choose to work with you.

1:10:18 Greg Sarris: And you have to make sure it might not be tricking you, trying to use you in some way.

1:10:21 Debra Schwartz: Yes, there's a dynamic back and forth.

1:10:21 Greg Sarris: You have to be careful. As I always say to people who wanna hug trees, how do you know it wants you to hug it? [chuckles]

1:10:27 Debra Schwartz: Trees are pretty huggable. But what we talked about before we began this interview was how you truly see yourself in the world. Now you've had a long journey to get to where you are today, and you've been a lot of different things. You've been disenfranchised from your birth family. You jumped into a family, the Sarris family, with everything that went on, then you were alienated from them in many ways. And then in and then out and up and down and all around to today, with the benefits of interesting, loving people and forces and education that gives you a tremendous authority and power.

1:11:13 Greg Sarris: And advantage.

1:11:14 Debra Schwartz: And advantage. And the collaboration and cooperation of many people who have trusted you. And natural gifts. Let's not not say that: you've got natural gifts. I've read your books, I have heard you speak. You're articulate. You're able to communicate. You're able to make order out of chaos in your own way.

1:11:40 Greg Sarris: Yeah, 'cause there's been a lot of chaos.

1:11:42 Debra Schwartz: But in your heart of hearts — let's close this interview with this, if you don't mind — in your heart of hearts. This is your oral history and you are telling us who you are in your body and your soul in the world. Can we just close with that?

1:11:58 Greg Sarris: It's funny, I had a feeling, almost like a vision a couple days ago as I was thinking about this interview, that this question would come up somehow this way. And in my heart of hearts, I'm my mother's orphaned son, never belonging to one person or place so that I can belong to all. I've got to accept that. Sometimes it's hard. We want one mother, we want one family, we wanna be loved in one place, we wanna say this is mine. I have to say it's all mine, or none of it is. Does that make any sense?

1:12:42 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

1:12:44 Greg Sarris: And that's the best way I can answer that.

1:12:44 Debra Schwartz: It's beautifully sad, but inspirational too. That's your destiny.

1:12:49 Greg Sarris: It's my destiny. Just as my mother, God rest her great soul, Bunny Hartman, said that my father was her fate, this is my fate. And think of that woman: she carried me knowing that she was going to give me away. She carried me. She didn't tell her mother she was pregnant until she was five months along. And she must have known 'cause you know what my grandmother said to me one of the first times after I met her? She said, "Well, I saw your mother and I said, 'Bunny, you're getting fat.'" And then she said [Bunny] broke down and said she was pregnant, and she said, "Okay, we're going to the doctor first thing in the morning to see what we can do."

That woman wanted to get rid of the baby. My mother had the foresight to go so far that it was too late for an abortion or anything else. 16 years old.

1:13:41 Debra Schwartz: Well, I think Mabel may have been right, there are things beyond what you can't see, great forces, and you just have to sing your song and do —

1:13:50 Greg Sarris: I will tell you one last story of what Mabel said to me. Once again, we were driving down the road, driving around, and she said, "Do you know how babies are born?" And whatever, I was 28 years old. I said, "Yeah, I think so." And she says, "No, you're stupid again." She started laughing, and I said, "Well okay, how are babies born?" She says, "The spirit follows the parents for two years or so before it's born, and it knows everything. It sees its whole life. It knows everything that's gonna happen."

1:14:19: And then she said — I'm gonna kind of ad-lib here because basically what she was saying is then with the acquisition of language and motor skills, that vision falls apart of the whole life. It cracks. But if you live long enough you can put it all back together again by the end of your life. And then she said to me, "Do you know what that's called in between?" And I was afraid to say anything at this point 'cause I'm always dumb. She started laughing and she goes, "That's what you call living." [chuckles]

1:14:52 Debra Schwartz: Well, I really think we're going to have to close on that one 'cause that's in a nutshell.

1:14:58 Greg Sarris: Yeah.

1:15:00 Debra Schwartz: Greg, thank you so much for taking your time, for sharing your story, for sharing your truth, for the work that you do, for the ways that you give. On behalf of the Mill Valley Library and the Mill Valley Historical Society, thank you.

1:15:15 Greg Sarris: Well, you're very welcome. We jumped around, but I hope you can do something with it. I hope it makes some kind of sense. [chuckles]