

NAIDCA X DDC newsletter



Welcome to NAIDCAxDDC's first quarterly newsletter! Thank you for your support and following. We hope to use this platform to share community projects, practitioners, and advocacy about all things deathcare. Please feel free to share with colleagues who may be interested in this work. This issue is highlighting the work of Tosha Big Eagle, Joël Simone Maldonado, and Chrystal Toop.



Decolonizing Death Collective at the Association for Death Education and Counseling Conference

Decolonizing Death Collective members Dr. Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner, Ia Kholan Gregory Bull, and Rye Purvis will be presenting at the Association for Death Education and Counseling (ADEC) annual conference in April. ADEC's Conference will be celebrating its 46th year in New Mexico, demonstrating nearly half a century of advocacy, education, and passion for the pedagogical advancement of death studies both locally and globally. Shelbi, Ia, and Rye will be presenting in the panel titled "Thanatological Sovereignty: Advocating for Native American and Indigenous Death Care Autonomy."



Association for
Death Education and Counseling®
The Thanatology Association®

**Thanatological Sovereignty:
Advocating for Native American and
Indigenous Death Care Autonomy**

Professor at University of Maryland Dr. Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner (Luiseño & Cupeño) spotlights colonial interferences in traditional California Indian death rites, highlighting the contemporary reclamation of language and

ceremonies. Rye Purvis (Diné) delves into Tribal-centered frameworks that privilege the unique relationship to land and oral traditions. Ia Bull (Squirrel Ridge, Cherokee Nation) questions what Indigenous death care autonomy would look like in the context of digital afterlives by discussing grief, the data economy, dignity, and the right to be forgotten.

By examining the relationship between death care, autonomy and sovereignty, the panelists both reclaim and visibilize the often invisibilized—offering possibilities for Thanatological conversations to interconnect with Native American and Indigenous fields of advocacy and research, public health, and human rights.

More information about the ADEC and annual Conference:
<https://www.adec.org/page/2025Conference>

Meet Joël Simone Maldonado, The Grave Woman



Joël Simone Maldonado, affectionately known as The Grave Woman is a licensed Funeral Director and Embalmer and advocate for cultural competency within end of life, death, and grief care and support services.

From her website, Joël's work is described as being "dedicated to empowering professionals, organizations and governmental agencies to create and implement culturally sensitive protocols and inclusive practices that honor diverse cultures and traditions."

Joël offers inclusive end of life, death, and grief care educational courses online through her website (link below). Courses include everything from "Dignity in Death: A Guide for Serving Black Decedents & Communities" to "Honoring Traditions and Creating Sacred Rites of Passage for Communities of Color." Thank you Joël for sharing your much needed and much appreciated work with us. Please check out the links below for more information about The Grave Woman!

The Grave Woman Website: <https://thegravewoman.com/>

Online Courses: <https://joe-l-maldonado.mykajabi.com/>



NAIDCAxDDC Interviews: Tosha Big Eagle

Scholar and community activist Tosha Big Eagle (Hunkpati Dakota) joins NAIDCAxDDC for our first quarterly newsletter's featured interview. Each quarter, the newsletter will feature through an interview the work of a scholar, community member, practitioner across the globe, as they share about the work they are doing in relation to deathcare.

This issue features the work of Tosha Big Eagle (Hunkpati Dakota), a PhD student in the Prevention Science Graduate program at Washington State University. Big Eagle shares with us about herself, some of the work she is doing with advocacy surrounding incarcerated women, the Good Death Fellowship, and facilitating death cafes in correctional facilities.

(NAIDCA) Tell us a little about you, introduce yourself, and the current work you are doing as a graduate student in the Department of Prevention Science?

(Tosha) My name is Tosha Big Eagle. I am the descendant of Wambdi Tanka from the Crow Creek Tribe of South Dakota, as well as Irish, French ancestry. And as you as you mentioned, I am a third year in the Prevention Science graduate program at Washington State University. I'm also an outreach coord-



inator and research support specialist for the PRISM Collaborative at the Washington State University's Elson S. Floyd College of Medicine.

And my research is kind of all over the place. I get passionate about something and then the next thing you know I've got five projects going. But part of my thesis work that I'm just finishing up was looking at culturally grounded harm reduction with Indigenous people.

Continued on next page

NAIDCA X DDC newsletter



NAIDCAxDDC Interviews: Tosha Big Eagle

Continued from last page

From that work one of the main themes that I found was this idea about the need for ceremony—specific ceremonies to help heal. So the idea of, you know, having death ceremonies to heal those of us that are still here, but also ceremony especially if our relative maybe wasn't walking a good path or living a spiritual life—holding those ceremonies to help them heal in their next journey. So that will be coming out soon.

I'm also working on a project with the Washington Correction Center for Women (WCCW)—working on an intergenerational peer caregiving program for elders inside. And those are our native elders as well as any elders that are requiring care for chronic illness, dementia and such. And it is through [the work at WCCW that] I was awarded a Good Death Fellowship in 2024 for doing death cafes inside of the women's prison and some training on advance care planning—as well as training medical and correctional staff on grief, loss, bereavement for themselves. Recognizing that it's difficult to care for people, you know, to have people in your care and to have them die. And so that's just some of the work that I'm currently working on.

(NAIDCA) Since you brought up the Good Death Fellowship—congratulations for getting the fellowship! The Good Death Fellowship is “for leaders in the death positive movement addressing systemic and social problems to help everyone die better.” (Note: description of fellowship is from Order of the Good Death website) And you've already spoken a little bit about the work that you're doing, titled “A Cage Death.” Could you speak about how you came across this opportunity?

(Tosha) Yeah. So this project working with women's prison really came about through my experience being formerly incarcerated. I spent almost a decade in the Washington Correctional Center for Women. When I got out of prison, I became

my grandparents caregiver, and I was honored and privileged to care for them for seven years until their death. Both of them died three months apart in 2023. I was able to be there for them and to talk about advanced care planning, to talk about their wishes and to make sure that they were honored. We were able to have ceremony if they wanted. I realized, you know, that equity and death is not something that everyone has—watching friends of mine die in prison and the very inhumane and isolated deaths that they have.

I happened to go to a conference and met my now co-researcher, Elizabeth Shatswell. We've been working for a year and a half bringing equity in life and death to women in the women's prison here. And we hope to take this project nationally after we've launched this pilot project. But through that, we worked with two amazing gerontologists from Washington State University, Dr. Cory Bolkan and Dr. Raven Weaver, who specializes in gerontology, death and dying and elder abuse. And that's how I found out about the Order of the Good Death. My co-researcher and I were really looking into how can we fund this project? It was really important for us to be able to stick to the model of death cafes. We applied for the funding, and I was shocked when we received it, because in my experience, the work that I do, you know, a lot of people are really fascinated by it. But it's...I don't think it's really appreciated by a lot of folks and seen as a need.

(NAIDCA) Where are you currently at with the project: A Caged Death?

(Tosha) So working with carceral systems is never a smooth process. I would say there's a lot of, you know, intentionality about it for a good reason. There's been a lot of research done with incarcerated individuals and it has not all been good. And some of it has been very, very harmful. So we're

Continued on next page

NAIDCA X DDC newsletter



NAIDCAxDDC Interviews: Tosha Big Eagle

Continued from last page
in the process of getting approval to go inside of the prison. We've been meeting with the Hope team (co-founded by Elizabeth Shatswell), which are peer caregivers inside who I'll be training to be facilitators of death cafes after my project has ended. We're in that approval process right now. We've submitted our project proposal, and we are hoping to begin going inside of the prison in June or in the summer.

(NAIDCA) I love the work that you're doing and it's really needed. I feel like it's kind of two inter-connections of, more invisibilized, like societal-invisibilized communities.

(Tosha) When we think about Indigenous death care community, and support services for incarcerated women—to bring both together...I think when people think about death care, it's maybe a little limited scope of what those possibilities are. But it includes intergenerational trauma and healings as well as accessibility and equity in a lot of different ways.

(NAIDCA) And I think your work really touches upon all those aspects. I'm excited to see the project come through hopefully soon.

(Tosha) Yeah. Just before I forget, one of the things that we've talked about with the Order of the Good Death is about resources. So in death cafes, they are not structured. But there are topic cards available. You know, like, what song would you like played at your funeral? And we're working with them on creating culturally inclusive ones as well—to be able to touch on the things like how can we talk about things from an Indigenous perspective and with an intersectionality of cultures.

We're working with Order of the Good Death to create a toolkit to include aspects of incarceration as well. Because this hasn't been done before. There are not death cafes in incarcerated spaces. Since myself and my co-researcher have lived ex-

-perience with incarceration, we'll also be talking with our peers that are still inside about what they may think or topics for the toolkit. Once we find licensing for the project and we get everything together, Elizabeth my co-researcher and I (alongside with help from Order of the Good Death) hope to create a website where our toolkit will be available for free. So if other prisons or organizations would like to go into prisons and facilitate their cafes, they have this toolkit that's ready for them.

(NAIDCA) You've already kind of touched upon a little bit about this. But why does Indigenous autonomy and/or self-determination in deathcare matter? And why is it important to advocate for this type of work?

(Tosha) I think about it in a lot of different ways. I think about it in terms of healing. And the importance of identity. And I think that healing occurs across the lifespan. Right? We heal [within] our lives and there's healing in afterlife as well, at least in my belief system and many other Indigenous belief systems. I think that part of it is that a lot of us struggle, especially those of us who may be urban indigenous people or we've maybe had our identity taken from us in some sense—whether through residential boarding schools or whether through a number of ways that the government and people have stolen those identities from us.

I've witnessed in my own family and I've witnessed in others, the power of being able to hold ceremony, death ceremonies, and ceremonies for after death for those relatives that are still here. The ceremonies that we do to help our relatives are healing and transformative—for connection and identity with oneself. I've also seen how hard it is and the struggle of not having that secure identity and not being able to have a connection with your Indigenous culture, identity ceremony, all of these things. And for me, reconnecting with

Continued on next page

NAIDCA X DDC newsletter



NAIDCAxDDC Interviews: Tosha Big Eagle

Continued from last page

my indigeneity is probably the only reason that I'm here today. Yeah, I struggled with mental health and substance use for a long time and incarceration, and getting back my identity was very healing and transformative for me. And I feel that everyone should have that, have access to that, if that's what they want.

"In death and end of life, often these topics get pushed aside or it's taboo and we don't talk about it. And, you know, if we're not talking about it then maybe we're not thinking about what our needs are as Indigenous people, and what the needs of other Indigenous people are at end of life, in death, and in afterlife."

In death and end of life, often these topics get pushed aside or it's taboo and we don't talk about it. And, you know, if we're not talking about it then maybe we're not thinking about what our needs are as Indigenous people, and what the needs of other Indigenous people are at end of life, in death, and in afterlife. I think it's our responsibility, those of us that are in these spaces that are doing this work to really raise awareness and advocate for our indigenous health, to be able to have that connection, to be able to identify with what their needs are as indigenous people and have access to ceremony.

(NAIDCA) In the Decolonizing Death Collective and in indigenous death care conversations I've had, we often talk about the importance of taking care of yourself. And conversations about doing things in a good way. But also how do we do things in a good way to also take care of ourselves

in this work?

(Tosha) Yeah. So I used to not really take care of myself while doing this work. When you work in anything where you're passionate about caring for other people and advocating for other people, I think it's hard to center your own health and wellness. Because I think sometimes we feel guilty. We're like, "I'm taking time for myself and I should be doing this work." We take time to eat and hopefully sleep. And maybe, you know, sometimes that's all you can do. I think it's important to recognize first of all to not beat yourself up if today: I was able to get up, I was able to eat, I was able to go to sleep, and I did the work that I did. But to have the self-awareness to know when you need more. So for me, having that self-awareness of always constantly checking in with myself, how am I doing today? What am I feeling today? I'm giving myself some grace and space.

I was at a meeting the other day, and it was a really hard meeting, and I just started to cry and I didn't stop myself, you know? And I think that, we've been very colonized in thinking you can't show emotion if you're a professional or even just if you're an adult that you shouldn't cry or you shouldn't feel these things. And I just let myself cry. And that's part of it, you know? That's part of how I take care of myself, is recognizing these emotions that I'm having because it's hard work. And it's not always easy. I would say it's mostly not easy, actually, because of working with different systems. So I just allow myself that time whenever that time may come. Even in a place where technically society tells me I'm not supposed to, I do it anyways.

Learn more about Tosha Big Eagle's work:

Gather Lab at WSU: <https://hd.wsu.edu/research-labs/gather-lab/>

Instagram: @TOSHA.BIGEAGLE

For more information about A Caged Death, please visit: <https://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/about-the-order/good-death-fellowship/our-fellows/>



Highlighting the work of Chrystal Toop and the Indigenous Death Doula Collective

CHRYSTAL TOOP

Chrystal is an Anishinaabekwe-euromix matriarch from the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan First Nation, a storyteller, Social Service Worker, plantkin helper, and certified Sexual Educator with the American Board of Sexology.

Her work in restorative healing justice is transforming the way we approach community care.



As co-founder of Aunties on the Road Doula Collective and the Indigenous Death Doula Collective, Chrystal has trained over 1,300 doulas in birth, death, and full-spectrum care—revitalizing traditional knowledge and strengthening support networks. Through Blackbird Medicines, she continues to develop training programs that empower helpers to step into their roles with confidence, cultural connection, and a deep understanding of holistic care.

Chrystal Toop (Anishinaabekwe-euromix matriarch from the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan First Nation) pictured here on the left started the Indigenous Death Doula Collective.

The Indigenous Death Doula Collective offers community support that utilizes and revitalizes traditional knowledge. She has shared some upcoming events with NAIDCAxDDC Newsletter below including: a Community Grief and Bereavement Workshop, Keynote Speaking at the Healthy Living & Chronic Disease

Prevention Gathering, and a Collaborative Doula Conference in May.

For more information about Chrystal Toop, Blackbird Medicines, and to reach out regarding these upcoming events, please visit:

<http://www.blackbirdmedicines.ca/>



Blackbird Medicines
on the road

Community Grief & Bereavement Workshop
Algonquins of Pikwàkanagàn FN
April 2

Keynote Speaker, Healthy Living & Chronic Disease Prevention Gathering
Calgary, Alberta
April 29

Collaborative Doula Conference
London, Ontario
May 27-29



About this newsletter

NAIDCA (Native American and Indigenous Deathcare Autonomy) and DDC (Decolonizing Death Collective) are both grassroots initiatives started by Dr. Shelbi Nahwilet Meissner (Luiseño & Cupeño) and Rye Purvis (Diné) that has included Decolonizing Death Cafe's, a monthly book club, and writing groups. The quarterly online newsletter officially began April 2025. The newsletter features: Events, Programs, Workshops about or revolving around deathcare (end of life support, burial, funerary, grief & healing). The Newsletter also features past/current/upcoming work, writing, research shared by Deathcare Practitioners across the globe--highlighting and elevating Deathcare Practitioners through interviews and appreciation of the work going on not only across Turtle Island, but globally.

If you or others are interested in subscribing, please go to this link:
<https://naidca.com/newsletter>

If you are interested in sharing about your work or community advocacy, please email rye@naidca.com.
The next newsletter, Summer Quarterly 2025 will come out in July.

Follow NAIDCA on Instagram:
https://www.instagram.com/naidca_

Follow Decolonizing Death Collective on Instagram:
<https://www.instagram.com/decolonizing.death.collective/>