

The Extraordinary Susan Dean

Cee Cee Donovan: Your name is Susan Dean, correct?

Susan Dean: yes it is..

Cee Cee Donovan: Can you describe your current role and how you support Indigenous entrepreneurs?

Susan Dean: My current role at REI is as manager over Procurement Contracts. We assist small businesses—Native, other minority, and all small businesses—in acquiring procurement contracts. We help them learn how to start the bidding process, manage the contract, and close it out. We also offer assistance and trainings throughout that process, including support for government contracts at the federal, state, and local levels.

Cee Cee Donovan: What inspired you to work at the intersection of Indigenous communities and business development?

Susan Dean: I am Native American, and my grandmother has been a business owner for over 55 years in her community. As a Native woman-owned business in a man's world—which is similar to my background in construction—she inspired me. Everyone looked up to her, and I feel we're stronger together. I believe in that mission and working together to improve the quality of life for Indigenous people.

Cee Cee Donovan: What tribe are you with?

Susan Dean: Cherokee.

Cee Cee Donovan: How do you help bridge the gap between traditional financial systems and Indigenous ways of doing business?

Susan Dean: We've started a capital readiness program that helps entrepreneurs create a pathway to qualify for financing. REI also offers small business lending. I know from my own experience—having to land contracts to fund my business when I couldn't get a loan—that this is super important. Now, we're adding a layer where entrepreneurs not only get capital readiness training, but also assistance with bidding for work, expanding their business, promoting, and adding jobs.

Cee Cee Donovan: Can you share a success story?

Susan Dean: Yes, we had a minority supplier client in Oklahoma City. They came to us, did a contract with Tinker Air Force, and landed their largest contract ever—\$80,000. We helped them get bonding, perform the contract, and bill it. He's just a flooring contractor, but for him, it was a huge success. For us, success isn't about the number of zeros on the contract, but the wins and opportunities. Every contract you don't bid is a missed opportunity. We focus on quality, not quantity.

Cee Cee Donovan: What drives your passion for this work?

Susan Dean: My background as an entrepreneur and knowing how hard it is to be successful—not everyone is lucky in bidding work or knowing what to do. I bring my experience and passion for small business owners to the table.

Cee Cee Donovan: Are there any partnerships or collaborations that have been especially impactful?

Susan Dean: When I started, I went to every small business event in Oklahoma and worked with Apex Accelerator and other small business partners. I asked questions and made connections. I've had several mentors, including Angela Cash with Tulsa Technology and the Apex Accelerator Program (formerly PTAC), and Gene Simon with the Corps of Engineers. They were very impactful and helpful—always there with answers and encouragement.

Cee Cee Donovan: Looking ahead, what changes would you like to see in the next five to ten years for Indigenous entrepreneurship?

Susan Dean: I'd like to see more Indigenous businesses receive funding, assistance, and training. We're partnering with business resource people to provide platforms that help with sales and business growth. We want to be a one-stop shop for entrepreneurs.

Cee Cee Donovan: Do you see technology shaping the future for Indigenous businesses?

Susan Dean: Technology is evolving, and if you're in business, you have to evolve with it. It's AI, IT-driven, cybersecurity—everything. You have to keep up.

Cee Cee Donovan: What advice would you give to young Indigenous women interested in entrepreneurship or financing?

Susan Dean: Get an education. If you can't, seek out as much training as possible. I wish I had finished my education—not because it changes how you do business, but it opens doors you might not otherwise have. Education is important.

Cee Cee Donovan: What are your hopes for the next generation of Indigenous entrepreneurs?

Susan Dean: I hope the next generation listens more to their parents. Technology is great, but there's still so much to learn. Never stop learning and never stop listening.

Cee Cee Donovan: How would you mix that with Indigenous traditions?

Susan Dean: As an Indigenous woman and mother, I'd say mental health and emotional well-being are just as important as educational well-being. All three guide our future, especially in the Indigenous population, because of the trauma our young people face.

Cee Cee Donovan: How can others support or get involved in your work?

Susan Dean: Support our events, ask questions, ask for partner relationships, get involved in your community, join small business networks, attend SBA meetings, and network as much as possible. The more you put yourself out there, the more opportunities you'll find.

Cee Cee Donovan: What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?

Susan Dean: Trust somebody until they give you a reason not to.

Cee Cee Donovan: If you could change one thing about the current entrepreneurial landscape for Indigenous people, what would it be?

Susan Dean: If nothing changes, nothing changes. To make a change, you have to change.

Cee Cee Donovan: Thank you very much for your time.

Susan Dean: Thank you!

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