

Smithsonian Folklife Festival Interview

Lee Pooyouma  
Human resource assistant/ basket weaver  
Coconino National Forest, Arizona

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Interviewer: Cathie Schmidlin

Cathie Schmidlin (CS): Okay, go ahead and tell me your name and what your current job is with the Forest Service.

Leone “Lee” Pooyouma (LP): Hi. My name is Lee Pooyouma. It’s actually Leone Pooyouma—Lee for short—and I currently work in Human Resources office as a human resources assistant.

CS: Okay. And Lee, how long have you been doing that with the Forest Service?

LP: I’ve been with the Forest Service for fifteen years this past June. It’s been a while.

CS: Okay. And how did you come to work for the Forest Service?

LP: My husband Marvin has been working for the Forest Service for over thirty years, and so I had been with the Forest Service for as long as we were married, So that’s how I came about to get familiar with the Forest Service, and I figured it was a good place to work, so after I got my degree from NAU I applied for a job here, and worked first for our archaeology department, for the forest archaeology as a clerk-typist. And that’s how I came into the Forest Service here on the Coconino.

CS: And so have you been with the Forest Service overall for fourteen years?

LP: Right. For fifteen years.

CS: So you’ve only worked on the Coconino?

LP: I’ve only worked on the Coconino, yes.

CS: And how did you hear about working for the Forest Service? Was that something you heard about when you were at NAU?

LP: It's just... It was through my husband. From meeting some of his fellow workers. People who he worked with. And it was just a really good bunch of people that were really friendly and made me feel I was part of the family or the group, and I figured it was a good way to get started at something that I really would like to be with, or a company or an organization that I would like to be with, and the people are just really, really nice. They made me feel welcome.

CS: In your career, as you moved up the career ladder, did you have any mentors or anybody that...?

LP: I guess I had a couple of them. People that I worked for. One of them was Peter [Pilaf?], the forest archaeologist. And another one was Linda Farnsworth, who has since moved on to another region. I worked for them, doing their clerical work, and I got to know them real well, and they gave me... along the way they gave me a lot of good advice, and I feel like that they kind of helped me get started and gain a little self-confidence in myself

CS: Tell a little about what you do in your current job.

LP: Currently what I do in Human Resources, I do mainly vacancy announcements for the Tonto and the Prescott National Forests. We are a zone office for the human resources services, so I do the permanent vacancy announcements for those two forests. There's another person that does vacancy announcements for the Coconino and the Kaibab. The other part of my job is that I also do the temporary nationwide hiring program as well. And what we do is, we mainly look at applications and make sure they fall into the right places as far as placing them into jobs and making sure they're qualified for the position before we hire them. But I do work with a personnel specialist who is my supervisor, and that's the main thing that I do in Human Resources.

CS: So are there any skills in what you do in your job that has any... that [codifies] with anything you do just for your personal goal...?

LP: Yeah, it does. I deal with a lot of people, a lot of public, and a lot of internal—those are our two customers: internally and externally—and I enjoy helping people out with their applications and answering questions about applying for jobs, because applying for federal jobs is a little difficult and sometimes a little confusing. So that's the part of my job that I like the best, is being

able to help people out and clearing up any confusion that they may have. That's the part that I like to do.

CS: Do you find that it's helpful being Hopi, that in the job and trying to help provide service or talking to folks who, how do you fill out the application; do you find that you're able to do that maybe with people from the reservation?

LP: Right, right. I feel like the Native Americans in this general area, which are Hopi and Navajo, and sometimes members of the Yavapai Apache tribe from the Camp Rooney area. They are of course always looking for jobs like anyone else, and I feel like they can relate to me a little more readily. They seem more at ease with me when I do talk to them one on one, and I get a lot of satisfaction from that, that they're able to relate to me. I also have in the past helped other Hopi Forest Service employees. Answered some questions about, not just employment, but also retirement and any new directions or instructions that come through concerning Forest Service policy. A lot of times I've also tried to explain that in my native language to them. I speak Hopi fluently, so I'm able to answer a lot of their questions, hopefully satisfactorily.

CS: Do you think that when they know you, or meet you, that maybe inspires them that they too can get a job in the Forest Service?

LP: Right. Right. And I will tell them, you know, you've just got to just keep plugging away at it if you're looking for a job, because it's very competitive. Whether it be positions in clerical or firefighters, it's pretty competitive. A lot of people are looking for jobs, and I always have to tell them they need to sell themselves a little bit more to be able get a job.

CS: Lee, tell me a little bit too about... I've heard about some of your own special interests. Things you like to do on your own time. Tell us a little bit about that and some of the skills that it takes.

LP: Well since I was a teenager, about fifteen or sixteen years old, I've been making Hopi wicker baskets. They're third mesa wicker style baskets. And because both my mother and my maternal grandmother were weavers, I picked up some of the techniques that they used to make Hopi baskets, and I just sort of kind of was really self-taught just watching my mother weave. So I made my first basket when I was about fifteen or sixteen years old, and I kind of left it alone for a while, and in my mid-twenties I kind of picked it back up again and started making the baskets again. And the baskets are made from native plants; bushes that grow out on the Hopi reservation. So a lot of the materials you have to prepare first before you can even begin to do the weaving itself.

CS: Is that something that was passed on? Because it sounds like, from your grandmother to your mother to you.

LP: Right.

CS: Is that the way it works, is that the women that do the basket weaving...?

LP: Right. In the Hopi culture the Hopi women do the basket weaving and the men do the textile weaving, so yes it is a family tradition. And as in any other Hopi family they passed down the art of making baskets.

CS: [Do you] know the history of the weaving? Do you know how that originated or whether there's traditions tied to that?

LP: I'm not sure how it got started. But it is... I'm sure the Hopi people have been weaving for hundreds of years. There are actually two types of baskets, and the reason that I said the ones that I make are third mesa style wicker—there's also another style called second coil baskets, and the two are generally... It depends on what location you're at. You know, second mesa has a coil style and we have the wicker style. And in the past, you know, of course they used natural dyes to make and dye the weaving materials that is used. But today in our times they do just use commercial dyes to do that.

CS: For the patterns that you weave... If somebody was from second mesa, you could use a pattern that was associated with a different village?

LP: Sometimes they may have the same pattern. Yeah, it's okay to do, and a lot of designs are traditional. A lot of it depicts animals, such as eagles. And then some of the designs reflect, represent, the kachinas; we make those; those are the hardest to make. And other things represent everyday things in life, such as the blanket design. There's also another basket design that my mother was really, really good at and she passed it on to me. It's called a whirlwind design whereby it kind of looks like a kind of whirlwind that's kind of going back and forth; and she passed that design on to me. So it reflects daily life and what's all around us. Clouds, rainbows, things like that.

CS: Are there certain times of the year that you weave, and are they for special purposes?

LP: Right. Well I generally do most of my weaving during the winter months when things are pretty cold outside. So it's a good indoor thing when things are cold outside. And part of the reason too is there's a certain time of the year when the materials that you find are a little bit more pliable to use, and they don't dry out—obviously in the winter time they don't dry out as quickly as they do in the summer months. So it just makes basket weaving a little easier if it's done during the colder months when your work... You know, it doesn't take a day; it takes several days or sometimes a couple of weeks to make one depending on the size of the design and the difficulty of the design. And so you kind of have to put your week aside every day, or every night; and so you don't want it to dry out, because once it dries out it's brittle and it's hard to work with.

And the things that the baskets are used for is—several ways. One of the ways is of course decorative; you use it as a decoration on your walls. The other way is, it's given as a gift to a baby—a small girl, or a small child, a girl, female—during some of our kachina dances or ceremonies; and that's how it's used.

And a third way that we use it is, in the fall we have what we call a women's' dance, and part of the dance is involving using the baskets. They hold the baskets and dance in the plaza, and it's used that way too as well.

CS: Tell me about some of the skills it takes to be a weaver. Was that something you just gained by experience, by doing it repeatedly?

LP: Well I do know that it takes patience. That's probably number one. [laughs] And it just takes... you just have to stick with it and try to learn and try to make it as smooth as possible. I mean, you know, being real, I don't know what the word is, but being really careful to make your designs straight and even; and it does take practice. The first basket you weave, you know, of course never ever comes out completely round, and they're irregular shaped or whatever. But with time, you know, you learn how to handle the materials so that you can mold it into what you want, and make it more even and rounder; and of course the more rounded it is, the better it is; and just sticking to or paying attention to detail.

CS: So the things that you learned from your culture, has that played a role in what you do with the Forest Service?

LP: Yes it does. I'm very familiar with my culture, and like I said I speak my language pretty fluently, and my family is a fairly traditional family and so we—my brothers and I—grew up knowing or being aware of all the different kinds of ceremonies and traditions and languages and foods that are related to Hopi. And I have some of the, I guess the characteristics and some of the personality of being a Hopi. You know, you learn to be patient and kind of, I don't know what the word is. And I try to use some of those teachings in my dealings with people, and not be too forward, although in some ways maybe that holds me back a little bit because Hopis tend to be

really, really conservative. So I think I consider myself maybe too conservative, and sometimes I wish I could kind of break out of that, you know, shell. But I find that if I just take things a little easy and not be too aggressive, people will kind of appreciate that; and that's because people have sometimes come on to you real strong to you at first, and then they realize that I want to do it in a more calm and collected way. And I think in that way it has helped me in dealing with a lot of people.

CS: Sounds like too that contributes to not only what you do but to the overall goals within the agency?

LP: Right, right. And being patient with people.

CS: And getting back to your tradition of weaving, how has that changed over time?

LP: Over time? Well one of the ways I know... In some ways it has not changed. Certainly the materials that we use we gather, still, the same ways that we've done in the past. Mainly what we call rabbit brush, and sumac, which are two different kinds of plants that are native to the Hopi reservation, the Navajo reservation. And we do all our gathering at the same time every year. It's usually late summer when we do the gathering for that. And the preparation for that; the rabbit brush, you still need to peel off the outer covering of the plant to get to the inside, which is the material that is dyed and then woven into the basket.

But one of the things that I know has changed is the old elders used to use vegetable dye. Of course the dyes come from, again, the native plant that grow out on the reservation. They would boil it for hours to get the colors out of the plant and then dyed the material in that. Today we use commercial dyes to color the plants. And that way it has changed.

Other ways that have changed is that the market for the baskets seems to have flourished pretty nicely. I know in the past, in my grandmother's time, she was lucky if she got a dollar for a basket—a fairly good-sized one. But now, if you're real good at weaving baskets and if you do some of the more intricate or difficult designs, you can probably get a lot of money for your work; several hundred dollars for one piece. So in that way it has changed too as well. But I think it's kind of because it's now recognized more as an art, rather than just as a utility-type or a utility use. So I think it's recognized more as an art. Because it is an art form. I mean, it's something you learn over a long period of time. It's not something you pick up overnight.

CS: And also too, have you seen changes between the Forest Service and the American Indian tribes? Do you think that maybe those relationships have changed? Are you in a position, or do you know anything more about that?

LP: I have had a little bit of dealing with the tribes; mainly the Hopi tribe, and their tribal government, when I was working with Peter [Pilaf?] in the archaeology section. I helped Peter with some of the information as far as... you know, you needed some information about how the tribal governments work, and how the culture works, you know, some of our beliefs. And so in that way I felt like I contributed a lot to how Peter could deal with the tribes. And I have taken trips out to meet with the Hopi tribe. So I've seen a little bit of the relationship and I'm aware that they've done a memorandum of understand type of things with both the Hopi tribe and Navajo tribe, and also I think some other tribes too as well. Probably the Camp Verde and the Yavapai Apaches. I am aware of it but currently I'm not too involved in that right now.

CS: So you see that as a change?

LP: I see that as a change. I know just from my own observations, I know that some of the Hopi elders have, in the past, you know, they've kind of felt like the Forest Service was not listening to them; but now I think that because of some of the understandings and the meetings and the contacts and the consultation of the Forest Service with the tribes, I think that some of the relationships have improved quite a bit.

CS: What are some of the other changes you've seen, maybe not necessarily tied to the relationship with the Hopi tribe? Just changes in general within the Forest Service in the amount of time that you've been working for the Forest Service? Anything significant come to mind?

LP: Yes, one thing that comes to mind is I know that the San Francisco Peaks, which is here on the Coconino National Forest, on the Peaks ranger district, is a very religious and significant site for the Hopis as well as other tribes. The San Francisco Peaks are sacred in that they have sacred sites, trails, springs, also other sites where historically the Hopi tribes, Hopi men, have come to the San Francisco Peaks on pilgrimages to pray for rain. As you may be aware the Hopi do dry farming, and that means there's no irrigation, and no bodies of water out on the Hopi reservation to do any kind of irrigating. And so when they do dry farming they depend completely or entirely on nature to make rain. And in the Hopi culture they pray for rain by doing prayers and going to some of these religious shrines to pray for the rain. And I know that they take it very seriously and they're very diligent in what they did to do those pilgrimages. I mean they came on foot, or mules, or burros, to make a trip from the Hopi reservation which is probably sixty, seventy miles straight across over to the Hopi reservation. And I would say they were very successful because it always rained during the growing season. But that was historically, and they did a lot of farming because that was what they depended on to survive. And they didn't have any modern equipment, they didn't have any tractors or plows or anything like that, and so it was all done by hand, by hoeing and using their own hands to clear off a small plot of land to plant corn, beans, squash and melons to feed their families. And a lot of times, well they planted enough to last at least a year, till the crop season. And some years they had droughts, and when they had droughts they had famine. I know in my grandmother's time, she says they had a famine when she was a

young girl. And that's when there's no rain, and because they depended entirely on those crops, dry farming.

CS: Is that a tradition, the dry farming, that continues today?

LP: Right, it does continue today. But of course obviously it's not as... A lot of the men today still dry farm, including my husband Marvin, and there's just a few of the true farmers that are left now, although Marvin considers himself to be just a weekend farmer [laughs], because obviously he works during the week and then goes out and tends to the fields on the weekend. And most of the Hopi men now have regular jobs just like anyone else, or have their own businesses to support their families, so they don't really rely on the farming as much. But it's still considered a very good thing to do to carry on the tradition of dry farming. But I think more importantly it's a tradition to carry on the native seeds that we have handed down from generation to generation, because who knows, it may help in world hunger someday. So who knows?

CS: Lee, also I wanted to know, are there any challenges that are related to your job? Any challenges that you face, like from your community or from your family or your friends back on the reservation?

LP: No, not really. The only time I felt like that it was kind of challenging or kind of awkward was when they had this EA on the snow-making machine on the peaks...

CS: The environmental assistant?

LP: The environmental assistant. And obviously the Hopi people in general were opposed to that because it desecrated the sacred mountain. Although I never really had anybody approach me and asked me about it, but I kind of sensed that maybe me being a Forest Service employee may have kind of put me in an uncomfortable spot.

CS: You mean you didn't have anybody ask you about the Forest Service; why are they doing this? They didn't make you, they didn't put you in that position?

LP: No. They didn't.

CS: Is that because the Hopi culture would not permit them to do something like that?

LP: I guess so. And like I said before, they're pretty conservative, and they, you know.

CS: Do you feel that in, and we'll just use that as an example of the Forest Service looking at a proposal to allow snow-making using effluent water on the peaks that are held sacred by many of the local tribes, do you feel that the Forest Service has listened and really understands what that position is from people from the Hopi villages who don't support that?

LP: I feel like the Forest Service does listen. It's obvious that they've had many, many numerous meetings with the Hopi tribe. I know that they've gone out and explained what it involves and what will happen, and try to make them understand that they're trying to do as little damage as possible [laughs] I guess is the word. I feel like the relationships have improved quite a bit.

CS: Has that ever put you in an awkward position? Because I think when you talk about the environment and the beliefs that people have, many people, whether they're American Indians or not, have spiritual beliefs tied to the land, and you can't quantify that quite typically, so that makes for some awkward moments.

LP: I'll have to admit that yes, it has. I have my own beliefs and my own opinions about the snow-making machine. But I just feel that because I'm a Forest Service employee I shouldn't state my own opinions. Although I guess as a public, or as a person, I could.

CS: You don't want people to think that you're representing the Forest Service if you were to express your opinions?

LP: Right. Right.

CS: So I guess sometimes that can make it a little awkward.

LP: Can make it a little awkward, yes.

CP: Do people—and now not related to issues or environmental issues—do friends and family, when you go back to the Hopi reservation, do they ever ask you about the Forest Service, or getting jobs, or...

LP: Oh yeah, I've had... But all in all, you know, setting aside the snow-making machine thing, most people are, I guess, envious that I have a job with the Forest Service. I think most Hopi people think of the Forest Service as a good employer, and they respect me for it. And yes, they do ask about jobs. Not only jobs, but they also ask about other things, such as the gathering of forest products in the forest. A lot of forest products we use for our ceremonies: the boughs of certain trees. And they ask me about those kinds of things; and they also ask about firewood and any kind of wood product like that to use to build homes.

CS: It sounds like most people—your co-workers—ask you about Hopi people and Hopi cultures; and it sounds like you have the same thing when you go back to the reservation.

LP: Right. Right.

CS: Lee, if you were going to participate at the Folklife Festival, what would you imagine yourself doing?

LP: Oh, I guess probably do a demonstration of my basket weaving. I'd lug along all my stuff, you know, my tools. We do use a certain kind of sand to help keep the materials moist and pliable, so I would lug along all that. So I could see myself doing that. I've done that in the past for other things, so I'm pretty comfortable doing that.

CS: What does that involve as far as components? What do you need? What are the components of the basket weaving?

LP: Okay. Well the materials obviously. The sumac is a bush that has kind of strong limbs, and that's used as a framework for the basket. And then the other one is, the other material that we use is the [rabbit brush?], which is the actual weaving material, and that's the one that's dyed different colors; and I would have to take several of those bundles of different colors along, as well as the sand that I just mentioned; a certain kind of coarse sand, clean sand that we use.

CS: Where do you obtain those materials?

LP: There's certain places around my village where we can get it. And that's usually sand that you dig out from the ground. It's not the top sand; you dig a little deeper to get it. And then the other tools that I use is an awl and scissors.

CS: So pretty much that's it.

LP: Uh huh.

CS: If you... Would it be frowned upon if you used materials to replace the sumac and the rabbit brush?

LP: Well, it's not... I guess we would probably get ridicule from some of my other fellow weavers; you know, the other women that do weaving. They would kind of ridicule and say, why aren't you using the traditional material? Or, you're lazy because you don't want to go out and get the right material to use. [laughs] Probably something like that.

CS: They would expect for you to lug it across the country.

LP: Right. Right.

CS: All right. So how long would it take? Can you kind of describe if you were to be engaged in demonstrating how to weave, how long would something like that take?

LP: Well for a small basket or plaque—it's sometimes called a plaque—probably it would take me two or three days to make a small one. If I was working at it for several hours a day.

CS: But for demonstration purposes you'd be able to do something in a smaller scale?

LP: Yeah. Uh huh. And actually, like I say I've done demonstrations in the past, and what I've done is I'll have one started that's three quarters of the way done or something, just to give people an idea of the different stages of the baskets. And then I would have one that I just started so they could see the beginning and the start of the basket.

CS: And what else would you be... or is there something else that you would be doing while you were weaving?

LP: Oh, I guess I could probably tell a little bit about what Hopi culture is like, you know, and our ceremonies.

CS: Is that something that you enjoy doing?

LP: Uh huh. Fine. Right.

CS: Okay. Anything else that you would like to add?

LP: I don't think so, but I sure would like to participate in the festival.

CS: Why?

LP: Sounds like a very interesting idea. You know, I mean, I'm excited about it, actually.

CS: Why do you feel that it would be exciting to...?

LP: Well, it's a chance to travel, obviously. I've never been to Washington, so it's a nice opportunity to go to Washington and see it. I did lose out... I had a chance several years back and because of some family obligations I couldn't go, so I missed out on the chance then.

CS: Do you also enjoy... Because you would be... There are people from everywhere. It draws... It's quite an attraction. I don't remember how many\ —several thousand people-- attend this festival over a week. Is that something you're comfortable and enjoy doing?

LP: I think so. I think I'd enjoy doing that. I enjoy talking to people.

CS: All right. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW