

Desi "Pete" Zavalla (father)
Tribal Liaison, Los Padres National Forest
&
Anthony Zavalla (son)
Firefighter, Los Padres National Forest

June 2004
Interviewer: Jill Evans

[This interview was conducted outdoors, and some statements are obscured by wind noise and by off-screen voices and machinery.

Mentions of 'J.P.' refer to Pete Zavalla's other son, J.P. Zavalla, who also works for the Forest Service.]

[First minute and 20 seconds shows Indians dancing and singing out of doors, in tribal costumes and headgear.]

[Scene changes to Pete and Anthony Zavalla seated outside.]

Jill Evans (JE): Okay. So Pete, actually at the very beginning of this tape is you dancing at the powwow last summer.

DPZ: Uh huh. [Nods]

JE: Just so everybody knows that it's you. 'Cause you look a little different now. [Laughs] So, since I sort of explained what this little thing is about, and that the Forest Service is looking for people that have special skills that they could share on the Washington Mall for the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, 'cause the Forest Service is going to be highlighted next year. So I thought of you two and J.P. because of your Native American background, and then also because of Tony, you and J.P. have the firefighting background, which I think is kind of interesting. So like I said originally, I thought that they followed you, Pete, into the Forest Service, [Laughs] and then found out differently, so Tony, if you could explain, [J.P.] sort of talked about how the two of you got involved with sort of recruitment on the reservation, that they were looking for teenagers to come work for the Forest Service.

Anthony Zavalla [AZ]: Yeah.

JE: So could you explain sort of how that works? And did you guys go together, since you're a little bit younger than he is?

AZ: Well originally we started off in a trail crew, which a fellow by the name of Mel Sanchez, he had over here on the [Hopi?]. And J.P. started from there, and after that I kind of followed him and we had our own trail crew on the reservation. So that kind of started me out, on the trail

crew, and we saw the hot shot crew and saw the different fire vehicles here. Didn't really know too much about it. And eventually later on I got involved with, when I first started in Big Sur, with the engine over there, engine eighteen, which is out of right there in Big Sur.

JE: So you went to an engine crew first?

AZ: Yeah. I started off on the engine... I started off at [Oxamal?] station in the Monterey District. And from there, that same season, I went straight to another engine. I got transferred over to the Big Sur engine and worked for a guy named Frank Sibroski there. Worked for Kelly Collins first and then went to engine eighteen. And then from there, that same year I got transferred over to the Santa Barbara district, because I wanted to work with the hot shot crew. That's what my goal was, to work for the hot shot crew. And that same season the [Moray?] fire started. And from there, at the end of the season when they were doing the rehab, I jumped on the hot shot crew then. And after that season I ended up working for [L.P.] the full time as a seasonal. And was there for the last four seasons after that happened. And after those four seasons were up I decided to go and jump out of Missoula. And I did that.

JE: For how long?

AZ: For one season I did it. I wanted to see what was different about it. I wanted to really, I wanted to jump out of an airplane real bad [JE laughs] so that was my goal. And I got to jump out. Same fire [with him].

JE: Oh, you did?

AZ: Yeah. I was first, I had to jump out first 'cause I was the [IC?] of the fire, so I got to jump out first before him, and I got to see him come down.

JE: oh, that's cool.

AZ: So that kind of pretty much made my year.

JE: So were you on the hot shot crew the same time he was too then?

AZ: No, he had left the hot shot crew I think the year before.

JE: Oh, okay.

AZ: So we were never on the hot shot crew together.

JE: So that season smokejumping was the only time you worked on the same crew together?

AZ: Yeah. Pretty much. We had our first fire together, so that was kind of neat. The first jump that we had together. I would have liked to have jumped out with him, but you know, I had to go before him. So.

JE: But that's neat that you guys could do that together.

AZ: Yeah. Yeah.

JE: And then after that season smokejumping did you come back to here?

AZ: I came back to Santa Barbara and picked up with the apprenticeship program, and from there I came over to {unit?} twenty-two for another season on the [Hopi?], and kind of worked my way over to the Rio Grande, the hell shot crew there.

JE: Oh yeah.

AZ: Worked there for the past two seasons after that, and then finally I got a permanent position on the [Hopi] engine here, forty-two. And now I'm the [FEL?] assistant to the captain.

JE: And how long have you been permanent here?

AZ: For about three seasons now.

JE: Oh good deal. Okay. And then so Pete, since your kids were in the Forest Service, how did you get started?

DPZ: You know, I can't remember. Well actually yes, I can remember. It was 1990. I was at the tribal hall and I was looking outside the window, and I was watching all our kids, you know, doing nothing in the summer. So I came over here to the Santa Barbara ranger district, which Patrick Pontes was the district ranger, and I asked him, I said hey, you have any Indians working for you? Which I was only joking around with him. He said, you know, I think we do. I said well, I have a crew that we use on the reservation. I can come out and work for the Forest Service on the trail crew. And I said, they're in the California Indian Manpower [word lost].

JE: Oh yeah.

DPZ: CIMC I think it was called. But anyway. So we got together, and of course here was Mel Sanchez again. He was, he spearheaded our program. And then Patrick supported it. And I worked right beside them. I was in charge of the crew sometimes, and sometimes Mel would be in charge. But you know, what was really so neat about that crew we had, is that they're all young adults now. And I got a thank-you from a lot of them. They're all doing real well. They're all in the work force. They're all working, things like that.

JE: Well great.

DPZ: And I'm really glad that I... One of the first projects that we did, in 1990, was to clean up the glass over at the [napp?] site. It's on [West Camino Ciello]. And we picked up all the glass. We cleaned that area up called the [napp] site. [Microphone noise obscures next sentence.] That was the main thing that we wanted to do. The main project was to clean up that mess there. And now it's showing that. It's nice and clean now, and we have visitors go there. At that time if you

went to [machine noise obscures words] there's a lot of bottles and glass, a lot of trash. And we cleaned it up. It's nice and clean now.

JE: And so... 'cause your position now is the travel liaison. So how did that...? Was there somebody in that position before you?

DPZ: No, I kind of... The regional office, [Sonia Tomez], she helped me create that program here on the forest. In fact, we could say 'create', but it's always needed in the process of protecting sacred sites, traditional cultural places, prehistoric sites. There's a thing called the NIPA process. In NIPA you have to consult with the Native Americans, especially the locals, the tribe here on the reservation, which is federally recognized. And that's why my position was created.

JE: And how long have you been in that position?

DPZ: Oh, let's see. Probably about six years.

JE: Okay.

DPZ: And before that I was a consultant. I consulted with all the Native Americans. Before that position was, I consulted with the tribes.

JE: With the Forest Service?

DPZ: With the Forest Service.

JE: On projects?

DPZ: That's when I was actually, I wasn't permanent then. I was a temp. You know, I was temporary. I was a temp for six years.

JE: Oh wow.

DPZ: I hung on, you know, but it paid off.

JE: That's great. Okay. And with having two sons in fire, did that worry you? Especially two of them jumping at the same time. And now one back doing that

DPZ: Well you know, I always... One thing I always did, I always, I wanted to know where they were at. I was always looking at where they were at. And I would talk to their supervisors. Just kind of tell them, hey, Watch my son.

JE: Did you know that?

AZ: No.

[Laughter]

DPZ: And you know, Su, the supervisor, they called him Su.

JE: Yeah.

DPZ: On the hot shot crews. He'd always say, hey, they're like my sons. I always take care of them.

JE: That was good.

DPZ: Oh yeah, you know, I worry about them.

JE: Yeah. Well especially two of them jumping out of planes at the same time.

DPZ: I know. I was kind of concerned about that day, but, you know. Luck was... No. Somebody was with them.

JE: Yeah. Okay. So with your... Well Tony, do you, you go to the powwows and participate in them, right?

AZ: Not anymore. I've got my regalia together. I haven't actually danced since I've been... The last time was when I was like thirteen.

JE: Oh wow.

AZ: Yeah, it's been a long time. And I'll get my stuff together and eventually...

JE: Is it something that you want to go back to doing?

AZ: Oh yeah. Definitely. [It's already in the blood, so...] I'd like to get my son started off at a young age too.

JE: And how old is he?

AZ: He's eight right now.

JE: Okay. Well I know [J.P.] participates, and so Pete, did you teach all of your kids that.

DPZ: Oh yeah.

JE: Why?

DPZ: Except some of the girls escaped. [Laughter] Which I'm told. My daughter [Kai?], my youngest one. But...

JE: Well your older daughter does, 'cause she was...

DPZ: Oh yeah, she... It's, you know, I don't know whoever's listening to me out in that world. If you're an Indian, you know it's hard to be an Indian today. Because you have to more or less assimilate yourself into that society which demands that you have your rent money, your cell phone money, you know. Your food is so high that after a day's work, you know, that's the time when you put your regalia together. When you go home. But we don't really... Well you know, I got mine together. It took me a long time to do that. It took me a long time on everything I have. But it's hard to go home and work on your feathers or start putting your stuff together. It's hard. You get... There's other things that come up that you have to do, as part of your lifestyle.

JE: Right. Pulling you away from that.

DPZ: I think that it's hard. It's hard. Very hard.

JE: So why did you think it was important to teach your kids that?

DPZ: You know, I think the most important "why" is because people are one day... or somebody's going to ask them. How come you don't know about dancing or drumming or your language. But really that's not part of being an Indian today. I know the world went through a lot of changes to change us too; assimilate us into the society. But they don't understand that we're very important. We're very important because we're unique. We're American Indians. And hopefully we will never go away. We will always be here. So I want them to understand that--my sons and daughters—that they're Indian and they need to be proud. But you know, something was kind of like... Me and a friend of mine, Antonio Romero, we used to go into all the parades. Be in all the parades, and then dancing in front of people, you know, because we probably were. But today I'm seeing something different. I don't know, there's just something, a click in the head, saying, I'm not going to be that wooden Indian, dancing in front of these people who are throwing... And they used to throw quarters and stuff at us.

JE: Oh really?

DPZ: But we never thought nothing about it.

JE: Yeah.

DPZ: But I won't do that now, because my kids go, God dad, you're just being a sell-out. [Laughter] You know, just joking with ourselves, you know.

JE: Yeah. Yeah.

DPZ: But that's the importance of, why do you want to know you're an Indian? I'm very proud [a few words too faint to hear]. And you know, my daughter [Nakia] went into the computer and looked out, and... I always knew I was an Indian. I always knew that. Well, what tribe are you? Then I'd look it up in our, oh, what do you call it? The maps of the United States. I knew I was from Texas, so I looked at the area where I was [words inaudible]. Well my daughter, about a year

ago, [words inaudible] family in Nancy, Texas. And come to find out, my grandfather was full-blooded Comanche.

JE: Oh, and you didn't know that?

DPZ: I didn't know that. He lived to be a hundred and two years old.

JE: Oh my gosh.

DPZ: So... And I didn't know that. It didn't make a change to me because I was already there, you know. I was never guessing whether I was in Indian or not. I knew I was an Indian. But anyway, it's very important.

JE: Yeah. And Tony, even though we live really close to the reservation, there aren't many Native Americans working for the Forest Service. Do you feel that it's special or different, or have you had a hard time with that? Has anybody made it a problem?

AZ: No. No one's made it a problem. I chose this job because there's some... I saw my brother doing it and I wanted to follow in his footsteps. You know, I grew up in a small town, and I went through school, did all the sports things, did all that, you know. And I knew when sports was over I needed something else to get the adrenaline rush. And this is the next thing to that, you know.

JE: oh, that's c cool.

AZ: And that's one of those things; I never thought it would be like this. And as soon as I got on the hot shop crew I understood. It kind of had the same feeling. The camaraderie with the crew, the working out, all those things that you do. And you go on a fire and...

JE: That's definitely adrenaline. [Laughs] Yeah. Well that's an interesting way of putting it. I wouldn't have thought of it that way.

AZ: And that's something that, you know, obviously I followed my brother in.

JE: Yeah. That's an interesting way to describe it, because I wouldn't have thought of it in that way. With the sports teams and...

AZ: Oh yeah, it's the same thing. You have to be able to get along with everyone and have the same goals.

JE: So even going to different places like Idaho, it was never an issue?

AZ: No, never. Never an issue.

JE: Well that's pretty good then.

AZ: And all the people that I worked with and I worked for have always been open to me. And I think that sometimes being a Native American, you see them at fires or other crews, and you see the way they are. Sometimes the leaders that are leading them, sometimes they're not all they're cracked up to be.

JE: Oh.

AZ: And so...

JE: Like the BIA crews and that kind of thing?

AZ: Yeah. You know, not downplaying anyone about what their skills are. But obviously we get this... I think people kind of see us as being less, or not more than, these other crews. But you know, they have heart, and that's all that matters. They want to go out there and they want to do a good job; and maybe they're not doing it the way other people, other crews are doing it. That's one of those things that's a hard question to answer.

JE: Yeah, that's true. That says a lot, though, that even going to other states there hasn't been any [word unclear]. That's pretty good for nowadays.

AZ: Oh yeah. Yeah. All the people I worked for, they really work good, know their stuff, and want to pass that on. They're not trying to keep it for themselves or anything like that. That's really important, you know. [Words unclear] Anybody, any new crew member or whatever. So.

JE: And is fire fighting something you want to stick with?

AZ: Yeah. Definitely. I've been here now eleven years now, so obviously I've made a career out of it. I can't... This is what I like doing; this is my life at this point.

JE: And here? You like being on the [Name unclear] area?

AZ: Oh yeah. This area, yeah. This is where I grew up, so it makes sense to be around here.

JE: That's true.

AZ: I've got a big family and it's kind of nice to be able to stick around and show them that I want to be here, that I want to be close to them. 'Cause you have, we have six kids in our family, so it's nice to be around and see our, and my nephews and nieces grow up, and be able to see them.

JE: And do you all live on the reservation?

AZ: No, I actually live here in [Paradise Canyon].

JE: Oh, okay. On the compound.

AZ: And my brothers and sisters live on the reservation in Santa Ynez.

JE: And do you live in Santa Ynez too, Pete?

DPZ: Yeah, I live in Santa Ynez.

JE: So you have your whole family around you as well.

DPZ: Yeah. This is the, to look at it a different way, this is our traditional gathering, traditional hunting grounds. This is our traditional area. Although the reservation is probably about a hundred and twenty-eight acres, maybe a little bit bigger now. But that's what I deal with in the Tribal Relations program. I deal with [words unclear] government to government. Like Tony was saying, around here, this is his mountains here.

JE: Right. That's what J.P. always said too. Yeah. Grew up in [Figueroa]. Yeah.

DPZ: The Forest Service has been very good, and we have what we call an administrative pass, which they can use that and park on any part of the forest. You know, for the hunting and fishing and gathering.

JE: And do people do that?

DPZ: Yeah, they do.

JE: Do you work with groups that do that?

DPZ: Oh yeah.

JE: And do you only work with the Chumach? Or are there other...?

DPZ: No, I work with Salinan, the Esselen, the [Totalians?], the Yokuts...

JE: Wow. And those are all around the forest?

DPZ: They're around the forest, yeah.

JE: Okay. I didn't realize that. I know some of those are further up north. By Big Sur?

DPZ: Well the Yokuts... Well actually the ones at Big Sur are the, are the...

JE: Esselen?

DPZ: Esselen. Yeah.

JE: Okay. And then the rest, the other tribes that you mentioned?

DPZ: They're over, they're located over there by Frazier Park.

JE: Oh. Okay. [Off-screen noises. JE laughs] Move the equipment over. [Pause until noises fade] Okay. So some of the things that they were wanting me to interview people with that had special skills; and Tony, I thought of you and J.P. One was because of smokejumping, and that being sort of one of those things that people hear lots about but hardly ever meet anybody that is a smokejumper, or has been a smokejumper, that can sort of explain that. Is that something that you would be comfortable doing for the public, and explain what it's like to work on an engine and what it's like to be a smokejumper and that kind of thing?

AZ: Oh yeah.

JE: Yeah?

AZ: Yeah.

JE: Do you do programs for schools with your engine?

AZ: Yeah, we do a lot of camps out here on Paradise Road. There's a lot of the campgrounds we do; little special things for the kids who come, the schools that camp out here.

JE: Oh, okay.

AZ: So we show them the engine and show them what we do, and have them see our tools. Yeah, we work a lot with the children that come to this area, so...

JE: And you're comfortable with that?

AZ: Oh yeah. Definitely.

JE: Groups of kids? [Laughs] Explaining everything?

AZ: Yeah, you know. They lose their attention real quick. It's kind of hard to get them, to show them something, and then to see what we're doing.

JE: Yeah. [Laughs]

AZ: You know one time we were showing the kids the engine, and we turn around for one second, and the kids are throwing everything out of our packs, [JE laughs] and grabbing the [fusies?], digging holes with the tools, you know, and so... Yeah, it's really neat.

JE: Well you definitely have one of those jobs I think that kids look to you with awe. Oh, a real fire fighter.

AZ: You know, the one thing about it is, they can't, they don't know the difference between us and city fire fighters.

JE: Right.

AZ: They ask why we don't have red trucks, and why is our truck green? They always ask that. So until we really show them what we have, and why we're not the same. Like in certain areas we are and in certain areas we're not, so...

JE: And so do you explain to them what the difference between a structural fire fighter and the wildland fire fighter is? That kind of thing?

AZ: Yeah, we show them all the stuff. But we still carry a lot of stuff that, you know, [words not clear] Like our SEVA we carry [words unclear]. We show them our tools. Obviously our tools are going to be different from what they carry. And our packs and everything.

JE: And explain to them that you're gone for long periods of time?

AZ: Yeah, that's why we show them our red bags, 'cause we have clothes in there to last us fourteen days. And they wonder how we get that many clothes in there for fourteen days. [JE laughs] We tell them obviously we're not wearing that many clothes; it's all shirts and you know, a pair of pants.

JE: Right. Different from their camping experiences for sure.

AZ: Yeah.

JE: Yeah. I think that's pretty interesting. And you have kids too. One that's eight. Do you have other children?

AZ: No, I have one son. He's eight. Dakota.

JE: Okay. So he must think it's pretty cool. To be in firefighters.

AZ: Oh yeah. He's always telling me that he wants to, he kind of wants to follow my lead. That's what he always says, but we'll see when he gets older. [Laughs]

JE: Oh, that's cool. Then you'd have three generations, Pete.

DPZ: Yeah. But I won't be the first.

JE: That's right. 'Cause you followed you kids.

DPZ: J.P. told you.

[Laughter]

JE: And Pete, so I thought, because of your Native American work with the Forest Service, I don't think a lot of people really know that, that there is a tribal liaison person or position, and that people would be interested to hear what you do with the Forest Service. Is that something you would feel comfortable doing for two weeks in D.C.? Sort of explaining what you do?

DPZ: Oh yeah. That's my specialty in public.

JE: Okay. And I know you like to chat with folks. [Laughs]

DPZ: That's right. You know, my position is tribal relations, and they call me the liaison. But actually I play liaison, I play the part of [words unclear] manager, whether it's in fire; and human resource specialist and Native American cultural specialist. [Words drowned out by car noise] But I think my position, I really like it. To tell you the truth, sometimes it takes a special kind of person to do, whether you're a smokejumper, whether you're on a hot shot crew, or you're a tribal relations liaison. A special, I think very unique, I don't know, [words unclear]

JE: Yeah. That alone takes a special skill I think.

DPZ: Yes it does. Just like you. Not everyone can do what [words unclear]

JE: Well that's great. So you would be comfortable with explaining what you do and sort of chatting with folks about the connection between the Forest Service and different Native American tribes?

DPZ: [Words unclear] I learn I can't make promises. I used to do that all the time. I would tell the tribe, well, I can, the Forest Service can promise you that we're going to have, we're going to give you like, oh, access to [some] areas and special use permits. You can use areas for the bear dance or ceremonies. But I can't make those promises until when they happen, they fill out their special use permits-- they're doing that now, to use an area over here—to apply for special use permits, and then the decision is made by a line officer or a forest supervisor. We don't have any problems with that. I think it's going to work out. This forest here is very supportive of the American Indian programs.

JE: Oh yeah. So they don't usually have a problem with granting their special use permits?

DPZ: No, as long as we do it within that area that we have that First Amendment freedom of religion. There's a freedom of religion, and then here there's a Native American freedom of religion, which I see as two different things, because the tribe here on the reservation, they're federally recognized, and we have to work with government to government. Whether it's a little "e", excuse me, whether it's a little "c", consultation; and then the big "C" consultation is in Washington D.C. So those are two things that sometimes we have to know the difference between the little "c" and the big "C" in consultation. Those are... I wouldn't have a problem talking to people about it and explaining to them what we need. Our process, my process, the process that I have to go through me; the process in order to be accepted through the [NAPA?] process. Consultation with the Native Americans [words unclear].

JE: So you're their contact then? Anything like that, they all go through you. And then you go to the Forest Supervisor, whoever.

DPZ: Yes.

JE: Okay. That's kind of a neat job then. To work with all those different people.

DPZ: It is, yes.

JE: And do they end up doing lots of different things? 'Cause I know [like on the same with the others?], not a whole lot.. That kind of thing, especially use permits and using the forest in that kind of way. Is that mostly done here?

DPZ: Yeah. They haven't really applied for that, for the special use permits. It's kinda slow. They have to understand that. You know, how it works. And they haven't really had a use for it yet. But now they are. I think they have a use for it now. We're running out of room there on the reservation. There's no more room for a ceremony, to do a ceremony.

JE: Oh. Okay.

DPZ: So those are one of the things they'll be applying for; a permit to do the four-year bear dance; to [word unclear] family gatherings, they call them gatherings, where the families get together who haven't seen each other for a long time [words unclear].

JE: Oh, that's neat.

DPZ: 'Cause it was closed because... There's a big site there. But hopefully it'll happen.

JE: That's great. And do you work with archeological folks for those sites?

DPZ: Yeah, I was an architect before. I was an architect for about five years. I don't have the degree but I have the experience to go and document sites, record sites. I identify a lot of, we call them artifacts.

JE: Right.

DPZ: They're cultural objects.

JE: And I know things are found on the forest fairly often, and do you get involved with that?

DPZ: Sometimes I do. We've had some human remains unearthed.

JE: Oh, really?

DPZ: Where they were doing a project. And I, that's when it's very important to get all the people involved. The Salinan [word unclear] Lodge, they're notified right away.

JE: Okay. And Tony, if they had... One thing they were talking about doing on the Mall was to have different kinds of engines the forest has used throughout its hundred years, so that people can see how they've progressed from the beginning until now. So is that something that you think you would be comfortable with? Sort of explaining what you work with now compared to, if you had another engine there that was from like the '50s.

AZ: Oh yeah. That would work. I mean, it's come a long way. It's not comparable any longer, what they used back then with what we use now.

JE: Is it different from, even when you started?

AZ: Yeah, it is. I mean, we were working with engines that were... I can't remember how old our engine was. Like from the '70s. This was in 1993. [JE laughs] So I mean, we've come a long way. The equipment we use now, to what I'm working with.

JE: Well even like your personal protective stuff. That's changed a lot. I mean from when people used to wear just jeans and...

AZ: [Words drowned out by off screen noise]

JE: Okay. I think that's really interesting, to see... A hundred years isn't that long, but just to see how it's progressed even in the last twenty years, I think is interesting. People wouldn't believe that it wasn't that long ago that hot shots were out there in jeans and a t-shirt and a shovel, compared to what you do now. Or what you did with the hot shot crew. Okay. And, let's see. And so with being in fire, do you think there's a problem, or would there be a problem on your end if you didn't [leave?] for a few weeks in July, which I know is prime fire time. Do you think they'd let you?

AZ: I'd have to talk to them.

JE: Okay. That's something you would be game for if they.

AZ; Uh huh.

JE: And you too Pete? 'Cause I know you do go to fires.

DPZ: I've never been to D.C. It'd be a good experience.

JE: [Laughs] Okay. Because it would be two weeks on the Mall ,doing the same thing over and over. I know [Words unclear] Okay. I think that's it unless there's anything else that you want to ad that I didn't ask. Tony? Anything else that you can think of? Okay, thanks so much for helping me. I'm sorry that I had to do J.P.'s separately, but I'll send them all in together.

END OF INTERVIEW