

American caucus for the State of Nevada Democratic Party.

“That’s what I’m hoping my podcast does, is remind people that we’re fucking human,” he said. “We’re all looking to be represented, and we’re all looking to be cared for, and we’re all looking to be heard, and we’re all looking to simply exist.”

In the first episode, “Ground Zero,” Melendez gives a synopsis of his upbringing, a general scene setting of Nevada and a broad overview of Native Americans in Northern Nevada. He sets his lofty intentions for the rest of the episodes. He promises the podcast will rub up against some tough conversations. He calls himself “a white person whisperer for Native People and a Native People whisperer for white people,” indicating his ability to decode topics for listeners coming from different backgrounds.

The whole first episode is a message of general housekeeping. It’s meant to get everyone listening on the same page. And then none of the episodes are like that again. If you’re going to give the show a try, I urge you to give it a three-episode test.

“I always knew I wanted to have a conversation about my community, but I realized there wasn’t an appropriate format,” he said during our own conversation over coffee. “Because when people get together, they’re not really having these conversations.”

I need to point out that the podcast isn’t really conversational, though. Melendez isn’t coming at his listeners like an indigenous peoples’ talking head. This isn’t Joe Rogan from the reservation. This podcast is a memoir. It’s ethnographic. Most importantly, it’s highly engaging storytelling drawn directly from Melendez’s life. It’s carefully written and concisely edited.

The stories are relatable and full of wisdom. It’s spoken in his real voice, sometimes flowing from super insightful discourse into his version of explicit street slang that comes from growing up tough in the neighborhoods of Hungry Valley and Reno.

“When I initially started the project, the people I thought would be listening would be younger tribal people,” he said. “I thought maybe certain aspects of my storyline would come through as a caring uncle or a big brother.”

“There’s so much truth and so much knowledge behind what he’s speaking,” said Darren Easterwood of Reno. “He’s practically become a historic figure not only for Nevada Indians, but for all Indians through his podcast

You can find the *Coffee with an Indian* podcast on Brian Melendez’s website www.lucentree.com or wherever you listen to podcasts.

and his representation of indigenous people.” Easterwood said he’s half Native American, and he grew up in Reno alongside Melendez’s younger brother, Tyler.

Melendez’s audience is broader than the Native American community. Being a white listener who grew up on the East Coast, I enjoyed the whole series. I learned from them, too. I feel like I get a glimpse of Reno in decades passed, and I get to hear what it was like growing up as Native American.

A couple of times each episode he will stop in the middle of a story to highlight an important generalization. For example, it’ll be like, “Lesson learned: listen to your intuition. Sometimes it’s a matter of life or death.”

Another good one was, “Lesson learned: If we’re going to save the planet, at the very least we’re going to need to outnumber the people that don’t give a shit.”

The episodes work somewhat chronologically from his schoolboy days through adolescence into adulthood. He really acquaints the listener with his family and friends, their nicknames and their influences. At times, he will stop an episode to address some of these people directly, even some who are deceased. He’ll send out a little sentiment—a message of love or gratitude, a shoutout.

“I’m not doing this from a place of judgment or self-righteousness,” he said. “I’m not a hero in my story, nor do I ever believe I’m a hero in my story. I try the best I can to highlight the antiheroes in my life that actually did shit in my life and who actually made a difference in my life. A lot of those people, for the better part of a story, were tarnished souls. They were crooks and criminals and murderers and gang members and drug addicts and bad parents and shitty brothers, and all these people had a part in my life.”

The stories run listeners through the gamut of emotions. They range from hilarious to downright tear-jerking. He told me he believes in healing through radical transparency, and that’s why he’s willing to put it all out here in a public space. He’s also very adamant to make clear that what he says is not a blanket generalization for all tribal people. His stories are his own. □



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