

Folk Tales Podcast

Episode 8: Learning Together

Audio Transcript

[00:00] **Intro (spoken by several consecutive voices over upbeat music):** Every summer, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival brings voices together, honoring the traditions we carry forward. This podcast is the un-hosted open mic for the Festival's tradition bearers, creatives, and storytellers. Culture isn't preserved in glass cases—it's lived, breathed, and passed forward. Here's the story.

[00:33] **Rebecca Fenton:** As young people come up and learn, they inhabit their traditions and, and make them their own.

[00:38] **Ava Delgado:** The youth is the future generation, and they're never too young to start learning a new craft or start inspiring people.

[00:45] **Whitley Carter:** It's really meant a lot to me, learning from my dad. It honestly has made the learning process so much more enjoyable.

[00:50] **Hta Thi Yu Moo:** The community come together because we don't see the weaving part more often as we used to back home.

[01:00] **Fenton:** Culture can't live if new people—young people—aren't learning it.

I am Rebecca Fenton, and I am curator of the *Learning Together* program area at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival.

With *Learning Together*, we were interested in exploring how young people learn about traditional skills, stories, and different forms of knowledge outside of the framework of school, lessons, classes, books. We were interested in working families, how they pass their skills on to their kids over time, and also community organizations, community settings, where skills, stories, and knowledge get passed on through meetings and community settings through, like, spending time together socially.

We had some families from Idaho who are working ranchers and also gear makers. Their livelihood is a traditional art form. They have a sense not only of their handcraft skills but also how everything they make underpins their daily lives and livelihood.

[02:09] **Chase Carter:** My name is Chase Carter. I'm from Pingree, Idaho, and we are fourth-generation cattle ranchers.

[02:14] **Whitley Carter:** My name is Whitley Carter. My family, we have five kids in our family, and I'm the oldest. I'm 17 years old. I'm about to turn 18. Just graduated high school.

[02:23] **Chase Carter:** And we live off the land. We, we make our living raising cattle and horses and also making tack for horses, saddles, head stalls, other kinds of small gear items.

Idaho was settled by pioneers in the mid- to late 1800s, and my great-grandfather was the first to move into our area and start cattle ranching. Where he lived is not very many miles from where we live currently today, and we've run our cows in a lot of the same places that he ran his cows.

[02:53] **Whitley Carter:** I feel really connected to where I'm at living because my family is all over in Idaho and we have been there for so long, and I honestly feel like my family before me has shaped so much of who I am today, and I hope that I can do the same for my own family.

[03:08] **Chase Carter:** My dad ordered a custom saddle when I was in fourth grade. I was ten years old, and he actually ordered it from the Severe family, which would be an uncle to Matt Severe and Anna Severe. I met Anna because she's a saddle maker, and our kids are kind of involved in some of the same activities, but they live about two hours away from us. Our paths don't cross often, but they have crossed, and we've gotten to know them more here through the Folklife Festival than anything else.

[03:32] **Anna Severe:** It was really neat for our family to go there, for the kids to see that there's such a bigger world out there than what we are in and appreciate other cultures too, you know?

My name's Anna Severe, and I make saddles and help my husband on the ranch with the cattle and the horses.

It's been really rewarding to be together as a family, and the kids enjoy it, and I get to be around them. All my kids are under 18, so we haven't quite got where they know more than mom and dad yet.

[04:02] **Chase Carter:** My kids, they would come in the saddle shop ever since they were young. But it was very common for my kids to dig in the scrap pile and get some leather out and start, you know, pounding on it, tooling it. They come to understand the importance of those tack items and want to build their own.

[04:16] **Severe:** I think it's important to carry the tradition on. For one thing, what we do is to try to be as self-reliant as possible.

[04:24] **Whitley Carter:** We've all been in this house shop since we were little, and we would go to the scrap bin and just take our own pieces out and kind of do whatever we want with them, and that's kind of developed a love for leather and to work with them and just how alive leather is.

[04:37] **Severe:** My oldest daughter really enjoys engraving silver and making things out of metal. My son, Skeeter—he has been braiding. Then, Jaycee does the bead work, and then my youngest, Quincy, he's been doing the leather work with me.

[04:52] **Chase Carter:** The ranching industry in Idaho relies on horses and saddles to get our work done. A lot of cowboys—to them, you know, their saddle is a way they can express their identity in a way that, maybe, you know, someone in the city might do through a souped-up car or a lowrider car. That's your style, your image, and, you know, every cowboy, they want their saddle done a little bit different.

[05:12] **Severe:** The first thing I made was a pair of chaps, and I made them with my dad, and so that just kind of started me with the leather work. I mean, we grew up in a ranching family, and so this is what we did. The horses and cows was something that I, I just—it was my thing. I loved it.

[05:27] **Chase Carter:** My parents didn't do saddle work or anything like that, but every rancher's got some leather tools just to do small maintenance and repairs on tack, and I became interested in those at a young age. And as I grew up, they tried to foster that interest, and they would help me with smaller projects.

[05:45] **Whitley Carter:** I built my first saddle just a year ago, and I loved it so much, and I am gonna keep continuing with it. I saw my brother do it, so I decided to go and do one myself, and it was a really good experience.

[05:56] **Chase Carter:** Some of my favorite memories working with my kids individually is to see the confidence rise as they work their way through the project. You know, a saddle's a big project; in any big project, you have to understand that you're gonna work on bits and pieces, and you might not see their integration until further down the road. It's good to see how their confidence and their appreciation for saddles in general and for the craft increases the longer they're a part of it.

[06:22] **Whitley Carter:** I remember one day that I was really frustrated in the saddle shop, and I was not seeing the progress that I wanted to, and I felt really down on myself. And dad

came in, and he was like, “Whitley, good things take time.” And he’s like, “The longer that you take on this saddle, it doesn’t matter. It’s not gonna matter in 20 years.” He said, “You’re gonna remember this, and you’re gonna remember all the growth that happened in this time period.”

[06:47] **Chase Carter:** If there’s one thing that I want my kids to learn from the ranch industry and learn to make saddles, it’s how to learn. No matter what path they choose in life, if they can learn how to learn, they’ll have the tools to be successful.

[07:10] **Fenton:** We invited a family of Mexican American luthiers, the Delgados, who are based in Nashville, Tennessee. They make stringed instruments, including guitars and lots of instruments used in mariachi and other Latin American music traditions. This is a fourth-generation family skill that they brought to share with us.

[07:27] **Manuel Delgado:** I got started working in the shop from a very young age, just being around there. My dad would let us hang around and tinker. Started playing guitar when I was five, repairing them when I was seven, and then I built my first guitar when I was twelve.

My name is Manuel Delgado. The Delgado family business started back in 1928 with my grandfather and my great-uncle in Torreón, Mexico.

They moved the business in the ‘30s to Juarez, right on the other side of El Paso, Texas, then went on to Los Angeles, moved the business there in 1948. I’m first generation, born in the United States in Los Angeles. From there, I brought it to Nashville twenty years ago. It was a chance for me to show what I was capable of doing. So, for Ava and Lila, it’s really important for me to see that they’re getting an opportunity to showcase what they’re doing.

[08:11] **Ava Delgado:** My name is Ava Delgado. Mostly, my role in the business currently is a lot of doing repairs, a lot of social media presence, inventory, stuff like that. I did get to do all the design and all the planning when I made my own instrument when I was nine with some of the guidance from my dad.

[08:28] **Manuel Delgado:** Ava started with me in the shop at three. We did everything together from the time she was born, so she would hang out in the shop with me. And I never felt like wanting to be like, “Oh, she’s too small for that. Oh, she’s too little for that.” Lila came in, same thing. Giving them the same kind of freedom that I had when I was a kid is basically what I was doing.

[08:49] **Ava Delgado:** Me and my sister are actually really close. We love working together. We’re both really creative, so I feel like we play off each other’s strengths. I’m more

interested in the math and the physics aspects of the instrument, and she really loves to be creative and does design.

[09:03] **Manuel Delgado:** The girls learn by doing. After they were able to be around the shop, they'd get scraps of wood and build stuff and things that they would just glue together. When we came to actually building their instrument, what we would do is, everything we would do, we would talk through it first, and then I would have them do it by themselves without me walking through it.

Working with young people can be challenging, and you have to have a lot of patience. And not every child is the same. And the patience comes from letting them know that they're gonna have some freedom in doing whatever it is that they do.

[09:34] **Ava Delgado:** The art of making something by hand, it instills in you a feeling like no other thing does when you are making something that is truly your own. So, to be able to share that feeling with a family member or anyone really brings you closer together by sharing that feeling.

We kind of honor my great-grandfather and my grandfather's memory by continuing to do the craft in an old-world way by doing it the way that they would've wanted. When we put our name and our brand on an instrument, we can be proud to send it off knowing that not just our name but that their name is on that instrument.

[10:05] **Manuel Delgado:** I tell my daughters this: it's like, you're not just representing yourselves, you're representing your family name, you're representing the sacrifices made by your mom and I, your grandparents, great-grandparents.

Everybody thinks, "Oh, you're a Mexican luthier. You make mariachi instruments." No, we make electric guitars that are played by celebrities. We work on acoustic guitars, build steel string—we do all these things, and we have A-list artists. We're not just in a box. There's more to us in terms of who we are as a culture, as a person, what our craft is.

[10:35] **Ava Delgado:** We really pride ourselves on the family aspect of our business. We treat all our customers like family, and we're a family business, and it's really exciting for me to be a part of that.

[10:45] **Manuel Delgado:** I try to teach the girls—like, we want them to fail, you know, meaning that we want to know that they're taking risks where they might fail. We don't want them to give up. We want them to keep going, but if you never try, then you're already failed because you've never even given yourself an opportunity to try to learn something new.

[11:03] **Ava Delgado:** I think you are never too old to start learning something new as long as you have the patience to stick with that craft. It's really important for younger generations to remember how people used to do it, how my grandfather used to do it, and keep that old-world tradition alive.

[11:30] **Fenton:** We had a muralist from Guatemala, Evelyn Morán Cojoc, who's an accomplished artist and also really avid teacher, so that's kinda what she brought to the program. Evelyn has done a number of community-based projects—her public art projects—and she does a lot of workshops and teaching in Guatemala.

[11:48] **(Evelyn Morán Cojoc speaking in Spanish)**

[11:56] **Morán Cojoc (through translator):** In the process of the workshop, I am also learning with them because I relive those moments when one is young and has dreams.

Art makes human beings more sensitive. So, without art as human beings, we wouldn't exist. A work of art, I've always said, needs to speak. You have to give a message in the same way the notes of the marimba make us dance. Similarly, paintings need to have music.

[12:30] **Fenton:** One thing we were excited about in bringing her to the Festival is that there is an important community of Mayan and Guatemalan immigrants and their descendants in the greater Washington, D.C., area. So, we knew that her art would have a particular resonance to this audience.

We were able to bring some students, local students from Virginia and Maryland, to work with Evelyn over several days. So, they conducted some private workshops and developed some ideas together. Visitors who watched Evelyn's painting develop saw these young men working super hard to help complete this very large mural during just the six days of the Festival.

[13:11] **Morán Cojoc (through translator):** For me, this is a gift from life because the Smithsonian invited me to work with youth who are from my own roots and who are from my town.

[13:20] **(Selvin Vail Diaz speaking in Spanish)**

[13:26] **Vail Diaz (through translator):** I was born in Guatemala. I came here to the United States last year in 2024. I'm in school, and I'm almost quite literally new to this country.

For me, painting is not just painting. For me, painting is expressing yourself, having that passion, observing very well every detail, getting close to every detail, having love towards the painting, connecting yourself with the painting. And I paint with my fingers. I also paint with a brush, but for me, with my hand, it's to feel every part of the painting, expressing myself in the painting, and that's why I use my hand.

[14:12] **Morán Cojoc (through translator):** What the Smithsonian is promoting so that the youth don't forget about their country, about their roots? It's very important because it grounds us to the earth.

[14:28] **Vail Diaz (through translator):** I am extremely proud of what I am doing because I am representing who I am. I'm representing my town. I'm representing my roots. I'm representing my grandparents. That is something that I am passionate about.

In this era and in this time, there are many young people who are forgetting who they are. There are many young people who are forgetting their roots. There's an evolution, you could say, but I feel that they shouldn't forget who they are, where they come from. For me, I will never forget where I come from.

[15:19] **Fenton:** We worked with some community organizations that do a lot of different services for their people, but that includes arts-based mentorship opportunities.

So, the Karen Weaving Circle, which is a refugee organization from Minnesota in which senior weavers and youth weavers spend time together on a weekly basis developing their skills and staying connected to their community and heritage through the medium of weaving.

[15:44] **Hta Thi Yu Moo:** The Karen weaving started back in 2008 with a group of women. They come here in—starting in 2005. Our current weavers, they are very talented.

My name is Hta Thi, and I am weaving coordinator. I start work in Karen Organization of Minnesota at 2010 as a youth coordinator, so I worked with the refugee. I myself, a refugee. I came here at 2007.

The weaving program is started by a group of weavers. They came here with no knowledge or English. It's like they were a newborn in a new place. We have a space for them to learn how to weave, and also we provide a summer program for the youth to learn our Karen traditional weaving.

[16:35] **Fenton:** The Karen Weaving Circle is a program of the Karen Organization of Minnesota, which is a social services organization for a refugee community of Karen and other refugees from Burma, Myanmar, who have been resettled in Minnesota where they are—one of the largest populations of Karen people in the United States is in the St. Paul and Minneapolis area.

So, they do a lot of different things, practical things, to meet the needs of their community. And the weaving circle was established to meet a need, which is a need to carry on tradition and to connect with one another.

[17:13] **Hta Thi Yu Moo:** So here, our community, when we do summer program, the master weavers are their instructors, and when the youth are attending the summer program, they're connected to the elder, you know, they come, they sharing. The youth also learn the, the language.

[17:29] **Fenton:** One of their senior weavers learned to weave in the United States as a resettled refugee, so it wasn't something that she had done, uh, growing up in their homeland, but it was something that she perceived as giving her a way to be connected. This is Rosie, one of their senior weavers, and so she passes that on in a very overt way to the young people that it's not only like a skill or a craft that has a history but it's something that involves them with each other in their present. Their group really illustrates how this teaching or transmission has benefits both for the teachers and for the youth to bind them together through this artistic tradition.

I also just am a textile lover, and I'm fascinated by their work. It's so beautiful and rich. There's a lot of stories. There's a lot that one can understand about Karen people, culture, and history through the medium of these traditional textiles.

[18:26] **Hta Thi Yu Moo:** They're learning each other's skill because they're from different regions. There's different technique of weaving too. So, they come together. They share each other's knowledge of weaving.

[18:35] **Fenton:** They use mainly cotton threads in a lot of different colors. And on a backstrap loom, your body is actually part of the equipment, so the loom is braced around your back and attached to a wall or a post or this brace that I'm describing. You're seated on the floor. You have the weaving wrapped around you that provides the tension that holds it in place. And then there are a host of traditional patterns from relatively simple to super intricate and complex that they're doing all totally by hand.

There's also meanings associated with colors and pattern. Certain types of colors and patterns that women wear or that men wear or that are used at certain times of life or rites

of passage. So, that kind of cultural discussion and education is attached to learning the skills and the patterns of the weaving itself.

[19:27] **Hta Thi Yu Moo:** There's like a pink textile. It's like a diamond.

But people for different regions has different meaning. So, the diamond for her regions, for Rosie regions, she said it's met spider web, and the weavers learn from the spider because the spider, you know—they're making the web; they keep making until it's done. So, as the woman, they're look up to the spiders. They keep weaving till the products are complete and never finish or never give up. Keep doing till you finish your project.

[20:01] **Fenton:** I think that, for people who have been displaced in their homeland multiple times, and people who are very deliberately building up their community as resettled refugees in the United States, the attachment to their special holidays, traditional clothing, and all the associated traditions and rituals that go along with it—those things don't keep going just by default. It takes a lot of human effort, um, and deliberate organization to keep them healthy and sustain these traditions in a new place.

[20:35] **Hta Thi Yu Moo:** I see the youth, you know. I myself a youth; I'm learning, and I learn a lot from them and the Karen women, you know, our culture perspective, cooking, the way we talk, the way we dress. So, I learn a lot from them, and I also share this to my next generation. They're my good example. So, I, uh, one day I'll be a good example for the next generation.

[21:15] **Fenton:** I was so impressed by the kids. The young people, like how hard they work. What they do is not easy.

[21:22] **Ava Delgado:** It doesn't really feel like work. This is just something that we all do together as a family, and we're all really passionate about.

[21:27] **Fenton:** And the level of commitment that they have. Even as some of them were really young kids under sixteen, some of them have a sense that they may do this as their career long term.

[21:38] **Whitley Carter:** I definitely wanna stick with these crafts. It's a way I can sustain myself throughout the rest of my life.

[21:43] **Fenton:** They definitely embody how important it is to keep their traditions alive, to be able to share about them, that it connects them to their past and that they want to make it part of their future. The future of culture is in good hands with them.

[22:13] **Shauri Thacker:** *Folk Tales: Youth and the Future of Culture* is a production of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Ella Peters produced this episode.

It takes a family to keep some traditions going, just like it takes countless hands to raise and run a festival. For our season finale, we'll meet some of the people who keep our festival running smoothly from start to finish.