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**Indigenous Insights: An Evaluation Podcast
Season 1 Episode 17: Caroline Davis**

<https://gladysrowe.com/s01e17-Indigenous-insights-caroline-davis/>

July 31, 2023

Gladys Rowe ([00:04](#)):

Tansi. Greetings. Welcome to Indigenous Insights. I'm your host, Gladys Rowe, and I'm so grateful you are here. Each episode I sit in conversation with Indigenous evaluation practitioners, leaders, researchers, and scholars who are working in, thinking about, and supporting Indigenous evaluation, to share the learning they've experienced along the way. My hope is that these episodes allow you to reflect on how to design, implement, learn from, and support evaluation by with and for Indigenous families, communities, organizations, and nations. Join me and my guests as we open up our evaluation bundles to share what we've gathered in our journeys and bring them together into this space. I hope in these stories you will come to understand how we can collectively contribute to de-colonial futures and strengthen Indigenous resurgence.

I am so excited to be sharing space today with Caroline Davis, who is Diné or Navajo, originally from the Navajo Nation in Arizona. Born and raised on the reservation, she has firsthand knowledge that drove her passion to work in the field of public health. Tailoring her career specifically to Indigenous populations, she found her niche in evaluation work and considers herself an advocate for the inclusion of Indigenous research and evaluation methods in any work with all communities, but specifically Indigenous communities. She currently lives in Southern New Mexico with her husband and three children and works as a research director for an evaluation consulting group. Welcome, I'm so glad to have you here with me today.

Caroline ([01:45](#)):

Thank you. I'm so glad to be here as well.

Gladys ([01:48](#)):

Wonderful. I'm wondering if there's any other way that you'd like to introduce yourself into the space before we get our conversation started?



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Caroline ([01:58](#)):

Yeah. I just wanted to kind of just do my traditional Navajo introduction, Yá'át'ée'h Caroline Davis yinishyé, To'naanezdizi déé naashá. Tahnéészahnii nishí, German dine'e' bashishchiin dóó Tachiinii dashicheii, Irish dine'e' dashinalí. Ákót'éego diné asdzáán nishí, like many other <laugh> tribes, you know, we make those connections with who are our family through our clan. So I just wanted to add that first.

Gladys ([02:33](#)):

Yes, thank you. So important to show up as our whole selves in this space. So I'd love to start off just hearing a little bit about how everyone got into this space of evaluation. So I'm wondering if you can share a little bit about the evaluation journey that got you to where you are here today.

Caroline ([02:55](#)):

Sure. Well, I graduated from New Mexico State University about 10 years ago, 10 years ago and a couple months. And I had chosen that university. They had a lot of professors who specialized in their experience working with tribes, rural health, border health. And for the first couple years of my career after I had graduated, I had worked for a public housing program and then I was working for an urban Indian health center in Arizona and I was working in their health promotion department and doing a lot of kind of the direct service work. I found that that wasn't really – it didn't really feel like the best fit for me. It just wasn't lining up with what I felt like I wanted to do. And after I'd been there a while, they had gotten a new project through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and one of the positions was for a project evaluator.

I applied for the position, they hired me, allowed me to transfer to that. And I worked on that project for a couple of years, and I loved the work that I did there. And I feel like that was the perfect position because it was evaluating the system of care for Native American children. So it was already in this space of looking specifically at issues that were impacting Native American children and that I was able to use a lot of different approaches in that evaluation that we were doing. And it wasn't what you think of when people talk about, you know, the common Western thinking about what evaluation is and how that would be done. I'm sure that there would've been a completely different approach, had I had a lot more experience in a lot of those Western evaluation methods and a lot of those inquiry methods, being a lot more familiar with those, I might have approached it differently. But because I had more of my experience in working directly with the community and doing a lot more of the planning and implementation piece, that I approached it differently.

And in that position as well, we had a training and technical assistance providers and I just, I thought that that was really cool. I was like, that's what I eventually want to do. I really enjoy this work, and I've come across communities that don't have that experience, don't have that expertise in being able to carry out evaluation on their projects, and I would like to be able to do that to help other communities to increase that capacity so that they're able to do it themselves.



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So I worked for a community health center for a few more years after that. And then I did eventually kind of break into that training and technical assistance world, doing training and technical assistance on evaluation. And it's been a process getting to this point where I feel like I have this strong understanding of what Indigenous evaluation, Indigenous research is.

One of the things that I feel like really solidified my understanding of that – there was the University of Colorado, the Tribal Early Childhood Research Center. They did this series of learning circles and it was a lot of different professionals who were in that space of doing research and evaluation with tribal programs. It was specifically focused on early childhood programming, but it applies to everything else. So it was just a group of professionals being able to talk about, you know, the work that they do. There was a few different readings that we had and we discussed those. I think for a while, the idea of what Indigenous evaluation was for me was kind of this nebulous concept. And I was trying to look at it probably the same way that a lot of people try to understand it, that they want Indigenous evaluation to be kind of this nicely packaged set of tools that they can use when working with Indigenous communities.

And you know, that's not what it is. There are definitely those tools that align with what Indigenous evaluation and Indigenous research methods are and those approaches that align with it. But you know, it should be thought of more on the level of maybe an ecosystem, that it's from this start to finish and it's involved in every part of it. But so I've been doing that training and technical assistance work for a while and I wanted to get back into doing more of the, I guess what you might say, direct work. And that's where I found myself today, working for an organization that provides those external evaluation services. And a lot of my role, which I initially felt – and this wasn't just specifically in my current one, but over the span of my career – was that it was a role that I kind of initially pushed against because it was this thinking of, I don't want to be in this space having to teach other people about how to do evaluation with Indigenous communities. And at the time, thinking of it more as similar along those lines of when they do cultural competency trainings and I'm like, that's not what I want to do. And as I got a stronger understanding of what Indigenous evaluation is, it made that piece easier because it was more about increasing their capacity to be able to do work that's going to be helpful to these communities, which is kind of what the big picture is in the work that I do.

Gladys ([10:27](#)):

Thank you for sharing how you came into this space and it sounds like quite the journey, in learning about what calls to you and how you want to show up and the gifts that you bring into the space of Indigenous evaluation. I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit more about you: you shared in your journey how you wanted to really learn more about showing up as that training and technical assistance provider and the work that you did with the Tribal Early Childhood Research Center. Can you tell me more about how did you learn? and what did you learn? Like what are the important things that you took away from that learning about what it means to do Indigenous evaluation?

Caroline ([11:14](#)):



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I think that I probably had a lot of that growth in my level of understanding. And then also, you know, confidence in myself in my own work when I was working for this organization that provided training and technical assistance to tribal communities who were receiving home visiting funding. And there was a fairly heavy evaluation component, not just for looking at the outcomes of the programs, but also continuous quality improvement that they were required to do. They were also required to participate in a cross-site study. And I feel like I grew a lot of that experience, fortunate to have coworkers who were more in that space of being either open to the idea of Indigenous evaluation or already had some of that experience, maybe not even specifically an Indigenous evaluation, but a lot of the approaches that do really align really well, you know, with what it is when we talk about what Indigenous evaluation is. So I had a lot of people to learn from there. And the community, when you talk about tribal early childhood research and evaluation, is a pretty robust one. And I got to meet a lot of different people. There's a lot of different organizations. There was a few different universities that were involved in various steps of, you know, all these different evaluation research initiatives that were going on. And as I mentioned, the learning circles that I participated in, which really solidified that understanding.

I had been trying to understand what Indigenous evaluation was, and it was this, you know, I know what it is, but if somebody asked me to explain what Indigenous evaluation is, I don't think that I could. But after these learning circles and being able to talk through taking these little pieces and saying, you know, this is something that I feel like is part of Indigenous evaluation. And then there's this other thing that's over here that's part of Indigenous evaluation and kind of putting all of those things together and finally getting this understanding that Indigenous evaluation is not about inquiry methods, or that's a small piece of it. And it's, I guess in very basic terms, finally seeing Indigenous evaluation at the core of what that is, is that it's putting Indigenous people and Indigenous values first.

And that is something that needs to be woven into everything that you do with those evaluation approaches. But then it also goes beyond evaluation, right? Because those are, it's apart from the beginning where you're talking about the life cycle of what happens when a tribal community or a tribal organization applies for federal funding. That there's that beginning piece even before you apply for any of that funding, that it's like, what are we looking at? And that's evaluation. Figuring out what it is that you need, what the community is interested in doing. And then even some of those more technical pieces of actually writing the application, that that needs to have that community input level there as well. And then, you know, through the life of the project, once it gets funded, they go – you know, some of those evaluation pieces are more obvious there, but that idea that Indigenous people and their values need to be the core of everything that you're doing.

And I really got a sense for that in that position that I had, and providing the training and technical assistance to these home visiting programs, because a lot of those programs also had a very heavy cultural component. And I was fortunate in that way as well because a lot of federal funding have these really prescriptive, this is what you're allowed to do. And this particular type of funding had more freedom for these tribal communities to kind of figure out, how are we



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going to include our culture and the services that we're providing? And then looking at, okay, how are we going to evaluate that? Because, you know, there is this requirement to – what is the way that they word it? – contribute to a body of knowledge, that that is just a requirement that they have to participate in when they receive this funding.

So it's like, well we want to be able to capture what it is that you're doing, everything. Not just following, you know, the step-by-step things that are included in these pre-created curricula that are used for home visiting programs, but also some of those pieces that weren't considered the term evidence-based because they've just never been evaluated in any way. So it allowed for a lot more this wider range of how are these things going to be evaluated and what are the things that can be evaluated, specifically with the continuous quality improvement piece, getting the programs, getting program participants all involved in these evaluation pieces of the work. So that was really interesting and I feel like I was really fortunate in that way to be starting out with a training and technical assistance role where I had a lot more of that freedom to be able to get an understanding of what Indigenous evaluation is.

Gladys ([18:37](#)):

Yeah, that sounds like a really exciting space, considering, like you shared, a lot of the federal granting can be so prescriptive and restrictive in even the design of the program that's being funded. So the home visiting space sounds like it was a beautiful opportunity to really engage in that community knowledge. And not only the program development but also delivery and also the evaluation space, and thinking about whose voice and whose priorities are setting the course for the evaluation right from the beginning. So you shared, you know – and I like this point – the idea that Indigenous evaluation is so much more than simply the methods of inquiry. Like it's more than a sharing circle here and there. It really is about that community-grounded process. And you share that you also notice that there are approaches that align with Indigenous evaluation that you were able to incorporate. So I'm wondering if you can share, in your experience in implementing Indigenous evaluation, what could this look like based on what you've done? So if you have an example of an approach that you've used or could walk us through kind of a story from the work that you've done.

Caroline ([20:02](#)):

You know, one of the things that I like to come back to when I am sharing some of, you know, what are some of the alternative ways – well, I don't know if alternative is the right word, but I guess alternative to western methodologies – and thinking of evaluation is actually in that first role that I had as a project evaluator. And you know, as I mentioned before, because I didn't have that kind of exclusive background in doing research and evaluation, that the approach that I took was a much different one. And you know, one of the things that we had to evaluate the current state of this system of care for Native American children, specifically for mental health services, and thinking about what were some ways that we could look at that. And one of the things that we ended up doing was having like a fictitious patient that we went through the process of, you know, from the point of entry into the system, whether it was from the hospital because they



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were admitted because of self-harm or if it was something that happened through their school, that they were given a referral for whatever that point of entry is. And we looked at it from a couple of different points of entry into that system and what that would look like on an individual level, somebody moving through. And it was really interesting to be able to see where were those gaps in services, where were those times when there just wasn't something there. And it wasn't just a gap, it was like something that just was like non-existent, to see where there was a lot of red tape that was encountered and, you know, just a lot of those different barriers. And I guess that you could think of that more as like a qualitative method in collecting that data. You know, some people might call that an ethnography approach because you're looking at this specific situation, but it was more helpful. I feel like it was more helpful than just being able to track down the numbers of, okay, this is the number of referrals that were provided at this school, and this is the number of children who actually had some type of follow-up service.

Or, you know, a lot of those times those numbers are easy, they might be easy to report on, but it doesn't say a whole lot about what the actual situation is, to give those data and then to say, these are some of the potential barriers, versus saying, in the situation of this 13 year old patient who was admitted to a hospital because they had done some type of self-harm to themselves and getting to the point where they were receiving regular care through seeing a counselor or a psychiatrist, whatever the case might have been, to tell that story from beginning to end. And not only from that point of entry but painting this picture of what this individual's life is like. And we did this also through interviews that we did with individuals to really get an understanding, a more personalized story of what were those things prior to their child being introduced to this system, this mental healthcare system.

And that's just, it's a lot stronger to be able to articulate that data, what the findings are in that way. You know, I feel like that's something that's missing from the Western methods that we use, that a lot of the time the gauge for what's considered a quality research study, a quality evaluation is whether or not it's at this level that can be published. I like to say that like Western methods are finally catching up to Indigenous evaluation methods because there's definitely a lot more use of mixed methods in some of those inquiry methods that we use, that they really emphasize mixed methods now. And you know, that's something that has always been true for Indigenous evaluation. It's like these aren't numbers, these are people, and being able to have data that shows that – and when I say data, not specifically numbers, but any of the information that's collected – that those are things that are catching up, you know, using a lot more of like the community engaged approaches to – it used to be called, well, I think a lot of people still use the term community participatory approaches. A while back I heard the term community engaged and I was like, that's a better term because I feel like, participatory, it's like you could ask some people a few questions and say, oh yeah, we allowed the community to participate in this project, this evaluation initiative, whatever the case might be. But to say, community engaged, the connotation there is that it's a lot more involvement and not just saying, you could survey a community really quick and call that a community participatory approach to planning, but that community engaged piece involves them at a much deeper level and across a longer span of time that they're able to be engaged and contribute to the planning, the implementation, the evaluation



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of the project. So those are just some of the examples of how that has kind of met with what some of those inquiry methods are that align with Indigenous evaluation.

Gladys ([27:15](#)):

Yeah. Thank you. There's so many pieces there that you touched on that are important that I'm seeing for sure. So thinking about the opportunity to share the story of the experience through this patient story that you outlined there really gets to the depth of context of an experience within the healthcare system, right? And so much of the important aspects of sharing within the evaluation is about understanding the nuances and the complexity of the context within which Indigenous peoples are interacting with those systems and telling the story of not only that individual, but also like you shared the gaps and barriers and entry points and interactions within that system. I think that's such an important part of evaluation and really gets to some of the opportunities that are out there in terms of evaluators within advocacy spaces or evaluators as advocates. And I'm wondering if you had any sharing around that idea of being able to be an advocate using this evaluation space in your experience?

Caroline ([28:31](#)):

Yeah, I definitely consider that something that I expect to do in any of the positions that I've held more recently. You know, because I intentionally continue to work with Indigenous communities and that's the space that I want to be in. But because there's this issue of a lot of these huge consulting firms that have thousands of employees and they have entire teams that are dedicated to putting in those bids to be able to win these training and technical assistance contracts. And then they get it and then they outsource the piece: well, we don't really have anybody in-house who has this experience in working with tribal communities, so we're going to go find another organization who has that expertise. It's very, I don't know, I think it's a little odd and that there probably are some of these smaller organizations that are really poised to be in a better place to be able to provide more quality training and technical assistance. But, you know, they don't have the resources to compete with these huge consulting firms that often win these contracts. So a lot of the time playing that advocate piece, because I've worked for those smaller organizations that these larger ones will subcontract with, because we do have the experience in working with tribal communities. So really being the voice and looking at myself as, I'm in this perfect position between the tribal communities and the federal government and doing what I can to advocate for what's going to be most helpful, most beneficial for these tribal communities. That I'm not looking at it from this viewpoint of, oh, I'm here to make sure that you're meeting these requirements for the federal government and your funding. But to say, these are the requirements, but I'm going to work with you to figure out what's going to work best for you.

You know, specifically with evaluation, really pushing this idea with them of evaluation: it's not research, and it should be for your community. It needs to be something that's going to be helpful for you. And that's often where I start when consulting with any of the tribal communities that I've worked with, just asking the question, what do you want to know? What is going to be helpful for you to know, helpful for your community to know? And I think that that's an



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approach that, like I said, Western evaluation approaches are kind of catching up to that idea. I've seen a lot of these evaluation consulting firms that kind of push this, oh, we really focus on usability and utility and we really focus on the community and they really market it like it's this novel concept, that they're being really progressive and forward thinking, when Indigenous evaluation has already been there and they're just starting to catch up to that. But, yeah, that advocate role is just viewing myself as I am an advocate for these tribal communities and I happen to be in this space where I have the opportunity. And I think that people in those roles, you know, they should; you're not advocating for the federal government. They don't need that. They have enough of that going on, on their own, that it needs to be advocating for these tribal communities to make sure that things are beneficial for them.

Gladys ([32:56](#)):

Amazing. There's so many elements there in thinking about power and resource allocation and the way that we can reframe who has the power within evaluation. And this – like you said, it's not a new concept for Indigenous communities; this utilization focused evaluation is just reality for Indigenous communities. You know, wanting to create something that is meaningful for a community is in alignment with so many values across many different Indigenous nations. So it's not new. This isn't something that is innovative <laugh> within evaluation itself. I'm wondering what else in your time in this work, thinking about what is needed to strengthen the field of Indigenous evaluation, what are some of the opportunities that you're noticing?

Caroline ([33:53](#)):

I think one of the primary areas that I've seen, and I even experienced this personally, that education piece, you know, when we talk about education, a lot of the time we're talking about that formal education that happens in an academic space or even some of those slightly less formal, that takes the, you know, with the things that you get continuing education for. But those things, they all have – they're organized around specific learning goals and limit, in a way, who's able to participate in those. But really a lot of the knowledge that I've gained outside of actually doing the actual work and being in that space doing that work is a lot more of the kind of non-formal or even informal education. Like, you know, the learning circles that I mentioned before, that it was less structured. You know, it doesn't follow this really specific syllabus. It was, here's what we're going to be reading prior to our next discussion. And a lot of the times we would start off these meetings discussing what we thought about the reading for that week and what we got out of it. But the majority of the time that we talked, it was how some concept in that reading applied to the work that we do, or just something that made us think about something in a different way, but then also a lot more of that kind of informal education, which the majority of that took place. And actually doing the work, being fortunate enough to have people who were already in this space who are advocating for Indigenous evaluation, who are already approaching evaluation in this way of, this is something that's for the community.

And when you're working with Indigenous communities, how you're approaching that, that it's a lot of different components. You know, looking at it from a Western viewpoint that you could



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say it involves like that cultural sensitivity piece, that it involves using inquiry methods that involve qualitative data and not just the quantitative data, that it involves using approaches such as community-based participatory approaches, you know, putting a lot of those Western terms on it, that it involves a lot of different things. And I actually had read something recently about, you know, what needs to be changed in evaluator education in general, not just specific to Indigenous evaluation, but again, like I say, when they're talking about what has been missing, it's like, oh, you know, the Western thinking is kind of finally catching up with what Indigenous evaluation is already based in.

So like those things of finally realizing, oh, a lot of what we teach about evaluation in those formal settings, they're driven by individuals who have those academic appointments. They're often white men and white women with PhD level education. They have these resources, the time, the money to be able to do these complex studies and have really pushed that idea, that in order to consider something is quality, is whether or not it's publishable. And changing the way that we look at that, when we're talking about what should education for evaluators look like moving forward, that it really does, they're saying, you know, it goes beyond inquiry methods, and those things beyond inquiry methods should be taught as a piece of evaluator education. But, you know, a lot of those other things that I talked about and that it should be this much more comprehensive kind of ecosystem way of looking at something, which again, Indigenous evaluation has always been there.

It's something that, I think another term that's often used in Western methods is that person-centered approach, which also, you know, aligns with what Indigenous evaluation is, that we're not looking at something that exists inside a vacuum. We're talking about people, and it's not going to ever be this nicely packaged thing because everybody has different experiences, different places that they're coming from, different points in their life that they're starting from with whatever it might be that you're evaluating at the time. So I think that education piece is something that definitely needs that focus on. And if these spaces had considered, imagine that they had looked at these Indigenous evaluation methods and values, that they would've said, oh, you know, this is like a perfect framework that already exists over here, instead of going through this whole figuring it out like piece by piece, oh, we need to introduce a little bit more of this, and, oh, and then we have, mixed methods is something that we need to use. Oh, person-centered approaches is something that we need to use. And kind of piecing this together as they go along.

And it feels like this really long way around to being able to say, you know, the purpose of evaluation is that it needs to be focused on the individual, focused on the community that it's meant to help. And talking about the usability and utility pieces and stepping away from that idea that evaluation and research needs to be grounded in a lot of those academic approaches. And I actually come up a lot on that in my current role, that there's this idea that, from the evaluator perspective, well, I know I know better, I know the evaluation methods, so I know better on how to evaluate this program. And I've unfortunately seen this dynamic that happens where some of these tribal communities really rely on their evaluator to tell them what to do and when they're not coming from, even that, the idea that that's not something that I would consider a value of Indigenous evaluation.



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And that's why, you know, that's so important that that's something that needs to be included in the education piece. Even if we're not saying, even if we're not calling it Indigenous evaluation methods, to really push and include those pieces that are not just the inquiry methods, that these are, you know, you need to think about the usability and utility of what you're doing when you're doing evaluation work with these communities. And one of the things that I also always say is that I'm not an expert when I meet with these communities. You know, I'm not an expert. I am somebody who has a set of tools that maybe you don't yet, but you are the experts on your community. You are the experts on what you need to know. And I am here as somebody who's just going to use the tools that I have to be able to help you get there.

Gladys ([42:51](#)):

Absolutely. So many pieces there, on the opportunity for education and capacity building for evaluators, for Indigenous evaluators, and also for community, for tribal communities, and thinking about what can they expect? how might they ensure their priorities are addressed? And then what could that collective evaluation relationship look like when it's really truly grounded in tribal or nation worldviews and values, and thinking about how education might shift to be more accessible and congruent with those worldviews. So we are coming to the end of our time together. We've certainly, you've shared so much in this conversation so far, but I wanted to make sure, is there anything else that you'd like to share, that you would like to put out into this space as we wrap up our time together?

Caroline ([43:49](#)):

One of the things that I often think is, what I would like to see change specifically in the training and technical assistance work that I do and that space that I work in. Kind of going back to what I was saying about the really big consulting firms that often win a lot of these is to see that change on the federal level to be able to evaluate that a little bit better. You know, that this should be for tribal communities and it's about more than just winning the contract, or being able to see more of that support so that some of these smaller organizations are winning those contracts, or even some of these larger firms being able to have the people on staff, that would be something that would be really great to be able to see that change.

And then also that there are definitely a lot more programs that are focused on Indigenous health in various different areas, whether it's like the tribal colleges that are having those programs or some of the universities that are closely located to tribal nations, that they have those programs that are focused on working with Indigenous communities in a number of different areas that, you know, evaluation, I know a lot of people <laugh> in evaluation and research, but like, it's a really dynamic field to be in, and I would love to be able to see more Indigenous people in that space.

Gladys ([45:52](#)):



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Yes, so much opportunity and invitations to think about there in your closing reflection. Thank you so much for spending time with me today. I've really appreciated getting to know more about your work and about your hopes based on the vision that you have for Indigenous evaluation and how to support this even more. Ekosi for your time.

Caroline ([46:18](#)):

Thank you so much.

Gladys ([46:21](#)):

I'm so glad you spent time with us today. I have a few notes to wrap up this episode. If you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on your favorite streaming service, including Podbean, Spotify, and Apple Podcasts so that you don't miss an episode. Also, this podcast is self-supported and I'm hoping to make the work more sustainable. So if you're finding the content interesting and valuable, please consider supporting Indigenous insights through Buy Me a Coffee. You can find the link in the show notes. Finally, I would like to extend an invitation. If you are someone who has an interest in Indigenous evaluation and would like to have a conversation on this podcast, I would love to hear from you. Please send me a note and we can connect about your work, what you're learning, and the questions you're thinking about. That's it for this week. I look forward to sharing this space with you again soon. Ekosi.