



Dr Christopher Horsethief



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xaxqanaʔ ʔitkiniʔ

Dr Christopher Horsethief, Dr Sana Shahram and Shaunee Keyes are all members of the **xaxqanaʔ ʔitkiniʔ** project, which means 'many ways of working on the same thing'. This project brings non-Indigenous and Indigenous Knowledge Holders together to co-design solutions that promote equitable health outcomes across the Ktunaxa Nation.

Ktunaxa people have lived in the southeast region of British Columbia in Canada for over 10,000 years. In this conversation, the team speaks about how projects like this can help the process of nation rebuilding within the Ktunaxa Nation, some of the challenges that this project faced, and how you can get involved in this kind of research.

Break the **podcast** down:

Hello Christopher, Sana and Shaunee, welcome to the Futurum Careers podcast, and thank you all for being here. Could we start by each of you just saying your name and your role in the xaxqanaʔ ʔitkiniʔ project?

01.10 Sure. Hello, my name is Christopher Horsethief, I'm the research lead for the Ktunaxa Nation Council and one of the investigators for the xaxqanaʔ ʔitkiniʔ project, and that was very good pronunciation.

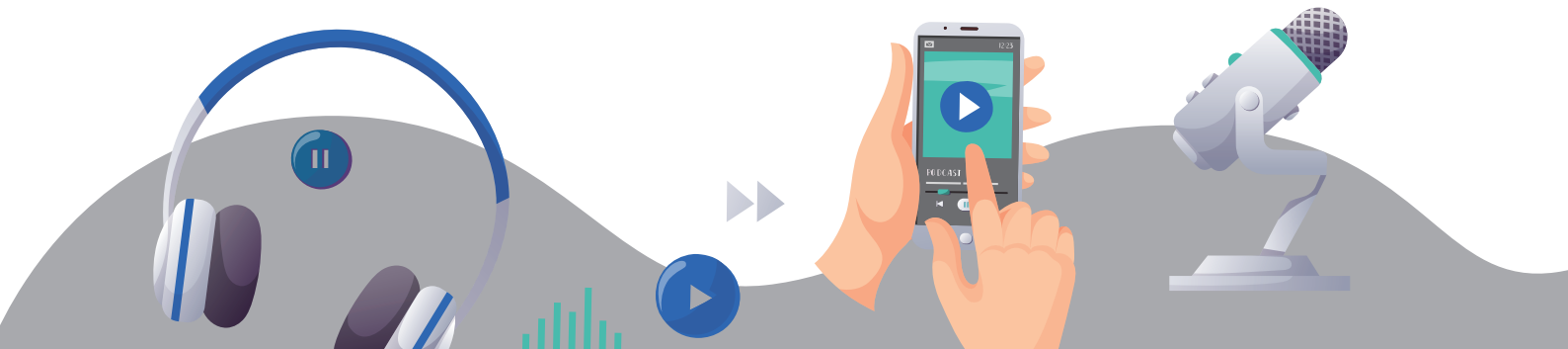
[Laughs] Not as good as yours.

And hi, I'm Sana Shahram, and I'm Christopher's counterpart at UBC (University of British Columbia), so we co-lead the project together.

Hey, my name is Shaunee, I am a clinical counsellor, and I handle the youth internship side of the project.

Great, thanks everyone. So, Christopher, if I can come to you first, can you set the scene for us a little bit and give us some context about the Ktunaxa Nation and why there's a need for projects like this?

Christopher: Yeah, so there are a couple of things that I think are relevant here. Most of the projects that we work on of this nature are about colonisation or decolonisation or anti-colonisation or post-colon... something where all of the discussion happens in the context of a community that has been through the process of colonisation, but that's not what's helpful from our perspective. We are trying to focus on long-term goals that are looking at rebuilding or reconnecting people to the building blocks that were taken away from us, forcefully removed from our community through the St. Eugene's Residential School, other residential schools in Canada and throughout North America, and the Indian Child Welfare Mechanism, which was the process of removing Indigenous children from their families and adopting them into other areas of the world. ➔



Christopher continued: Those processes completely disconnected us from our relationships to the community, our relationships to the language, the culture, values, morals, ethics, all of those kinds of things. More importantly, it disconnected us from our family members, the people that were around us that we had this belongingness with, that we had this shared identity, and in a very real way disconnected us from ourselves because we kind of grew up, many of us in this vacuum where we didn't have the basic information we need every day to solve the problems around us.

So essentially, it was this attempt to force rewrite our computer code so that our community members acted like little versions of Canada. We were little Canadians. We were, as one of our Elders described it, we were less likely to fight or resist Canada if we spoke and prayed and carry on the same way that Canadians do. But what the unintended consequence was, is it alienated us from those same resources that allowed us to be Ktunaxa people, which is what we are trying to do.

And you mentioned reconnection and rebuilding. Could you just elaborate a little bit more on those concepts and those processes?

04.10 Christopher: So, we started with nation rebuilding about 30 years ago, where we started to take an honest appraisal of what was going on around us, and we started to look at the end outcomes. Do we want something that, while it may be very compatible with Canadian architectures, is very foreign to our philosophical stance, our language, the way that we pray? And we decided to start setting some long-term goals for recreating or rebuilding who we were, making sure that instead of converting or translating our language to meet English, we started going the other way.

What are important concepts we need the outside world to understand about us? How do we get people around us to know that we educate our young and we raise our children differently? There's nothing wrong or backwards or stunted about that, but it makes more sense for us to do it using the tools that we've used from the beginning of time.

Eventually, when we started working on research projects and focusing on getting young people and more community members into science, technology, engineering, mathematics, those areas, we started to see that what was really helpful was making sure that they knew there was a place for us there. We need to understand

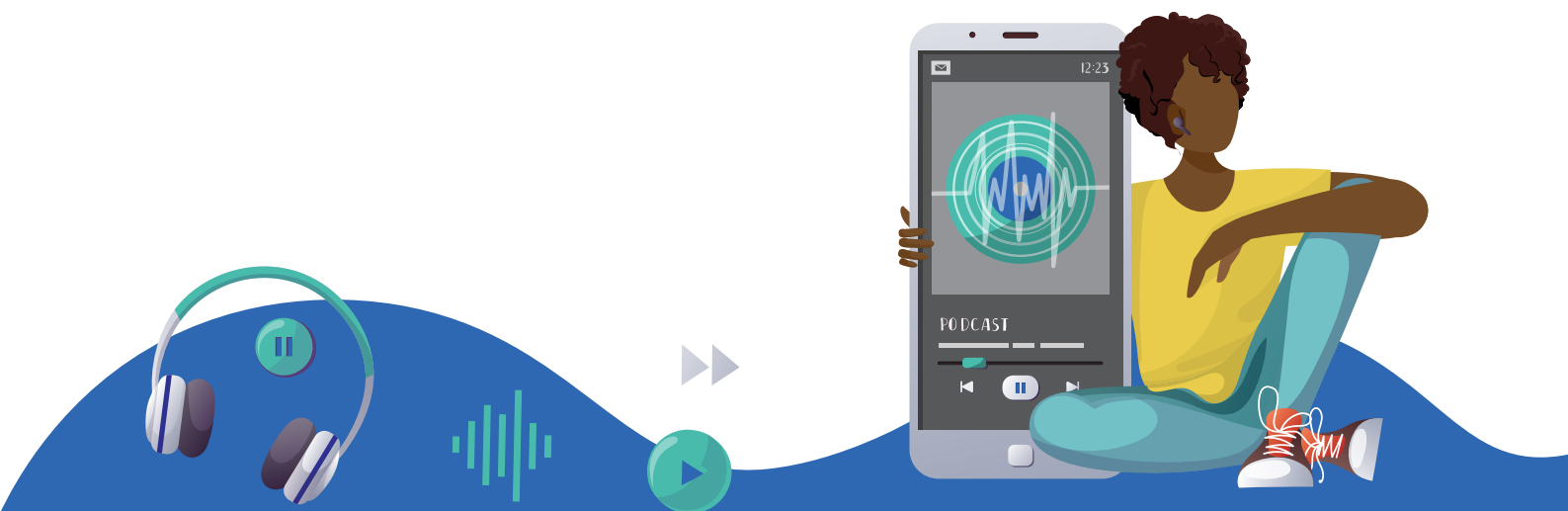
both. We need to know calculus. We also need to understand our language. We need to understand the way various legal systems work, but we also need to understand how our community solves problems.

So, we just started piggybacking most of these conversations off of what is called [0:05:46 unknown word] or the way that a group solves a problem with one heart. That was going all the way back to the beginning where we asked the Elders, how did we solve problems since the beginning of time, in our own framework that connects us to resources, that bridges us to our families across generations, across space and time and challenge? They were really clear. It's a group gathering information and using it with one heart.

06.16: That kind of became the framework for us crowdsourcing information from our own community members and then with our partners out there in the world, like Sana and some of the institutions that we work with, we started engaging in this reciprocal calibration where we didn't filter everything that we did through these non-Indigenous, non-Ktunaxa ideas. We just started saying, here's what makes sense to us. Think about that a little bit and answer a few clarifying questions.

Then they would send those answers back to us and we would make sure that everyone had the space to be able to ask questions, clarify the information, make sure that those quieter, softer, slower voices were a part of the conversation. What we found at the end was Elders looked at the process of research and said, this is what we've always done. Our oldest Elders, whose grandparents were born in the late 1800s, early 1900s, said this is the way my grandparents solved problems when I was growing up.

Instead of changing it all to try and mimic these Canadian structures around us, we were doing what made sense to us and then our partners were also making sure that we were exchanging ideas so that we were doing reciprocal calibration. We weren't changing what we were doing to fit in. We were making sure that the systems around us were changing so that we didn't lose any of that detail, any of the resources or the ideas or concepts that were very important to us. →



Thank you, Christopher. Shaanee, if I can come to you now and ask about how you came to be involved in this project and how other people could get involved in similar projects if they were interested.

07.57 Shaanee: I think it all really starts with relationship. My relationship with this project, for instance, started organically. Almost by coincidence, I was doing adult upgrading and first year college courses when a teacher identified me as an Indigenous student, invited me to a small gathering. And then I used to hang out in the space that that was hosted in. It was called the Gathering Place at the local community college. Sometimes I'd help make meals while I was there and that developed into relationships with Elders.

And Christopher has a longstanding relationship with that institution. I mean, dating back to the 90s. And when he asked an instructor there who he was friends with and had a personal relationship with, if there were any young people who would want to help serve coffee in meetings that he was already having with the Elders, my name was presented. Chris didn't just see a young person to serve coffee, though, even though, you know, at the time, that's really all I saw for myself. Chris helped me see more, helped me see that potential and needs that I could help meet in the community. And that's reciprocal relationship.

So, when people are asking about how to get involved in this type of work, they really need to take into consideration the relationship that that entails. And that means asking questions on your own first, consuming media from Indigenous academics and what they say on the matter. And then the balancing act of knowing that not all communities have the same needs. So then, coming into it, wanting to listen and to learn, asking yourself, what do you have to offer? How can I offer support for community growth and progress in these areas?

But for young Indigenous people looking to get involved in research or just community-oriented work, there's a different type of balancing act. And it's the humility to know you can't be everything everywhere. A lot of times we see people trying to peg themselves into so many different roles, and then it's not really meaningful. But we also need to have the confidence to know you can fill a role somewhere. There's a space for you. And that might change and grow and adapt to circumstance as needed.

And listening and learning are such key aspects of the work. And for people wanting to get involved in research in their communities, I'd say ask the questions, what research is being done? Who's doing it? Where can I fit in? And it's so important for everyone, but especially young people to ask what helps give them meaning? What gives them a sense of purpose and belonging? What type of engagement and involvement in community would be really exciting for them?

I'd say if you can identify those things in yourself, you have a bit of an idea of the areas to look for those opportunities. And when I went to college, I knew I wanted to upgrade my education to give my family a better life. But I also knew I wanted to do something meaningful to me.

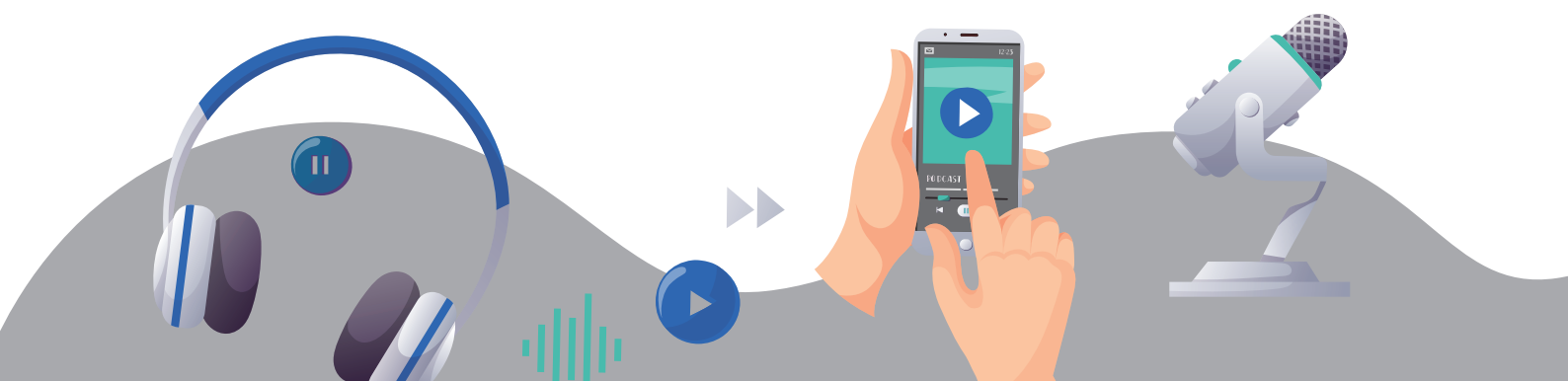
Thank you so much for sharing that. It's great to hear about your connection with Christopher, how far back it goes and how your journey evolved as you went through it. So, Sana, if we come to you now, what are the challenges of this kind of research? And how has the project overcome them?

11.20 Sana: Oh, gosh. Okay. So, I think one of the fundamental challenges with doing any transformative work of this nature is that research systems and university systems, much like any other system that we're talking about, has profound misalignment between their understanding of task and tool.

My colleague Katrina and I, we often use a metaphor that's absurd, but is very apt, I think, in this situation where it's often like we are fishing with skis or digging with noodles. What that really gets to is that there's this misalignment between what we understand as the root causes of inequity, which is the maldistribution of power, resources and opportunities. And then what we do to respond to that typically makes no sense.

I'm often caught in these conversations where I know that the work that we are doing with this project is incredibly aligned. It is the right way forward. We are taking direction from people who are much wiser than us in solving these issues. And we're leaning into science and knowledge that is millennia old. And what we're doing doesn't really fit what the research world thinks is the work that we should be doing. And so, despite the fact that we know that the distribution of power and resources and opportunities is the root cause, we typically respond by parachuting ourselves into communities, placing ourselves as experts and trying to download solutions onto those communities in a form of charity or some ridiculous notion that we somehow hold answers that we just haven't given to these groups before.

When in fact, what we should be doing is looking at how do we meaningfully redistribute power, resources and opportunities. And that means coming in and figuring out how do we do this work with parity? How do we do this work where everybody is working on the same thing, using the resources and tools that they have at their disposal so that we can solve this in the best way forward.



Sana continued: Working with a research institution that is really outcomes oriented, metrics oriented, it's pretty challenging sometimes to convince those groups that when you say you want to decolonise a system, when you say you want to move towards truth and reconciliation, that work takes time. And that work is about process. Working with a research institution that is really outcomes oriented, metrics oriented, it's pretty challenging sometimes to convince those groups that when you say you want to decolonise a system, when you say you want to move towards truth and reconciliation, that work takes time. And that work is about process. It's more about us changing than it is about changing anybody else. That's a hard conversation to have with anybody, but it's incredibly hard to have with institutions that are used to having sort of unmitigated, unjustified power and influence.

And so, walking that tightrope has been exciting. I think that we are getting increasingly good at doing that and not feeling like we need to justify our reason for being but actually inviting others to learn from us instead of the other way around.

Thank you, Sana. How can students both from Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous communities get involved in this research? How can they prepare themselves for this kind of research?

14.36 Christopher: I will start by saying that if you want to be a part of your community, it's not a magic pill where you show up and say "I want to be a part" and then you get all of these special cultural powers. Our culture, like anything else, is something that you have to work towards. And a part of your usefulness in 10 years or 20 years, or even three years, is if you're going to go to school, then you also need to learn a little bit about science. You need to take those math classes. Our Elders didn't have the opportunity to learn multivariate calculus. They didn't understand what an ANOVA model was. But you as a young person, just like you're given a name in our language and you're given songs to sing in these cultural values, you reciprocate by also going to school and paying attention and taking that extra math class and understanding that someday your belongingness, your purpose will fit in like a puzzle piece to these kinds of things that we need.

If we don't have you doing that in a few years, like when I first started working with Shaunee or the young people that are on our mentorship programme right now, then in another five years, it would be all non-Indigenous, non- Ktunaxa people. And we're starting to see now that the investiture and young people in education a decade ago, 20 years ago, 30 years ago, those are the people now that are playing key leadership roles in resource management moving forward.

16.07 Sana: I would just add. One of the things I always say to researchers, especially youth researchers, etc., who want to get involved with communities that they are not part of is that you need to be very open to correction. And I think we don't talk about that enough, that people think when they see these partnerships that everything is just rainbows and butterflies, and it was super easy. But the reality is, you need to be willing to have more conflict in terms of how you navigate those things. And you need to be willing to be corrected and to show that you're being corrected. And so, to have your own emotional resiliency and fortitude to say, I'm in this for the right reasons, I'm not just in here to be sort of praised and brought in with open arms, but I'm here to learn and learning means that you're going to be corrected. And you're going to have to adjust to new ways of thinking and new ways of doing.

We've been very fortunate that those corrections from different members of our team have come with a lot of grace, but you need to be willing to hear those things and to adjust and move forward, just like you would in any other setting where you are the learner. We need to be able to move into those spaces with humility and a commitment to learning, which means being wrong and being willing to be able to be wrong. It's something that takes practice, and it's not something we're always taught, especially in academia.

Shaunee, did you have anything you wanted to add just at the end?

Shaunee: Yeah, I'd say really lead with curiosity, like genuine desire to learn and to listen and not to implement your own agenda.

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