

The Write to Heal: *Big Gunz, Small Bullets* (Episode 2)

Interview with Barbara Aragon, social worker with Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration's Tribal Training and TA Center and Pedro Reyes, Iraq veteran and Native American digital storyteller

[00:00:00] **Tamara Kissane:** Welcome to The Write To Heal Soldiers Deep Dive into Storytelling. Are you compelled to write stories, poems, or keep a journal to help make sense of your life? I'm Tamara Kissane, the founder of Artist Soapbox. In this limited audio series, writer and teacher June Guralnick and I speak with life changers - people who champion writing as a catalyst for healing and soldiers whose lives have been radically transformed through story.

In this episode, you'll hear from Barbara Aragon and veteran Pedro Reyes, extraordinary Native American storytellers and digital story leaders. In addition to working together as colleagues, Barbara and Pedro are related to one another as mother and son. Check out our show notes for more information about Barbara and Pedro's background, along with links to their compelling online digital stories.

We hope you enjoy this conversation about the power of storytelling to inspire connection and healing. And do stay to the end because we have a provocative writing prompt we're inviting you, our listener, to sink your teeth into.

[00:01:11] **June Guralnick:** Barbara, Pedro, I am so glad to have the opportunity to talk with both of you today about your absolutely life-changing, amazing storytelling work. I thought maybe we'd begin by each of you sharing a little bit about your background. Barbara, how about we start with you?

[00:01:29] **Barbara Aragon:** I am a Native American woman, storyteller and also social worker, but I think identifying more as a storyteller, extended family member, a grandmother and tribal member of two different tribes, Laguna Pueblo, which is New Mexico - and I was born in Albuquerque and lived there first, probably about 12 years of my life there, then moved up to where my mother is from in Montana and she was Crow. And so I'm a combination of those two cultures, but really I've lived in Sacramento for over 40 years. And so that experience has really shaped who I am and has contributed to what I do today and what I love, which is storytelling.

[00:02:12] **June Guralnick:** Pedro, what about your journey?

[00:02:14] **Pedro Reyes:** So for me personally, you know, I never wanted to be a storyteller growing up. It wasn't until I got out of the Army when I was 23 that I started going back to school and I was actually an English and math major. Math comes to me super easy, so I never really saw myself as a storyteller ever.

So when I got out of the Army, they beat this idea into your head that you're only as strong as your weakest link. And so for me, at that time, my weakest link was writing. And so because of that, I ended up becoming just an English major. I dropped math and I wanted to really kind of focus on being a better writer.

[00:02:55] **June Guralnick:** You know, Pedro, what's so interesting to me, and so brave actually, is that you played into your initial weakness, not your strength.

[00:03:06] **Pedro Reyes:** But in my mind, I would have never done that if I wouldn't have come out of the Army with the mindset of that drill sergeant or that sergeant in the back of my head saying, you're only as strong as your weakest link.

[00:03:18] **June Guralnick:** I want to talk a little bit now about digital storytelling. How does it work for you in terms of capturing Native American experiences? And specifically, I know both of you have used it as a tool for healing. That became very obvious in the workshop that I took with you all. I had never worked in that way. I had never approached writing in the way that you approached it. It was life changing for me. Why this form? How does it speak to you?

[00:03:45] **Barbara Aragon:** I got into digital storytelling by attending a conference. My background is in social work, but you know, social workers in historically native communities weren't really valued. And when I think back to social workers when I was growing up, they were people that could come take something from you. They weren't necessarily something that as a child you ever thought, I want to be a social worker, you know? But like many times, things just unfold unexpectedly. So I had an opportunity to leave Montana.

I wanted to go to school, but it wasn't, oh, I want to be a social worker. I want to do this. It was just - there's an opportunity to come to school here. And so when I came out here and entered the MSW program, it was really a chance to, you know, move away and start a new opportunity. And then after getting my MSW and working in native communities, probably for at least 20 years, I would use

traditional stories in prevention, work training, intervention work, you know, because they're so powerful.

But I went to a conference and there was a woman that was showing digital stories on domestic violence survivors. And I walked into that workshop and sat down and was just captivated by the combination of individuals telling their personal story and then weaving in the images, weaving in music. And as I sat there, I thought, we need to do this in native communities.

You know, we're storytellers. We've always told stories. We taught by storytelling. You know, we prevented things by storytelling. We healed by storytelling, and more importantly for me, it was that people needed to tell their own story. In native communities, most often the stories have been told from outsiders.

Someone came in and did research, anthropologists, scientists, you know, whoever it was, they would write about native people. And to me it was powerful to think that we could reclaim our stories. And that is the most empowering thing we could do. So to hear about digital stories and to see it, it wasn't a natural thing like it was for Pedro - for me to go and learn that skill. I really struggled with it, but it's, you know, like you say, it changed my life and it continues to just be such a powerful blessing to my life.

[00:06:25] **Pedro Reyes:** So I always say whenever I'm at a digital storytelling training, cause I'm also trying to get the participants to understand what we're doing is from a content creation perspective, you're on a spectrum. And one end of that spectrum is like slideshows, which we all understand. It's just pictures and maybe some music on the other end. I think we're all used to it as just big kind of productions. And somewhere in the middle of that is digital storytelling. And when we go out and do digital storytelling, a lot of times people have had moderate size producers who want to do a video about their tribe or about their traditions or something like that, and they'll tell me about it. They'll be like, oh, last year somebody came out with a bunch of production equipment, all this stuff. And I think it really kind of harkens back to what Barbara said about these communities telling their own stories and really kind of having control over that.

And I think one way that it hasn't really been allowed for people in their own community to tell their own stories is by thinking you need all of this equipment and you need all of this technology in order to tell something worth watching, and that's just not the case. Yeah, I think that personal touch really just kind of puts it over the top as a really moving piece.

[00:07:42] **Tamara Kissane:** Barbara, speaking of moving works, you created a digital story about your grandmother titled *Talas' Gifts*. Let's listen to it.

[00:07:57] **Barbara Aragon:** When my grandmother, Agnes Cummins was alive, we always exchanged gifts. She usually gave me blankets. My gifts were usually joke gifts that I searched for in my travels. I was always looking for gifts that would make her laugh, like the bean spoon with the ladder slats on the handle so the farts could climb out.

Or the lotion bottle with the oil of old age painted on the side. She proudly displayed both of these items in her kitchen. My aunt gave them back to me after my grandma died, and now they're in my kitchen. When she became sick and the family knew she was preparing to leave, I ordered a Hudson Bay blanket - a point blanket like the one she said she wanted to be buried in.

I was planning to come home to Montana that weekend, but my mom called and said I had to come immediately, so I bought a ticket and prepared to go. I was disappointed that the Hudson Bay hadn't arrived, though it had been guaranteed to come overnight. During a layover in Salt Lake City, all the TV monitors were broadcasting the news that George Harrison had died.

I sat and watched the reactions of the individuals around me as I waited for my flight to Billings. His songs were being played. I flash back to the scene whenever I hear one of his songs. When I arrived in Billings, she was already gone surrounded by grieving loved ones. The hospice staff commented on the number of people that came to see her before she passed. As one of the oldest members of the Crow tribe, she had touched many lives.

By the time I arrived, someone else had already purchased a Hudson Bay blanket and had taken it to the funeral home near the reservation. I really don't remember the funeral very well, and though I miss her, I don't grieve as I had imagined that I would because I never really felt she left me. The day before she died we spoke on the phone. I hollered, "I'm coming," trying to make myself heard by ears that were going deaf. "Good," she hollered back. "I'll go back with you." Sometimes I wish I could sit at her table and eat her beans and KFC, and she would tell me once again the traditional stories that she had planted in my heart.

But I have come to accept that now. I am the storyteller. When I arrived back to Sacramento after the funeral, there was a box on my porch. It contained a Hudson Bay blanket. She always had to give the last gift.

[00:10:49] **June Guralnick:** I think it's so authentic, and I mean that in the truest sense of that word. It's coming from somebody's heart and soul.

[00:10:56] **Barbara Aragon:** And to me it is so exciting to, I guess I'll say, harvest that story. Sometimes people, they'll often come and say, oh, I don't know. I don't really have a story. And then all of a sudden, the story emerges that not only I wasn't aware of, but sometimes they weren't aware of. It's just a whole blossoming experience that I love about digital storytelling.

[00:11:23] **June Guralnick:** Pedro, I wanna talk a little bit about your background as a Native American vet and how that also has informed your storytelling.

[00:11:31] **Pedro Reyes:** Yeah, sure thing. I'll tell you a story about this one time when we were in Montana, there was this lady there and she asked me, she said, "Pedro, how many stories have you done?"

"I've been doing this for about six or seven years. I've done about 10 stories." And then I thought about it a little bit longer and a little bit longer, and I said, "You know what? I've pretty much been a big part of everybody's story that I've done, so I've probably done about a hundred stories." And she said to me, "You've seen through a lot of eyes."

And it really touched me in that moment because I didn't really realize or appreciate the connection that I had with all of those people that I helped walk through this digital storytelling workshop. And so for me, the kind of military brotherhood, that connection and that community that's basically given to you when you join the Army and you can't get away from it, no matter what you do, you know you're going to war with those people.

You stay in the barracks with those people. You see 'em every morning at 6:00 a.m.. In some way. I was slowly building that over these six or seven years of a really deep connection with people, really kind of going deep, kind of understanding their own story, even when I didn't realize it.

[00:12:45] **Barbara Aragon:** I want to talk a little bit more about the veterans' digital stories because for me they were the work that I have so much pride in, and a lot of that came from growing up in a culture that honored veterans so much because of the warrior tradition. So when I was a child, I grew up in houses that the walls were covered with basic training pictures, and that was the case. Whatever house you went in, there were those young men that were on the walls.

So I grew up very early just honoring what veterans did and how important it was to native culture. And those really were the male role models throughout my life. These were Korean veterans, these were World War II veterans. So when I was asked to help the National Museum of the American Indian, when they were going to be opening, to talk about how we capture some of their stories, I'd already started doing digital stories and I said, "We need to use digital stories and to capture their stories because it is amazing to me that they continue to serve." So, you know, the numbers of native veterans is so high. And so I've been the project manager on a number of those stories and for me, they were just such an honor. But I'd never really expected Pedro to enlist. And so when he did, it was a surprise.

But I'm so glad that I had those digital story workshops because I learned from those veterans telling their stories so much of what Pedro might be experiencing. When someone would say, "I really can't tell this story." Or they might say, "You know, I've never told this story." But to hear those stories, I felt like those men were my kind of spirit guides to understanding a little bit about what Pedro's experience might be.

[00:14:54] **Pedro Reyes:** You know, sharing war stories with another veteran - it's just a difference of perspective. So what you guys would think is dangerous or something bad or something really emotional, from our perspective, 90% of the time it's bravado, right? It's almost like a badge of honor. And we're like, yeah, check this out. You know what I mean? Where it's like, right, who's got the better story?

[00:15:18] **Tamara Kissane:** That's an excellent segue to your digital story, Pedro. *Big Guns, Small Bullets*. Let's listen to it.

[00:15:33] **Pedro Reyes:** O' Hail O', O' Hail O', O' Hail O' Artillery. King of Battle. Follow me. Took a boy and made a man. Put a weapon in his hand. O' Hail O', O' Hail O', O' Hail O' Artillery.

I have seen all types of weapons from big to small, old to new, reliable, and jerry-rigged. I was trained as a 13 Bravo - a Cannon crew member, an artilleryman. The unofficial mantra of 13 Bang Bang is pull string, go boom. When we arrived in Iraq, we traveled in Chinooks to Taji. I heard that our brigade sniper team, COE, was heading to Baghdad and they wanted four men to go with them. I ran to my platoon sergeant and told him to put me on the team. He said, "You got it Reyes."

Our team snaked around every inch of Baghdad. We stopped for gelato in the middle of the city one time. The taste of sweetness in the desert. We ran to bunkers when mortars fell. One night we got word that the Iraqis were going to push into Sadr City. Sadr City was a black hole, the only district in Baghdad that the military was not supposed to enter.

I remember the Iraqis used World War II era vehicles. Jerry-rigged armored personnel carriers with men hanging from them, driving into battle. Two thirty in the morning, barely awake, sitting in a gunner's turret. Tracer rounds began to pepper the sky.

After eight months in Baghdad, I went back to my unit in Taji. They were getting ready to take over the cannons. They were getting ready to shoot artillery missions every night. We didn't shoot high explosive rounds. We shot illumination rounds. They turned the night into day.

Three a.m. you hear the sound. Just barely at first. The sound you've heard a thousand times. The one you've been trained to act on. Fire mission. As one we all move to our positions. Communication happens simultaneously. The sweet symphony only we have been trained to create. We pull the string, we feel the boom, we see the light.

The next day we went to headquarters. They told us that two infantry officers were there earlier. The illumination round we shot last night was requested by them. When the artillery shell popped, they noticed they were 10 feet from a metal wire running across the road. They came to our headquarters to shake our hands.

[00:18:55] **Tamara Kissane:** That's such a riveting piece. Thank you! We'll make the links available in our show notes in case listeners would like to go online and see the visuals that accompany both of the digital stories that we heard today.

[00:19:07] **June Guralnick:** Pedro, when I look at pieces of yours like *Big Guns, Small Bullets*, there is a level of anger that lies beneath the surface in those pieces for me. When I watch them, there's heat in there.

[00:19:20] **Pedro Reyes:** But I mean, there's heat in the military. You know, the first four months of my military career is four hours of sleep and a drill sergeant yelling at me all the time no matter what. So when you go into the military, you're just exposed to that and it's almost this hardening factor, right?

Like aggression or anger isn't necessarily looked down upon in the military. You know, it's almost like something that you need. It's something that'll take you further.

[00:19:50] **June Guralnick:** Barbara and Pedro, after I took that workshop with you and then myself started to learn more about it and then teach it to others, at times it feels emotionally draining. How do you go about processing that for yourself? How do you handle the pain that comes up?

[00:20:07] **Barbara Aragon:** For me, it's with story. I mean, story and ceremony I think are the things that I look to for everything in my mind. I always believe, I'm always in ceremony, and ceremony requires struggle, requires pain, but ceremony always takes you to a new place.

And if I know that and I say I believe it, it has to be part of my practice. And I believe digital storytelling is my spiritual practice. You know, I would love to have been a midwife in another lifetime to help someone move through that pain, you know? Then to come out with this beautiful baby, this beautiful addition to the world.

And I think that's how I see digital storytelling. To hear people tell their story and dig deep - then all of a sudden there is that story. When I thought we lost your story, June, I was frantic. I was thinking, I've got to find that story. I've got to find that story because it was such a beautiful, and I know you struggled to me, you were in ceremony, to bring that story out.

So, no, I don't really see it as painful. You know, even the pain is really beautiful to me.

[00:21:33] **June Guralnick:** You know, it meant so much to me that you cared. Can't even express how much that meant to me.

[00:21:38] **Barbara Aragon:** I go back and watch people's stories and definitely have watched your story since then, June, and yeah, those people live with me. You know, those stories live with me. They're my companions.

[00:21:53] **June Guralnick:** Pedro, what about you in terms of emotionally processing some of these very, very painful stories that you hear and that you facilitate?

[00:22:01] **Pedro Reyes:** I think Barbara probably goes a little bit more deeper with other people, but I will tell you though, it's very emotionally draining to hear these stories.

I'll give you an example of one time where we were in a story circle and everybody was sharing their story and it got to the point where it felt like they were talking about my story and that was really, I don't want to say off-putting, but it was kind of scary. You know, where it feels like everybody's telling you your story, but I think the best way that I handle it, at least up to now, is I'm definitely like, yeah, let's focus on the process. Let's focus on the steps about how we're going to move through this.

[00:22:45] **June Guralnick:** You know, I have a reflection and it's something I've thought a lot about over the last few years. The more specific a digital story is, the more universal it becomes on the surface. That makes no sense.

[00:23:00] **Barbara Aragon:** No, it makes perfect sense because like Pedro was saying, they're telling my story. I can't count the times where people have said after story circle or when someone shared, they say, "That's my story. That's my story." And that really primes their story and it prepares them to share theirs. And I always think people don't feel so alone when someone tells their story, when all of a sudden someone says, "I have been there and I was, you know, I was on the streets, I was in the depths of misery. I made the most awful choice that I've ever made." But when someone tells their story, they're saying, that's my story too. And in some ways, we're forgiven.

[00:23:49] **June Guralnick:** It's almost a notion of entering into a state of grace where you forgive those around you. You can also forgive yourself. It's that gift of forgiveness to yourself and to others.

[00:23:59] **Tamara Kissane:** I think that there is a difference between an individual journaling about their story and the step from that process to then sharing in community. And I'm wondering if you would talk about what is significant from individual to community and why you think that might be important for people to take that step?

[00:24:25] **Pedro Reyes:** So when I think about the difference between the individual and the community, I think it's that kind of human connection, which kind of makes a huge difference for a lot of people. And I think Barbara's comment about seeing your story from somebody else and then being able to forgive yourself, I think is such a huge element too, right?

Because not only are you as a storyteller or as a writer or anything, sharing something with that audience, but the moment they start sharing something back, which is a recognition, I think is something that you don't necessarily get from journaling or from just keeping the story to yourself.

[00:25:06] **Barbara Aragon:** What is amazing to me is that people's stories, no matter what the setting, you know, the theme is really about finding that sense of belonging, that search of where do I belong in this world? And even those that have even passed on that might be in our story. All of our stories are a collaboration of many, and I don't ever want to forget that.

[00:25:34] **Pedro Reyes:** Yeah, I'm excited to see where digital storytelling goes in the future. People switched over a lot to digital content during Covid, which made digital storytelling a little bit more popular.

But the downside to that is we didn't really do them in person. We had to do them over Zoom, which is just a completely different interaction. And I'm excited for the rest of this year and next year, being able to go back to in-person and then the final showing at the end where they can bring in people, people who a lot of times have never heard that person tell that story before.

[00:26:11] **June Guralnick:** It's been so amazing to talk with both of you. You have changed so many people's lives. I have been so honored to have the opportunity to study and work with you. Thank you for everything you do to shepherd people to tell their stories.

[00:26:32] **Tamara Kissane:** Wow. We heard a lot today about the healing power of telling your own story. What did you take away from this conversation that's still turning in your mind? In the spirit of this series, The Write to Heal, we invite you to respond to this prompt: *“If you had 10 minutes left on this earth and were given the chance to write something down, what would you write?”*

Take a moment to jot down whatever comes to mind. No need to edit yourself. Just let it flow. And if you're willing, we love to hear your thoughts and writing. You can share those by sending to artistsoapbox@gmail.com with the subject heading, The Write to Heal.

The Write to Heal: Soldiers Deep Dive into Storytelling is a production of Artist Soapbox in partnership with June Guralnick. This series is dedicated in memory of David Brave Heart whose inspiring music graces our introduction and closing sections, with additional music by Louis Wilkinson. The intro

montage is sound engineered by Royce Froehlich with post-production by Jasmine Hunjan and Tamara Kissane.

For more information, including the list of writers who contributed to our opening montage, please see the show notes. Catch us on social media, or visit our websites: artistsoapbox.org and juneguralnick.com.