

Transcript

Miyamoto Jensen | How Family History Helped in Healing and Set a Course for Her Future

Stories in Our Roots : 0:03

Welcome to the Stories in Our Roots podcast. I'm your host Heather Murphy. In this podcast, we dive deep into how knowing the stories of our ancestors can make a difference in our lives today. Discovering our family history is more than a hobby. It is a way to connect deeply with ourselves, those we love and the world around us.

Heather Murphy : 0:28

Hello, this is your host Heather Murphy. Welcome to Stories in Our Roots. Today I talk with Miya Jensen, a young professional genealogist pioneering Polynesian genealogy. She was the first to graduate with her Bachelors of Arts in Polynesian family history from Brigham Young University. Along with learning, Miya enjoys teaching others how they can research their Polynesian ancestors, and she also performs client research. Her biggest dream is to create research methodologies for all Oceania cultures and peoples. Miya's ancestral background includes Samoan, Tongan, Hawaiian, Japanese, German, English and French. I appreciated her willingness to record this episode with me and how open and honest she was as she talked about the struggles in her life that led to her learning about her family's history. She talks about the strength that she draws from knowing the stories of her ancestors, and how knowing that past also allows her to interact with her living families differently than she would without that perspective. Thank you, Miya for sharing with us your experiences. And now here's her interview.

I'm so excited to talk with you and have you share your experiences of how family history has impacted your life. So to get started, could you just tell us a little bit about yourself?

Miya Jensen : 1:51

First, my full name is Miyamoto Loretta Jensen. My first name is Japanese. I may not look Japanese and that's fine. Because I have more Polynesian in me than anything else. But I'm named after my great great grandmother on my Japanese side from my mother. And my dad saw my great grandmother's name on my mom's pedigree chart and felt inspired that that should be my name, and which I think is so fitting because I am now a professional genealogist. I didn't expect to go into this field until I grew up a bit and came to college.

But yeah, I was born and raised in Hawaii and Laie specifically. I'm the oldest of five children. I went to an all Hawaiian high school called Kamehameha Schools. It was a wonderful experience learning about my Hawaiian culture and heritage. But what really impacted me was when I left and I came to school out here in Utah. I originally was going into piano performance, that didn't work out which is totally fine, because I found my love for family history. And now my emphasis is Polynesian genealogy.

I'm known on Instagram and on Facebook, social media generally, as The Polynesian Genealogist. My goal is to pioneer Polynesian genealogy and for all of Oceania and bring more representation recognition to it in the genealogy industry. So I'm proud to do research for those who have Oceania heritages. And I also work right now for FamilySearch and researching Pacific Island oral genealogies.

And yeah, I live out here in Utah now. And I'm married to my wonderful husband Shad from Idaho and we have a little boy, he's turning four tomorrow. And I love to surf though I can't surf here in Utah. I miss surfing. I love the beach. One of my favorite things to do is to dance and I love singing in the shower and just making food and just having fun friends. I'm very personable, and I just love being with people. So that's a little about me.

Heather Murphy : 3:50

Great. Thank you so much.

Miya Jensen : 3:52

You're welcome.

Heather Murphy : 3:54

How did you start becoming interested in family history?

Miya Jensen : 3:57

Yeah, that's, I love that question. So you know, I never really was interested in it as a child, knowingly. It was just kind of like given to me to love to be with the elders. I loved sitting with them. I loved talking to them. And I recognized at a young age that I had a knack for remembering people's names, and also remembering how they got their names. And I always asked people, how did you get your name? And so that naturally led me into family history.

What really happened though, what really got me going into it is when I... So I'm a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and I started a full-time mission in the Japan Tokyo mission. It was wonderful, yet very hard for me. And I suffered from severe depression and anxiety as well as body dysmorphia and I struggled with learning the language. I was extremely homesick and I just didn't feel comfortable in my skin. So I was starving myself and just not happy overall. Even though I was happy to tell people about our church and about Christ, I just wasn't happy.

But my last companion... So each of us missionaries we are paired off in twos. She really showed me how wonderful it was to be involved in family history. I remember meeting her just this bubblyness she had and a joy for doing family history where... She was young, she was 21. And we were the same age. And I was like, I've never met anybody young like me who really liked family history work. So I was blown away by that. But what ended up happening is at seven and a half months, I decided to leave my mission and come home because I needed help. I needed to go to therapy, I needed to take care of myself. And so I did.

But what really pulled me through during those times, because it was hard being home and not fulfilling the expectation of being a missionary for our time for sisters is 18 months, I remembered the joy that I saw in my companion and in doing family history work. So I was like, you know, maybe I should take a shot at this too. I also was involved in what's called temple work, where we believe in not only researching our ancestors for performing what's called sacred ordinances on behalf of our ancestors. And I was heavily involved with that. And because I was doing those things, and because I witnessed the joy that other people had a family history work, I was able to find a lot of healing for myself and strength, and power through those hard times.

And because I experienced that, I was like, you know what, I can never turn away from this. I just knew it, that this was something I loved, and I was good at it, and I wanted to be better at it. And I recognized too, that there were a lot of people in Polynesian genealogy that needed help. And so I saw the need, and I stepped in. I was like, I want to fulfill this. So I'm here now and I'm so stoked. I love everything about it. Even the hard, hard, hard parts of it because there's a lot of trauma and shame in our history. But again, I truly believe that the cure for a lot of what's happening today is in family history work. So, yeah, that's kind of a winded answer, but that's how I got involved in it. And that's how I'm here and I'm staying forever and ever. I just love this work so much.

Heather Murphy : 7:22

Would you be able to tell us anything specific of the process of researching or any individual ancestors that you learned about that helped you in that process after you came back from your mission trip?

Miya Jensen : 7:34

I'm trying to think of... There's a lot of ancestors running through my head because I love all of them and I know y'all and y'all know me. I think what really stood out to me was that I had ancestors who did really hard things. One for example, her name was Makaopiopio. So she was the first one to join the Church of Jesus Christ in our family, way back in the day in the mid-1800s, I believe, her and her husband. And they joined this church in Hawaii. And they particularly wanted to leave Hawaii to go to Utah, come here and join the gathering of the saints as well as to take place and participate in the temple that they had here and perform work for themselves, because they and they and us believe in forever families. And so they wanted to participate in that.

But what happened was Makaopiopio's husband passed away right before they were going to make that journey. She still decided to leave even though she would be essentially companionless, be a widow. And so she got on a boat and she left and she came to San Francisco and she travelled by buggy and train all the way across the... well I call them plains but you know not those kind of plains out Midwest but she left California all the way to Utah. I mean, I have a hard time sitting in the car more than six hours. I'm like, this lady traveled the ocean, the entire Pacific, and across these states because of what she believed in.

And what ended up happening too, when she came here, there was a colony settled for the Native Hawaiians and the Polynesians called Josefa colony. She was actually the first one to die in that colony, because she contracted leprosy from her daughter who had it here in Utah. You know, the Native Hawaiians, they were kind of stigmatized because of leprosy. Also, too, there was issues of racism and what not. But her resilience and her strength to do what she needed to do despite her circumstances, it blew me away learning about that and seeing that she did the hard thing. And it wasn't just one hard thing. Her whole life was a hard thing.

As I've reflected on her life and the life of many of my ancestors during that difficult time coming home from my mission, I realized that I have been born of resilience. I have been born of strength and of power. That is in me. That is in my blood, it flows within me. And all I have to do to activate it and to cultivate it is remember and to reflect and just realize that that is, that is a God given gifts within me. And that helped me to push through. And if I didn't realize that then I realize that now even more so now. I see how much more important it is to teach that and to share it with other people. There's so

much power behind it and it really did change my life and heal me and gave me the strength that I needed to move on with my life. I'm so glad I did. And I'm glad I'm a living breathing example of it too.

Heather Murphy : 10:44

Now, you mentioned that you find traumatic things in your family history. How do you handle those things when you come across them?

Miya Jensen : 10:53

Oh, man. Um, you know, recently I was reading a record and it said... it was in the perspective of anthropologists and missionaries who came to the Cook Islands. I don't have Cook Island descent within me that I know of. But I still consider all of that because all of us Polynesians are related somehow, right? And by reading the record, it said that these oral traditions that they were using were a heathen practice and they were like, "We need to stomp this out, this is not okay." And even in other anthropology books that I've read from back in the day, they said that oral traditions are invalid 100%, you cannot rely on them for anything, any genealogy work whatsoever. And you know what? That was heartbreaking for me to see.

And because it's that mentality that caused a lot of pain in my family history and not just my but in my people in general. What I've done to deal with that is first of all, I let myself feel those emotions. I let myself just experience that because it is a hard thing to see. So yes, I've wept over it. I've cried. I've laid in bed and just like, "How can people say that about my family and about my people?" and just let myself just experience that emotion. And once I do that I let myself deal with it too.

So how do I deal with it? I recognize that those people, that mentality and the things that have been done wrong to my family and my people, I acknowledge it, I say, you know what, that was wrong, and that is not okay. And because I know that those things that people have done are not okay, I have made it a resolve in my life to not be that way and to recognize the issues that I may have within me that I project on other people. So there's social biases, we talk about racism. All of us have the potential to have negative point of views about certain people and races. I also take the time to recognize, you know, are there some things that I can do better and what are they, and choose to do something about it and move forward in that way. And that's where I find that healing. But if needed to I've, I recommend to a lot of people, when they find trauma, they go to a therapist, they find professionals to help them walk through these things. Find that professional help. Also find groups of people who will uplift you, support groups. We have so many great influencers and people who are willing to listen, to talk, to share, to weep with you.

Just know that you're not alone, either, when you find these kinds of things. And that ultimately, even when it is hard to read or face, these traumatic and shameful experiences in our family history, it's in facing it and having the stamina to endure and be able to confront them that we actually find the healing. Sometimes the cure is the hardest part and that's okay. Baby steps, it takes baby steps. So that's what I would recommend to anybody who's going through and experiencing the very painful and realistic side of family history work.

Stories in Our Roots : 14:15

This episode is brought to you by my premium service Stories in Your Roots. Many people wander the internet hoping to come across information that will tell their family story. And while technology has made records more accessible than ever, wandering the internet will not provide the answers you are looking for. You need to know what questions to ask, where to look for the answers and what to do with the information once you find it. To learn more about how you can have a family history coach help you maximize your discoveries go to heathermurphygenealogy.com/coaching. That's heathermurphygenealogy.com/coaching.

Heather Murphy : 14:56

So how has what you've learned about your family in the past affected your relationships with your living family?

Miya Jensen : 15:05

Oh, that's, I love that. It's helped me to be well, I try to be a better person. Because listen, yeah, racism has, for example, it has been in part of my family for a very long time. Certain races have been looked higher than others. And what I've tried to do, as I've seen that in my family history, what I've recognized is as more people, as all of us have grown up and married others and have increased our families, I've tried to be as welcoming and as kind as possible. Am I perfect at it? No. And do I struggle with some social biases? Absolutely. Like all of us do. But I try my best to be as kind and welcoming as possible, because the last thing I want is for family to feel like they are ostracized by me, that they have not been welcomed by me. Because all of us, all of us need love and all of us need acceptance, and friendship, and loving kind relationships. And there's no... I lose nothing when I am nice, when I am kind to other people and invite others into the home and into our family. That's just one example. But yeah, that has made me more aware of how I need to treat my family.

But then also to, you know, I'll be realistic about this. There are some things in my family that are not okay. And that have not been solved yet. And I can't go too much into detail. But what I recognize too is for some people, say for example, abuse has been passed down or addictions. Just because I'm born into a family relationship it doesn't mean that I have to put myself in harm's way and being around people who are hurting others or hurting me. And so I've learned that sometimes I have to separate myself from them. And there's nothing wrong with that. That is a healthy thing. Not only do I have to do work but these other individuals have to as well. So there's, it depends, you know, it really just depends on what the situation is at hand. But yes, I've recognized a greater turning of my heart to living individuals, as well as me protecting myself and my own family, my husband and our son, from people who are hurting each other. And so it's difficult. Families are messy. They're beautiful, but they're messy, right? Very complex.

Heather Murphy : 17:35

From what you learn about your family that gives you a different perspective to see things a little bit differently than you would otherwise.

Miya Jensen : 17:42

Yes. Oh, yeah. It's shed so much light on my family. And that's just even recently. I was telling my mom, I'm like, you know, I realized that a lot of people in our family, I had this facade almost that they were one way, but as I've grown up, and I've had my own life experiences I've realized like, they're not all perked up, or as perfect as I thought they were. And they actually are enablers and not healthy. And I have to just separate myself. I don't need to pass on that kind of generational trauma. I can stop that. And for me, what I found to be most useful is to cut off that relationship for now at least, you know, just again, to prevent from those things happening to my family. So yeah, it's painful and joyful for both the living aspect of family history and for even the dead. It's all... It's a bunch of mixed emotions. It's all over the place.

Heather Murphy : 18:46

Yeah, it's definitely not simple.

Miya Jensen : 18:48

Yes. That's a great way to put it. Yeah, it's just not simple. And that's okay.

Heather Murphy : 18:53

It is. And it's good to understand that because sometimes we look at family history as it's this great thing, but there's a lot of other stuff that comes along with that.

Miya Jensen : 19:02

Yes, heavy, heavy stuff. And you know, some people may say, well, you don't need to like dwell on the past. It's like, um, but we are, we are made because of the past, we are the byproduct of the past. And I can't ignore that. If I ignore that, that just hurts me even more. And I truly believe that there's great power and knowledge, it won't hurt you. And of course, there's timing for everything. But I believe that knowledge would never take away things from us. It'll only enable us, empower and give us more strength to do what is necessary, especially what's necessary in healing.

Heather Murphy : 19:46

You mentioned that you have this drive to help everyone in Oceania learn how to do their family history. So what are the some of the ways that you're doing that?

Miya Jensen : 19:56

Okay, great question. So, um, one thing that I'm doing is well of course I'm actively researching, I'm always reading and looking at articles. I'm connecting with professionals in the field, not just in genealogy but in history, anthropology, archaeology, you name it. I'm actively trying to connect with these other professionals and learn from them and read their works.

But generally for my audience, especially in social media, I like sharing that information with others. So I'm always posting. I have a weekly family history get together Friday nights where I talk about a family history topic. Last week, I talked about Samoan family history and I taught a class on it. And I'm providing these resources for free because I truly believe that all of this should be accessible for

everybody no matter what. Yes, it would be nice to be paid and compensated for it but that's okay. I find a lot of my compensation comes from hearing the stories of other people, how what I've put out there has helped them see. Yes, check out my social media.

I'm hoping to be teaching and presenting at more conferences. So this year I presented at RootsTech for the first time. That was the first time they did Polynesian genealogy too, which was a huge deal. And so there's that. I'm hoping to present again. This year I presented the NGS, the National Genealogical Society conference that they had recently. Because of COVID it was virtual. And then I was hoping to present at APG this year. But anyway, so yes, I'm constantly lecturing, doing those presentations and putting out information on social media, working on my website and whatnot and developing my business.

But yeah, so those are like the main things that I'm doing to really share what I know with people and just getting that word out and telling people is possible. You can do this. That's why I'm here. I want you to know that it is totally possible, especially when it comes to oral traditions. All of Oceania they have a very, very heavy tradition in oral backgrounds, right? So there's oral genealogies, oral chants. Our brothers and sisters out in the West and in Europe, they had written records, but our ancestors, they spoke and they shared things orally.

And so I'm trying to change the narrative to that oral traditions are a valid source, and we need to turn to them, we cannot dismiss them. Especially sharing that with a diaspora. They are the ones who I feel like need to hear it the most, because they are everywhere else around the world. And they deal with maybe it's not as obvious but sometimes there's assimilation, there's colonization, and there's racism, internalized racism. And so just trying to tell people like no, you cannot turn away from this. This is still possible. I've seen that that's brought a lot of hope to other people and their family history work that using both written and oral records will help us to achieve what has been thought of as impossible. It is 100% possible, period.

Heather Murphy : 23:02

That is great that you are encouraging people in that way.

Miya Jensen : 23:05

Thank you.

Heather Murphy : 23:07

So for my last question, what advice would you give to someone who is thinking about starting researching their family or maybe just isn't doing it right now? What would you say to them?

Miya Jensen : 23:20

First thing that comes to mind is to expect the unexpected, and be open to whatever you find. Because guess what, you're probably going to find some stuff that you're like, "Hold up. That was not what I had in mind about my family. That's not what I was taught." We find things all the time. People have tried to hide secrets, hide stories, change the narrative. As genealogists, a lot of times we find things that are uncomfortable or are contrary to the family lore. I would highly recommend that anybody going into

family history, anybody thinking about it, seriously, be open minded and ready for whatever's coming your way. Ready for the joy, ready for the pain.

But secondly, I would also advise too that, because this is a family work, you're going to have to talk to family, essentially. And I understand not all of us like talking to our family members, and that's okay. But I truly believe that when searching your family history work, that those living relationships that may be in strife right now, or non existent, can really bridge the gap and help knit your hearts together. And again, bring about the healing that you guys need. Because broken relationships exists for the purpose... I truly believe that they exist for us to also learn how to heal and to be made whole. I'm not saying that what people do wrong is okay, it's not. But because we are human, because we make mistakes and we're not perfect that leaves opportunities for all of us to be humbled and to heal ourselves and to heal these relationships with either the living or the dead. Please take into serious consideration of that as well, that speaking to your family will help open these things up.

And then also too, there are resources available even if we may not be as represented right now. I'm working to represent an underrepresented people and population. So hang tight, work with me, help me out. There's nothing... This work is all about collaboration too. So let's collaborate. Let's get together. And if it's not for Polynesians talk to somebody else. There's a lot out there. There's a lot for us to do. And there's always room for every single person in this world to come sit at the family history table and participate in this work. So come join us. Come talk to me. I love talking to people. I'd love to get to know you and cheer you on in your journey. It's a journey that all of us need to take a walk on. And if we've been ignoring it, we need to stop, face it and run with it. And again, I truly know and have experienced for myself the joy that comes from doing it and the healing even during the really difficult times. It is totally possible and realistic and obtainable.

Heather Murphy : 26:19

Thank you so much for joining me and sharing all of this information with me and the listeners. I really appreciate it.

Miya Jensen : 26:27

Thank you. Thank you. It's been fun. You're awesome, Heather. Thank you so much. Thank you, everybody listening to thank you.

Stories in Our Roots : 26:36

Thank you for joining me today for Stories in Our Roots. Please help this podcast grow by subscribing, leaving a review and sharing it with your friends. If you have feedback or would like to recommend someone to share their story, head to storiesinourroots.com and fill out the form. Thanks again for listening and I look forward to being with you again next week.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>