

A New Angle
MTPR Episode 26
Tailyr Irvine

Justin Angle This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today's guest is Tailyr Irvine, a Salish & Kootenai photojournalist from the Flathead Indian Reservation.

Tailyr Irvine Historically, native communities have been represented by stereotypical photos in regalia. Always in poverty porn, you know, all those kinds of things, and I work really hard to make my images not that. When I have a moment where someone's just human, that's what I look for the most.

Justin Angle Tailyr is a National Geographic explorer, and her work has been featured in The New York Times, The Washington Post, ESPN, CNN and the Smithsonian, among other prominent outlets. She's especially interested in representing the diversity within Native America and complex issues facing tribal communities. Tailyr, thanks for coming on the show.

Tailyr Irvine Thanks for having me.

Justin Angle So tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Tailyr Irvine I grew up on the Flathead Reservation in northwest Montana between Missoula and Kalispell, and my dad is a lineman for the power company there. And my mother ran a day care.

Justin Angle Sure. And you came to the University of Montana to study journalism. What motivated that choice?

Tailyr Irvine I didn't know what I want to do when I came here originally, I took a lot of prerequisites and one of those was the general journalism class. And so I liked it and I stuck with it.

Justin Angle Yeah, what was it about it you liked?

Tailyr Irvine I think just how interesting it was. It was actually like on paper, a very boring class. It's the history of media.

Justin Angle That's a boring title for class.

Tailyr Irvine Yeah, History of Media, something. And I was like, Oh God. But then I took it and we had like chapters, and some chapters are pretty boring, you know? But the other ones were really interesting, and I really liked about photography, specifically how the photos still had impact. Even, you know, decades later, where I still seen a photo and was like, Oh, wow, like, it hits you right in the chest, you know?

Justin Angle So you mentioned photography. So what stage of this process did you come in as as someone who is into photography? Or did you decide once you were here studying journalism that photography was kind of your medium?

Tailyr Irvine I think like a lot of people in my generation, I like taking photos. I am from, you know, the Instagram era where it just started happening and people posting more online and cameras are more accessible than they ever been. But I never thought it'd be a career, necessarily. I just thought like, photos are fun, but everyone wants to be a photographer.

Everyone likes taking photos. What kind of career is possible there? It wasn't until I got into the university and I was like, 'Oh, this could be a job, and I could do it'.

Justin Angle And what is it that you think like as you're as you're studying photography in school, like, what is it that you think allows somebody to create a career in photography and distinguish themselves from somebody that just is really good at snapping Instagram shots?

Tailyr Irvine I mean, honestly, it's a really fine line. I think anyone can tell stories. And that's what I love about photography most. You don't need to be at a certain caliber to to get into it. But I think the storytelling aspect differs where I think, you know, on social media, you're kind of telling your own story, but through journalism, you're telling community stories, places and people that you don't know, necessarily. And you're kind of just documenting history, which I think is the part of it I like the most.

Justin Angle Let's talk about some of those stories who get out of school here in 2018. During your time here, did you go you covered the Dakota Access Pipeline? Is that kind of your first immersive journalism experience or how did you kind of get into to that?

Tailyr Irvine When I got to the program, you know, we're studying basic 101 classes. I got an internship at my trial paper for the first semester that I was here, I think, and it was very low key. I just kind of went there and begged for a job and they gave it to me, you know? Yeah, sure, I could do whatever. And then the images I made from that, I got a bigger internship at the Billings Gazette in Billings. Sure, and that's where I kind of cut my teeth a bit. And then I came back the next semester to that summer, and that's when the Standing Rock was happening. And it was more something that's happening on my my social media feeds where I see and I was like, Oh, what? What's going on, what's happening? And I went there just out of curiosity. I wasn't necessarily planning on and documenting the whole thing. That's kind of how journalism works, I think. You get curious and you go find things and then you find stories there.

Justin Angle Yeah, yeah. And so then you graduate and covered sports for a while. And there's quite a bit of your stunning photography on your website is covering sports, a variety of levels — professional collegiate high school.

Tailyr Irvine I love sports photography. I think it's so much fun. Yeah, it's just always so dramatic, right? Whether it's, you know, Little League Baseball or its all the way up to the NFL, like there's always a winner and a loser, and there's always so much that feels like it's on the line, like even when you're photographing like your heart beats little fast and there's like a close game, you're like, What's going to happen? And I don't usually have a stake in any of the sporting events, but I'm like, 'Oh my God, I'm I'm really into this'. And it's also technically really difficult, which I like a lot.

Justin Angle talk more about that. I mean, because I'll snap photos at a game, they're just awful. But how how do these you know, you see these giant lenses on the sideline and these folks with like nerves of steel as the actions going on? And yeah, how do you do it?

Tailyr Irvine Yeah, I think I wasn't aware of how much of a workout would be. So we do have those huge lenses and they're just ginormous on a little tiny camera and you just have to kind of predict. There's so much goes into it, so for the NFL, for example, we had to file like 100 photos at halftime, which is about like 10 minutes. And so you have to have them off your camera and edit it and ready to go in about 10 minutes and captioned to get to the to the paper so they can upload it to the media very quickly. OK. And so when you're shooting, you have to like, predict where the ball is going to go, right? You don't know and you don't know what the big moment of the game is going to be. And so it's really stressful, but it it really helps like your reflexes and you just got to follow the ball. And sometimes sometimes it works, and sometimes you back focus and the ref isn't focused or, you know, sometimes it just hit or miss, but it really helps the workflow and help you get a lot better quicker.

Justin Angle And I was supposed to be competitive in the sense that there's a bunch of other journalists looking to capture the same moments and predict the same moments. Or maybe you're gambling on different things unfolding at different times.

Tailyr Irvine Yeah, yeah. And usually so I worked there for the paper, and so we had multiple covering different angles. And so you could kind of hopefully if you messed up or missed a hope, somebody else got it. But you know, if they're in your end zone and you and you missed the play, then it's like, you have to have a conversation with your editor. That's not that great. Like, I almost got it. It's a little blurry. I don't know. Yeah.

Justin Angle So how long did you do that for that? It was for the Tampa Bay newspaper?

Tailyr Irvine Yeah, Tampa Bay Times. I was there for about two years in Florida, and then I decided to make the jump back home, mostly for the pandemic. It brought me home. Which has been both a blessing and also different than I'm used to.

Justin Angle Sure, sure. And so since you've been here, when did the the opportunity to become a Nat Geo Explorer and those sorts of, you know, more independent photojournalist opportunities come to pass?

Tailyr Irvine So I started freelancing in 2019, I believe, and I was finishing up my time at Tampa Bay Times and ESPN reached out and they wanted me to do a story in Browning on the missing and murdered indigenous women movement through boxing. And so that was kind of my first leap into freelance, and I didn't know what I was doing exactly. Because it was a very it's very difficult to make a leap from having the support of entire newsroom to just it's you and your managing, you know, every emails and every aspect of the business. Yeah. And it's it's very scary and it's a lot more expensive because you have to buy your own gear and you have different other costs like, you know, I think ESPN asked me to, because I still living in Florida, fly browning for a week, get a hotel for a week. And, you know, buy the food and all the

expenses for an entire week rent a car and I was poor, you didn't have to big out. I didn't have the money and I was really worried that I was going to miss my shots for the freelance because it's scary. And that's the hardest part about breaking into the industry, I think, is the financial aspect of it. And so I was very transparent, my editor and said, I can't afford to front the flight. I can't afford to front the hotel room. I understand that you want me to photograph this, but you guys have to step up to help me. And they did. They use the company card, which I didn't know was even a thing. And that's kind of how I got my big jump into freelance. Because in that that project was about nine months and it paid very well and allowed me to have the cushion to front my other freelance expenses. And then the National Geographic grant that I received also helped a lot. It was around the time I started freelancing and as applying for a lot of grants for my big projects on Blood Quantum and I applied for three and I got them all. So I was really excited. But again, I had no idea how to navigate the financial aspects of it. And so I did the first chapter for the Smithsonian, and the second chapter is coming out with the National Geographic.

Justin Angle Yes. You mentioned the blood quantum work in the title being reservation mathematics. For the listeners that don't know, just explain to the extent possible, the whole blood quantum system in history,

Tailyr Irvine Blood quantum is so complex and so complicated. But essentially it boils down to Native Americans who are members of tribes are assigned a fraction of how much native they are at birth. And so you can only be one tribe. You can't be multiple recognized by the federal government. And it just it affects everything from land access to health care to education if you're not a member. So most tribal members have to be a quarter. And so that depends on your lineage going back to the 1900s where federal agents came to reservations and basically said, like, who was native and who wasn't native, so you started with a full blood. And then if the full blood from this tribe had a child with someone, another tribe, they only count one tribe. So and it's a half blood, you know, it's it disintegrates very quickly. And I think the easiest example that I use is my dad is nearly full blooded Salish Kootenai. My mother is crow. So

there are two different tribes. So when I was born, they had to pick which tribe to put me in. And since we lived on the reservation, they chose my father's tribe. And so that immediately erased all my mother's blood from my blood quantum. And so my fraction is seven sixteenths, which is a 16 under half right. Stay with me. Yeah, and I need a quarter. My child needs to be a quarter to be enrolled. And so since I am just under half, my child won't be enrolled unless I have a kid with another person for my tribe, which sounds like it's like, OK, just take some from your tribe, right? But there are only 8000 members of my tribe. I'm related to almost all of them. And if you take out, you know, people who are too old and the women, and it was just a very, very small number I'm left with, which is how it's designed to eradicate tribes. So. So we will cease to exist.

Justin Angle OK, so let's let's push on that a little bit. That piece about it being designed to eradicate the tribes, I mean, I don't think that's a leap that that many of the listeners maybe they had heard of blood quantum, but hearing about how you you lay it out there? Yeah, it seems like certainly that's a practical outcome in many ways.

Tailyr Irvine Yeah, it's designed that way. They first incorporate it to kind of see how many natives there were, right, to it to count the enemy.

Justin Angle Quantification?

Tailyr Irvine Yeah, so to speak. But then when you make it that you could only procreate within your tribe. Tribes have historically marry between each other to avoid what's happening right now, right? And so it's just a system that's designed to fail because you can't procreate within the same group for too long before you run into issues that we're running in today where it's like, you're related like everybody and there's not enough people.

Justin Angle And so how does this play out within tribal communities? I would assume there's kind of a range of feelings and opinions about the practice.

Tailyr Irvine Yeah, it's really difficult to change. Tribal nations have the power to change it in the Constitution themselves, but they've been operating on the system since nineteen hundreds, and it's designed into every aspect of the sovereignty, right? The constitutions. And their their ties with the federal government, like everything, is drawn on blood quantum. And so it's very hard to change a system that's been in place for over almost one hundred years. And there's not really a good answer to what to change it with, I think is what the problem is. No one knows exactly how to replace the system. If it's not blood quantum, then what? How do we decide membership? And it's very complex because it's tied to land access. And so you have tribes who have fought to protect their land for centuries, and it's scary to think about if they open up that they can open up the resources as well.

Justin Angle Was your entry point to understanding this system or being curious about the system of your own upbringing with parents that come from different tribes?

Tailyr Irvine Yeah, I think that played a big part when I was a kid and I didn't realize it. It just something that you grew up with, you know, if they marry some from your tribe or we're going to go extinct, you know, that kind of thing, and you don't realize the pressure that is until until I was older anyways. And then I realized how bizarre that is. You know, you leave home and you go to college. And none of my friends dealt with this. You know, they could marry or have kids, whatever they want. And there's not that much pressure. I mean, there is pressure from families, you know, to date certain people or, you know, to stay within their own culture. But it's not the pressure of date within your culture or your culture will cease to exist, right? And so I think I was like, why? Why is this like that? And, you know, do research was like, of course, it goes back to colonization and thinking about my own life and how it's affected me and who I've been able to date. And I was just curious what other people thought about it as well.

Justin Angle So you have this this curiosity about a system with so many complex sort of origins and now effects and how this plays out in your community. As we've talked about, how do you then approach investigating and telling stories about this system with your camera?

Tailyr Irvine Yeah, I've had this idea for a very long time. It's a story I want to do since I was a student, the university and I wanted to be first technically good enough to tell the story with photography. And so I waited, and then I also waited because I was nervous. How do you document something that doesn't really exist, right? Because blood quantum is not real. It's it's like it's the made-up number. And so how do I photograph? I made up number and I really struggled with how to approach that because it's so large. But right around the time I started receiving the grants, all three of my siblings were actually pregnant or expecting.

Justin Angle And facing the same sort of choices and challenges that you face.

Tailyr Irvine Yeah. And so it's the things that I had. It's my brother. He's having a he had a child with a Navajo woman. And because she's not from our tribe, their child is not going to be enrolled in our tribe. Even though it's going to grow up there and live there and be part of that culture. And my other sibling, she had a baby with the tribal member and so their kid is enrolled in so kind of the difference between the two and what that means when it plays out in in lifetime and in real life and the struggles and that comes with that, like my sister here and her partner had to go to the tribal office to make sure that they were enrolled right to go back as far as they can to make sure that there is no lineage mixed up there. My brother, he's an avid hunter. Our family is a big hunter. His child will never be able to hunt with him on tribal land, which is a big thing.

Justin Angle So I think that's an important point for the listener that doesn't necessarily understand some of these systems of enrollment in the tribes. We hear that term he in. Enrolled member and member of the Salish Kootenai tribe, but enrollment comes with it. Certain rights and privileges, I guess you would say, to land, to hunting rights, to access. Talk

about about that. Like what does it mean for the children of your siblings? One will have certain access to things and the other won't.

Tailyr Irvine I think one of the most difficult things with this blood quantum is that you're quantifying an identity, right? And it's it's very complex because the only other things that use blood quantum, you know, are horses and dogs, right? You know, purebred horse, purebred dog and then you have natives. And so it's just this clinically cold number that's attached and it affects real people. And I think people forget that.

And under the system, you can have a child who is a full blood. But I don't like using that term because it doesn't really exist. But you know, you have a very native child who's a member of, you know, six different tribes and not enough of any one tribe to be enrolled. And then she's discounted as a tribal member because she doesn't have enough blood to get into one. You know, it's it's full of flaws. And so I think my goal to document this is just kind of show how it just kind of show how many flaws are in this system, essentially. And so you have my brother who is native and his partner who is native and their child who is not going to be the right native on the reservation, which just doesn't make any sense. I think they struggle with that. My brother talks about a little bit. I've interviewed many times on it and he talks about, you know, how important hunting seemed to him, like he hunted with our grandfather and my father. And it really brings us close together. And it's a way to learn about the land and learn about where we come from and hear stories about the area. And she's not going to get that because she can never hunt there. And so that's just something that she won't be able to do, and she won't be able to camp with us without a permit, you know, and all these things are going to make her feel other from her other cousin, you know, are her other cousins. She has many, and it's just another barrier between people and trying to separate separate as I think. And it's complicated and families are separated. And it's it's very controversial and it's there's not an easy answer for it.

Justin Angle We'll be back to my conversation with Tailyr Irvine after this short break.

Justin Angle Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with photojournalist Taylor Irvine about her study of blood quantum.

So you've got one chapter out. The next chapter is a work in progress. Is that right?

Tailyr Irvine Yep, the first chapter is out with this Wilsonian. And the next one comes out in National Geographic.

Justin Angle Very good. And how many chapters will there be?

Tailyr Irvine It can be a book, probably.

Justin Angle Yeah. And so for listeners interested, like, how did you obviously through talking with your family members and so forth, but but how did you kind of educate yourself on this system for for folks that are learning about this complicated and in many ways maddening and upsetting to hear about practice? Like how would you advise people to educate themselves?

Tailyr Irvine I think you'd have to follow indigenous journalists. So I'm not the only one who works on this stuff. There are many others. There are podcasts out there that talk about it. All My Relations podcast has an episode on it. And there are a lot of lawyers who deal with it. So I think you it to follow, you know, indigenous educators and scholars and journalists and kind of creates a wide bubble so you can get, you know, as many opinions of as many facts as you can on it. It's complicated, and there's no one website to look at. You have to do the research and and find folks who are who are working on it.

Justin Angle Hmm. So in addition to the the reservation mathematics work, tell us about some of your other projects. What's what's exciting you at the moment?

Tailyr Irvine A lot of the work I do focuses on indigenous communities in Montana, and so I do a wide range of work on that for a number of publications. I just covered Chief Earl Old Person's Funeral and Browning for The New York Times. And I think my favorite part about working in Montana is that I've been to Browning probably five times, maybe in the last year, maybe probably more. And I'm getting a sense of community there. And so it kind of came a little bit to commission with the Earl Old Person piece where they opened up and they were really kind and welcoming. And it was overall just a really great experience about, you know, it's really hard to go in those communities when people are mourning and they're sad and be like, hi, tell me why you're so sad and let me photograph you at the funeral. It's a big ask, and it's not one that I take lightly. We wouldn't have our jobs without the people who open up like that, and I am just eternally grateful always. And members of the Blackfeet Nation really opened up and told wonderful stories about him. And that's kind of my work. I get to do when I get to meet people and get to hear their stories and and tell them, and I hope that they're happy with the piece. So that's my last project that I worked on. I also follow the missing and murdered indigenous women crisis. I've done a few projects on that following families who have lost loved ones and who are still searching for loved ones and who are still looking for answers. I feel very honored to be able to tell those stories and be able to have the families trust me with the stories of the loved

Justin Angle ones on your website and in this conversation, the word complex is used and you're interested in these complex topics and stories. How does that translate into your conception of what makes for a photograph that you want to use to represent some of these stories?

Tailyr Irvine I think the photos that are for those people haven't seen, you know, they outside the box. Historically, native communities have been represented by like stereotypical photos in regalia, always in poverty, porn, you know, all those kinds of things. And I work really hard to make my images. Not that. So a lot of my images just have people being people in it. And I think when I have a moment where someone's just human, that's what I look for the most with

the MMW one. You know, there was one of the daughters of one of the women who was murdered. She was, you know, putting her on her mother's grave. And to me, that's something that we all do. We all go to visit graves and take care of them. But you know, she's eight and she's has a shovel and she's, you know, patting down her, her mother's grave. And it just moments like that hit me really hard. And it's just like, this shouldn't be. And I think that illustrates the the whole entire MMIW movement like this, should it be.

Justin Angle And so a lot of your projects are pretty heavy. Juxtapose that with some of your sports journalism. There's certainly heavy moments in sports, but it's a win or loss, and you can feel like it's the end of your world. But it's it's really not. But also tremendous highs as well captured in your work. How do you kind of balance your sort of exploration of the highs and lows of emotion?

Tailyr Irvine I really struggle with that often. Historically, journalists were expected to go into those communities and be robots and not have any feelings and, you know, witnessed these horrific events and be OK. And I think we've had a 180 in the industry where we don't do that anymore. Journalists are people and they have feelings, and the work we cover really affects us. And you know, I deal with that a lot to the work I cover is extremely, extremely emotional and it's it gets really hard. And this last year had a string of really tough assignments. You know, I love doing this work. I think it's really important, but it does take a toll.

I covered mothers who lost a child in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, jails and I covered, you know, the missing and murdered indigenous women crisis, I'm covering these families who are mourning all the time and also working on just incredibly heavy, heavy stuff. And you know, this last year, I lost a lot of family to COVID and even covered stories. You know, it's it takes a toll. And so for me, I had to take probably a month off because it was just really, really sad. And I think what counteracts that the highs are having having the work published and having, you know, the family be grateful and having people have eyes on on the issues, but the lows are definitely there. It's definitely hard to suddenly hard to balance that. I think and I do try to

do sport stories as much as I can or stories that are a little more uplifting. But the stories I really want to tell are inherently right, inherently sad and hard, and that's why I want to tell them. But I'm also working on balancing that better. It's a little more difficult because there aren't sports major teams in Montana. So I'm working on more pitches to travel and tell sports stories.

Justin Angle OK. You're young, right? And that's not a knock. I mean, your work is fantastic, but you've got so much more life of head of you to learn and grow and tell more stories or tell them in different ways. I mean, how do you think about the years ahead and what is it about what? What are you working on to to get better at what you do or do things differently or things like that?

Tailyr Irvine Yeah, this is exciting. I've gotten to do a lot in my career so far. It's been fantastic and fun and a whirlwind, and I'm doing things I never thought I'd be able to do. You know, I'm just from a small town in Montana, and now I meet with editors in New York and I travel to New York often and I travel across the country photographing, which is feels like an unreal job. Like, I get to do this every day is incredible. That being said, I don't know what the future holds. I think right now I'm really focused on representation. I am a co-founder of a thing called Indigenous Photograph, which is a database of over 70 indigenous photographers predators to to find when they want to find someone to do that work is to help get more indigenous photographers hired in the industry because we hear often that, Oh, I would love to have an indigenous photographer for that. I just don't know where to find them. I just wonder where they are. And it's like, OK, well, here they are now. Right now, what's your excuse? You know.

Justin Angle Right. Exactly.

Tailyr Irvine And so I'm working on that and kind of working to create a community of native photographers who can have resources shared between them and have more opportunities. So it's been very exciting. And so I'm working a lot of the behind the scenes stuff to get other

indigenous photographers hired and recognized and noticed for the incredible work that they're doing. Same time, I'm still photographing. I have my Nat Geo project and I'm still working on that. I think in the future I might look into more editing roles because that's kind of the main gatekeeper. I think between photographers and publications is who's hiring the photographers, and that's usually an editor role. And so eventually, I think I'd like to try that and see if it fits. But who else? I don't know. This could change. I could do something different next year. No one else.

Justin Angle Yeah, I mean, that's the beauty of it, right? It's fluid. You know, you seem like somebody who has been able to combine, you know, passion, ability, hustle execution to create opportunity for yourself and then use that opportunity to grow into more opportunity. And now you're in a position where you can open up opportunity to others. How would you advise somebody who's maybe hearing this and wanting to break into journalism, wanting to break into photography or somehow, you know, create opportunity for themselves? How what advice might you have for somebody getting started?

Tailyr Irvine Thank you for getting started. My biggest advice is just to get out and take photos. Any any camera works like the best camera you have is the camera you have in your pocket or with you at the time. And just, you know, find things that interest you and find things that you're curious about. And, you know, if you're curious about it, I'm sure other people are too. And so dove into those stories that you really want to know because I think that's what I did is I followed things I was curious about and it just kind of led into other things and it just bounces off each other. And so I think if you follow your curiosity, that will be extremely helpful, as well as follow people online who are doing the work that you like and find people who are inspiring you and keep it going, I think.

I often hit walls or I'm just feeling so inspired and and on one of the lows we talked about earlier, and then I go to a portfolio review and I see people who are doing incredible work. Or I go to a workshop and people are just incredibly inspiring. There's so much fantastic work out

there that I admire and that a lot I want to emulate. I think they're fantastic and it really helps me up when I'm when I feel kind of down. And I think someone just getting into it find that work that really inspires you, makes you excited about the job, makes you excited to do this because that's what's going to carry you through the career.

Justin Angle Yeah, great advice. So for folks that want to maybe get inspiration from your work, where can they where would you direct them? Where can they find you online?

Tailyr Irvine They can find me online at Taylor Irvine, both on Instagram and Twitter. My first name is spelled T A I L Y R, and then my website is tailyrirvine.com.

Justin Angle Awesome. Well, Tailyr, thanks for telling us about your work. Best of luck and I look forward to more great things.

Tailyr Irvine Thank you for having me.

Justin Angle Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from University of Montana alums Michelle and Loren Hansen. A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from consolidated electrical distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio.

Aj Williams is our producer. VTO, Jeff Ament and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot. See you next time.