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[00:00:12] **Speaker 1** It's Anne, Egan, Waka. You say it like Wausau. Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin. I was born and raised there. Daughter of Edith and Hilary Sparkuwaka. My dad was an environmental activist, leader. He's in the DNR Conservation Hall of Fame. I love it. Egan Waka Waka, like wasa with a K, waka, wasa, wake. Let me see my name so fast that people call me Annie Egan, Annie Wacka, so I say Annie Egen Wack, and they're like, hi Annie. I'm like, well, my friends call me, Annie. I'm, like, that's cool. I'm okay, Wack is my maiden name, so I'll keep that one. You know what? Whatever you want to call me is fine. You can call me Ann or Annie. I kind of feel I think Annie would be okay because I think it's kind of such a personal interview. Yeah, that probably would be better and you know what you're talking about. You did! What was going on? Excellent. Oh, that's excellent. Oh it's a beautiful I have a lot of family up there. It is. Thank you for saying that. Okay, first of all, I do want to say that we are a 501c3 non-profit, so we are non-partisan. So we make sure that when we go out that we don't talk to political candidates. Our goal is to get our people, our Native people to the polls. So we work on combating historic voter disenfranchisement. Also, we work on contemporary barriers that people may face, educating our voters. and registering people to vote and improve policies that impact our native community access to the polls. And the key is that we do a lot of one-on-one and that's how I think we're successful. Well, that's kind of changed a little bit here and there. So we've had voter disenfranchisement where people are actually faced some challenges where maybe their tribal ID won't be accepted or they're turned away or the local election commission just gives them the incorrect information. And I can give you an example that I experienced about, it was in 2014, I actually moved to a Milwaukee suburb. and I went to vote. And I was registering and had all my information and she was, I was real excited. And she was asking me all the questions, you know, name, date, where you live now, age. And then she wanted to know where I was born. And I told her I was on the Menominee Reservation. And she said, you're Indian? And I said, yes, ma'am, I am. And she says, you can't vote. Indians aren't allowed to vote! And I just looked at her and I was having one of those days, you know, where it rained when I got out of my car, kind of every little thing. And I looked at, I said, ma'am, I can't vote. We are allowed to vote. I'm Native American. I was born in Wisconsin. I'm in Menominee County, which is a reservation. I voted before and she was a gas that I said I voted for. And I Just looked at it and I said ma'ame, I can vote, I've voted before. And she said, Indians can't, vote, you're not allowed. And I think She was really confused when she went to the head of the poll and I could see she got a little talking to and she came back and she was quite elderly. And she said, ma'am, I just want to tell you I was following policy procedure. This wasn't racist. And then I voted. She finally let me vote. I had the right ID and et cetera. But you know, that story I tell because people take voting for granted and we shouldn't. But also we have people that may face this and I want them to know, I don't care how old you are. If you're just turned 18 or if you're 90, if people treat you like that, you have the right to vote. You make sure you let people know that you're not going to leave until you vote. Yes, she did. She was so elderly, I think she may have remembered when we didn't have the right to vote. So we got it 100 years ago, it was 101 years ago. And it took some states longer to get the tribes to vote like I think the last was in the 70s and it was in, I want to say out east. It was a county out east, state out east that was one of the last to give the native people the right vote. But she was misinformed. And then the happy story is I went back When I voted like three years ago, I vote every year, but I voted at the three years ago when I went to vote, I had my tribal ID and she took it without question. And I was just using my license to vote at the first time. And she said, oh, that's acceptable. And then I told her my story real quick. And she says, can you come back? I said, sure. And I went and voted and I came back and she said I wanted to tell you that a high school kid was here. He just turned 18. He was so excited and he wanted to vote. And he said, how much does it cost to vote? I was like, are you kidding me? So that tells me we have to educate all people, our native people, but all people about voting. And we actually have gone into some high schools on our reservations and I've got some in Milwaukee area to tell our people about boarding and encouraging them. And that's something we'll continue to do. We need to educate our people throughout the year. And actually as they go through the school system and I'll be working with another group in Milwaukee that works in the MPS that will work at getting people to vote. Yeah, well, you know, the lot of these are anecdotal, so personally experienced. So that's why I shared my experience. But what we've had in the past where people went to vote and they told them weren't registered and they were, and they insisted and they weren't, they were told they weren' registered. This happened on my reservation a while back and she was adamant. Eventually they let her vote because she was so adamant and she said, I'm not re-registered because I registered to vote. And I know I'm on your list. They finally found it. But it depends, there's a lot of different ways that have oppressed our people in voting. So I'd have to say that the one thing I could speak to is my incident because with that, I literally, it was horrible, but I know people have had that before. Yes, they are. Isn't that great? I love it. Tribal IDs are a valid form. And so when we're registering people, a lot of people want to use their tribal ID, and that's just awesome. I love doing that. It's just so awesome. I love that. Most people have it. They get it from their respective enrollment offices. So they have to go to their enrollment office to get it. But also it's used for IDs for certain services as well. So like health services or community events or something. So it's really important to have that tribal ID. But you know, it's kind of wild that we are the only culture that have to prove who we are through a piece of plastic that has our number, but it's accepted, which is really awesome. That's great. They do know, we work with the tribes to get the word out. So it's kind of a common knowledge, it seems like when you turn 18, but we have to educate people too. We are in the community 365 days a year, well, except holidays, but we are out. We wanna make sure our people have received the proper education, that they're aware that they can use their tribal ID, what other forms are available. So it is up to us and the tribes to educate our people. And I think everyone's doing a pretty good job because... I've yet to encounter someone who has a tribal ID who doesn't know they can't use it. They know they could use that to vote. Well, that I really can tell you that I know the tribes work with the people to get their tribal ID. There's various ways they can do it by like, for example, if someone wanted to go to the tribe can send out a letter to someone using the tribal address and the tribal office address to them at that address and then they can use that as their address for voting. So other and other times it just We just keep working towards getting the people the right to vote with them who have P.O. boxes. It's problematic and it's something we're working on. We need better policies for that. I do know that the voter count is usually, we say about 70,000 possible Native votes. That's a number that, you know, it's hard to calculate, but that's pretty much what we use. The U.S. census is how that number is based on it, but the census isn't exactly correct either. I can give you an example of why. For example, in Milwaukee, I talked to someone who worked on the census, she's in Milwaukee for 20-some years. And when she sees the number come out, she said, we're higher. You know, they say we're about 8,000, et cetera, but she said a director also from an organization said it's more around 15 to 20,000. Everyone pretty much goes with 20,00 Native Americans in Milwaukee area. So that vote is, that could vote. We can't, we can't track all the registered voters. It's something, it's hard to do that with. current system. So we use it by going to the tribes and finding out, but we'd have to go to the election commission. Then we have to fit. It involves a lot that I really don't I'm not privy to about how we can access any registered. That's actually accurate. Yes, 70,000 possible voters in the state of Wisconsin, and that's about 1% of the population, which can really have an impact on some, some votes, some races. Well, I could give you an example for the 2023 spring race, spring election, compared to 2019 spring election. On the Red Cliff Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa, the voter turnout was increased by 130%. And that's where we're working hard. My reservation, I was on the reservation working on increasing voter turnout during that 2019 in the 2023 span. And we increased voter turnout by 75% on the Menominee Reservation. I'm really proud of that because we put a lot of work into it. Exactly, I think one of the key is the protecting our environment is one protecting the water quality from Lake Superior to, for example, the. Wolf River, the pristine Wolf River on my reservation. That's one issue. Sovereignty, tribal sovereignty, protecting our rights to govern ourselves, protecting your culture. And what goes with the water protection is our wild rice beds. Our sturgeon and walleye, ancient spawning, fishing areas. That's also up, that it's a big concern for our people. I think that the Wisconsin Indian Child Welfare Act is another issue where native children are placed with fit and willing indigenous relatives to help them preserve their culture stability in preventing trauma, because before they were normally placed with non-native families. So again, one of the key is that we keep hearing is mother earth is ill. and we need to take care of her. We need to sustain our wild rice beds. We need sustain our ancient wall-line spawning grounds. We need protect our waterways. We need clean and drinking water. And we've had people that, I've had tell me that Mother Earth is sick, she's throwing up. An elder came up and told me that. She said we have to vote to protect her. And then I had another person tell me Mother Earth's ill, she has a fever. She doesn't know what she's doing. And then another elder told me in Milwaukee, Mother Earth is in menopause. She doesn' know what wants to do. So we use humor a lot to get our message across. Exactly, exactly. Well, I can't speak to the tribal federal level because that's not really what we're talking about now, but with the state, I don't think there's confusion. I think that we have fought for our rights hard to have our sovereignty on our reservations and it's respected. And we have our governor is very respective of our tribal sovereignty. And like I said, it's not something that was just given to us. We fought hard for it. You know, that's interesting because we are going out now and going to the community and talking to the youth. And I think that's something that we're gonna have to make sure we keep working on because... As they become 18, some aren't aware of how to vote yet. So I've had people say, what do I do? How do I register? So we help them register, but we go into like the tribal schools. I know they've done that. They've gone into the high schools near the reservations. I've gone in to MPS and talked to several groups about the importance of voting and registering. And we had quite a bit of success with that. So I think it's not only the native people who need to educate our kids, but all people, because... Our children aren't all on the reservation either. Some are in like the urban Milwaukee areas. But I had hope, especially because that kid wanted to pay the vote, you know? It was sad that he thought that, but you know, yeah. What we're doing is we are actually going to be doing a lot of visits throughout our communities, doing a lot on one-on-ones, which is the best way to get our people to talk to us and understand the importance of voting if they don't know it. But now we're having people come to us when we're out tabling at events, say like at a powwow or at a community event where they're like, you know, scavote then, that was a slang we use, let's go vote, scavate then. And they said, I'm registered or, you know, one person that went to a powwow and he said, I'm not going to vote, it doesn't matter. Talked for 20 minutes and I told him why it's important. And you know again, we are in a 501C3. So we're very careful, we maintain that, which actually makes it easier because we talk about issues. And we had an event on March 11th in Milwaukee, which was part of a food for thought type event we had in Milwaukee. Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and the Menominee Indian Tribal, Wisconsin. I can speak to my event, and I know the other two are successful, but we all had Native American Rights Fund Attorney, Alison Ness would come in and speak. We had over 50 people in my event in Milwaukee, and it was at the Indian Council of the Elderly who's co-sponsored with us. And we had people from 10 different organizations from Milwaukee, Native organizations, attend the event, listen to what the message was. and they in turn pass it on to their people. And I work with as many organizations in Milwaukee as I can, and then I visit these. I've been revisiting them as well throughout the year. So it just doesn't stop. It's not just right before the election. It's all year long and it's enjoyable. I feel like I've be preparing for this job since I left my reservation in 1978. Went to Marquette, worked for the teachers union. I worked at an Indian health center for a while, which I'm now on the board, you know, Chair of the Board at the Gerald L. Indian Igneous Health Center. but I've developed a lot of contacts. And through that, I've also developed a lotta skills and know the culture well enough that it was brought up without my reservation by my father particularly, and how to speak to people and make sure we maintain respect and pride for our culture. And I'm so honored that I have this position. I'm extremely honored that I'm allowed to do something that I truly love and I feel very purposeful. Thank you. Thank you, I didn't know about it. Thank you, thank you. I think it was the protecting mother earth, which is really strong and also tribal sovereignty. And he actually filled out a pledge to vote card and said he would vote. So then we put them in our system and then we do emails to people and then you send voting reminders out and we had a tailgate last summer, which was pretty successful. We had a donation of a thousand tickets to the board games. We had a big tailgate and we had a color guard with all the tribes represented and a drum. And I had people, my one cousin came up, she said, Annie, I registered to vote. I'm gonna vote. And on last Friday, I met a woman who said she wanted me to help her register and I was helping her and she didn't have her ID or anything like that. So she said I could tell she was nervous. I said, I'll pick you up and I'll take you to the poll. Bring your elect, bring a bill and we'll go to the pole and you can register and I will make sure you're okay. I'm not gonna tell her what to do, but. I think she was a little nervous, so if I could help one person out, I'll do it. If I can help up 30, great. If I could up more, awesome. Yes. It does, and you know, it's just amazing that. we can make such a difference now for the next seven generations. That's one of our main lines is work for the seventh generations. What we do now, we think about what we're doing now, how will that affect the next 7 generations? And the key is to voting and maintaining all our cultural identities and sovereignty and protecting Mother Earth. And it's just a blessing to be able to do this work. The creators blessed me. Thank you!