



AN ENTREPRENEUR, CITY COMMISSIONER, AND TRIBAL LEADER—BUT FIRST AN ADULT STUDENT



A Sova Interview with Mark Wilson ¹

Mark Wilson runs a growing [media production company](#) and is a [city commissioner](#) in Traverse City, Mich. He's also a long-time leader in the [Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians](#).

Before all that, he was an adult student—first at a community college, and then years later at a public university where he got his bachelor's and master's degrees.

Wilson recently partnered with our team at [Sova](#) on a Lumina-funded project to explore what kinds of data and information adult learners of color actually want from colleges and universities. His work on that project—as a cultural liaison and media consultant—was informed by his own experiences as an adult student.

At the beginning and end of the project, I interviewed Wilson. In the first interview, I asked him about his educational background, what he knew about college before he ever enrolled, and what he thinks about college now. In the closing interview, after focus groups and interviews with 36 Indigenous adults in northwest Michigan, we talked about what we learned. The following edited interview combines elements from both interviews. For more on the larger project that these focus groups were a part of, see our new report [Turning the Mirror](#).

(((Can you share some of your experiences in education?

Wilson:

As a kid, I had experiences that I now understand to be about systemic racism, just little things. If there was lice in the classroom, the first kid to get blamed was the Native American kid and the Jewish kid. I got labeled as the troublemaker really early on, and I got held back. At that time I didn't recognize that teachers were bringing in bags of clothes as their kids hand-me-downs to me. Those are all things that used to make me feel a little less, because other kids saw that and would point it out. I went to all these different elementary schools. At one of them, the principal outright told me I was a troublemaker, and the kids were sure to remind me that I wasn't white. This is by third grade.

By the time I got to seventh grade, my anxiety was through the roof. And I kind of leaned in more to being the troublemaker. I thought it was just funny to not try anymore. And you skate by. And so thinking about higher education, I didn't think much. There was a program called Upward Bound that Northwestern Michigan College had, it was a grant for students who would be first-time college graduates. My parents hadn't graduated college and my father hadn't graduated high school, and it was that program made me think about college for the first time and had me experience a summer camp, staying on campus.

¹. Alison Kadlec conducted the interviews that make up the source material for this edited piece, and Mark Wilson hosted the interviews at New Leonard Media's studio.

The Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians had an adult school, which basically was GED coaching for high school drop outs, which I was that point. But I wasn't successful at that either. So, I kind of floundered for a while and I sold weed, which eventually got me arrested, and worked various part-time jobs. But I didn't do a whole lot of much.

My anxieties came to a head by the time I was maybe 19, and more or less felt like I didn't have purpose or direction in my life or community. I wasn't contributing. It started leading to some suicidal ideation. And some time went by, a couple of friends of mine had been in jail and they got their GED. I thought it was cool those programs existed, and I figured if friends were doing the work to get a GED under those circumstances, I really should do that too. So, I got my GED.

Then about six months later, I decided to take advantage of the Michigan Indian Tuition Waiver. And I learned that the Grand Traverse Band offered a higher education stipend if you go to school. I wasn't really thinking about what I would do with school, just that it was kind of a means to get by. You either work some lame part-time job or treat school like a part-time job.

(((How did college go for you?

Once I started, there were some prerequisites. I had several courses I had to take just to get to a place where I was allowed to take college courses, and that took a lot of time. But once I had taken intro to psych, it inspired me to take abnormal psych and anthropology. And then I took a sociology class. Those social sciences classes taught me a lot more about myself. And that's when I was able to reflect on my childhood and see some of these things that I had gone through. That made me want to go to school more. The English course I took was mainly just sitting down and being forced to look inward and write about yourself and look at your life. And it really helped. So I got the bug, and I stuck it out, and I started taking courses related to music and anything towards marketing my own music.

I had pretty much taken every visual communications course that the school offered without formally enrolling in the visual communications program. And then I learned that there were other students that I was working alongside of who had already gone and got jobs doing these various tasks that we were learning. And I hadn't even grasped that that's why you would even take that course in the first place. Why would you take a graphic design course if you don't plan to be a graphic designer? Why would you take time-based media if you don't want to work with some film? I was just doing it because it was fun. So it really blew my mind to hear you could get a job doing these things. And that's primarily what inspired me to even finish the associate and then the bachelor's and eventually my master's degree and start a career in multimedia.

(((When we first met, you told me a little bit about your general journey, and I was stuck by the parts related to your language and math requirements. Can you say more about that here?

When I enrolled to get my bachelor's degree, I was married by then, with my kids and mortgage, and seeing some hard times. I had gotten an audio certificate from a trade school, an audio production trade school outside of state that was more of a private for-profit. I owed money and a good way to buy myself some time was to go back to school.

So I enrolled in a liberal studies program through Grand Valley State University. And that temporarily settled the student loan situation. When I was at Northwest Michigan College, I barely got through any of my math. I was always like, 'When am I ever going to want to know how to calculate the speed of a river?'

I didn't care about taking any higher math classes. And every single time I've tried to move on, the requirement of a higher math class would just stop me. And so Grand Valley says, 'You can get the Bachelor of Science, but you have to take a higher math class. You have to go take statistics.' And I didn't want to do that. And I said, 'Well, what about the Bachelors of Arts?' They say, 'Well, that will require a foreign language.' I say, 'Great, because I would like to study Anishinaabemowin, which is the language of my people from here.' And at first Grand Valley didn't want to honor that. I presented several arguments and this went back and forth for a while.

I found a college up north in Petoskey, North Central Michigan College, that did offer Anishinaabemowin and Grand Valley eventually agreed to accept that. It was great of them to accommodate that request, and I hope it's something they offer to their students now in general. Luckily enough, one of the language teachers at the tribe knew the instructor for the course and introduced me to her. They made it possible for me to take the class. I would go on my lunch break at work, at the tribe, to my language class. I'd bring my homework assignments and do them with the instructor there, and then I'd just go up to NCMC for my tests.

And that satisfied my language requirement, and I also think does a real service to my people, anybody that's learning the language and using the language. And I got through that degree program. When I went to enroll for my master's degree, they required statistics because there was going to be a lot of research. And I successfully convinced them that my final research paper, my thesis for my bachelor's program, would suffice as proof that I'm capable of doing research.

And so I was able to get accepted into this program, once again, without a higher math course. At the very end, for my master's thesis, it would've been impossible for me to do it without learning some statistics. So when that time came, I had about six weeks to get on YouTube every single night and teach myself statistics. But it worked out, and I was able to get my MA. Yeah, so it's been a long journey from my GED to trade certificates and an associate degree from a community college to the bachelor's and finally my master's degree.

(((**When I reached out to you about these conversations and about working together on this, what did you think about it, and why was it appealing to you?**

I'm going to answer this in a roundabout way. So, from a very young age I wanted to be an MC and a DJ in the hip hop community. And that's what led me to all the things that I enjoy doing to this day. I still DJ professionally, and I love that. But it's also what led me to graphic design and video editing and audio engineering. But the important thing for me is that hip hop culture is a sociopolitical movement because it gives identity to those that have had their identities stripped from them, whether involuntarily or even voluntarily in our society.

So even those that have migrated to the Americas whenever, it's a new, pure American art form and culture. So, it was hip hop music that made me think about my own community and where my cultural identity had been stripped. And saying that means, I was raised by a full-blooded Odawa who had been removed from his home and raised in a white foster care system. And other brothers and sisters, parents, his parents, parents' parents, et cetera, ad nauseam for generations, had been forced into the Catholic boarding schools through a forced assimilation.

And so for me, luckily in my lifetime, the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians had taken their federal reaffirmation, and was recognized by the federal government as a sovereign tribal nation. So I was very privileged to be raised as a dual citizen, a citizen of the United States of America and a citizen of my tribal nation. I am both of these things, and hip hop as a social movement has always spoken to me in this way. So my question for myself became how can I contribute to those same ideas and give back to my community, my tribe, and my country?

Before I was elected to the tribal council, I was the multimedia specialist in the communications department. It was an entrepreneurial role, where I found a lot of the grant-funded programs, and helped them come up with creative ways to solve their communication needs. And I really liked that work and wanted to get back to more of that kind of thing.

When you reached out, I'd already been working with several clients through New Leonard Media to help them with various digital tasks, clients that share my values and care about community and advancing positive change. And when I saw that Sova shares those same values and was looking for a cultural liaison to the Native communities here to help make sure our voices are heard when it comes to education, and then also utilize some of my digital handyman skills, it spoke directly to my heart.

(((As you reach out to people in your community for these focus groups, what kinds of questions did they ask and how did that shape how you went into the groups?

What I said about my anxieties growing up—there's a lot more of that in our community. And so you can trust that a lot of the participants have similar backgrounds. Some maybe less anxious, some a lot more. When I started making phone calls, people were skeptical and they asked a lot of questions. They trust me, but for good reason they don't trust researchers. Some of the conversations that were supposed to just be quick outreach ended up being long conversations. And I'd direct people to the Sova website so they could see for themselves that you were an organization trying to do good work. But there was a lot of skepticism and I could hear some of that anxiety. Before we did the groups, I was worried that we wouldn't be appropriately sensitive to that and I remember we talked about that and made decisions about location and catering to help create the right environment. And that worked, though we didn't get it all right. Looking back there were things we could have done better, like when we realized that we needed a smudge space away from the conversations for people who needed to step away from conversations that can be emotionally hard. I feel like I should have anticipated needing that, and in the future we'll definitely do that. That's part of the learning.

Overall, I think we did a good job of creating the right kind of environment for real conversation. But it's hard, especially when you ask somebody in their 40s to come talk about why they never went to college. Some said, "I never needed to. I had the tribe." The tribe recognizes years of service in lieu of a degree. So if a job requires a bachelor's degree, but you've worked in human resources for six years, the tribe recognizes that experience as qualification.

But then others really surprised me. One in particular is a very successful businessperson who sold their business recently and can retire in their early 40s if they want. But they're not, they continue working because that's what's in them, to grind. And I really expected them to be the same way. 'I didn't need to—didn't need college.' But no, they told me that it was a self-esteem issue, that they weren't raised by anybody that went to college. They didn't feel confident in it. I really admired hearing that, because I've known this person for a while and I wouldn't have thought that.

I think the report you ended up producing really captures the insights from these conversations, and not just these conversations but the focus groups with Black and Latinx adults your team did as part of the project in other states with [Ambassador Stories](#) playing the role New Leonard play for the Indigenous groups here in Michigan.

(((So what's next for New Leonard Media? I know our crew at Sova is looking forward to more collaboration with you. You and I have been talking about deepening the work we did together on "Turning the Mirror." I'm excited about that, but what else is on the horizon for NLM?

Yeah, I'm excited about more work with your team, too. I'm getting sharper in how I position and explain what New Leonard can do for clients when it comes to media consultancy, full-service recording studio offerings and the rest. I recently rebranded and relaunched the New Leonard website because it feels like it's time to really dial into and express who we are and who we want to work with. I've been thinking a lot about the ideal customer avatar. I want to work with organizations like yours that aim to advance positive change, organizations that go beyond the bottom line and care about leaving the world a better place. Ryan and I are going to keep our [In Pursuit Of](#) podcast going which, as you know, is about highlight the work of people and organizations in Northwest Michigan that are working to create positive change.

On the horizon, I hope New Leonard and Sova get to work together on that deeper dive we've been talking about on Indigenous learner voice in the Great Lakes region. But tomorrow I'm leaving for a weeklong editing retreat to work on a documentary [Pathway to the Sea](#) about Māori connections to the ocean and the responsibilities Māori tribes and individuals take on to care for coastal bio-cultural communities. I'm a part of [Dr. Nick Reo's](#) team on the project, and it's been an incredibly meaningful experience and one that resonates with me as an Indigenous person in the Great Lakes region.

And when I get back, I'll be finishing up a collaboration with the [Michigan Community College Association](#) on a set of digital resources for colleges. That has been a lot of fun to work on. There's a lot of good work to be done, and I want New Leonard to be a part of it.

(((To learn more about Mark Wilson and New Leonard, visit newleonard.com.

NEWLEONARD