

# The Zest S13E17

**Karen:** [00:00:00] I would wish for our land to be back, go to that pristine state again so that we could really go back and eat the way that our ancestors did. I'm

**Dalia:** Dalia Colon, and this is The Zest: citrus, seafood, Spanish flavor, and southern charm. The Zest celebrates cuisine and community in the Sunshine State. Today, helping indigenous Floridians get healthy.

How do you eat healthy when it feels like the system is set up for you to fail? I mean, I certainly feel that way. And for indigenous Floridians, it's become especially challenging to eat the foods that sustained their ancestors for generations. Having been pushed off their land, given foods from the government that their ancestors wouldn't even recognize, and finding their surroundings polluted, many members of Florida's Seminole Tribe wrestle with lifestyle-related health issues.

Karen Two Shoes knows this all too well. After being diagnosed with diabetes, she decided to make [00:01:00] some changes. She lost 80 pounds and then went back to school to become a registered dietician. Today, Karen works as nutrition coordinator for the Seminole Tribe of Florida. She's helping her fellow community members reclaim their health by incorporating traditional Seminole practices with what's realistic for us in the 21st century.

Karen spoke with me about her own health journey and how she's inspiring her community.

**Karen:** I grew up here on the Hollywood reservation. There are, like, four reservations. We also have some satellite reservations, but we have the four main reservations. And I, I grew up on the, uh, urban reservation that's right in the city.

The others are kind of not like that. It is one of the most populated reservations, and my particular family was one of the first families to move onto this Hollywood reservation. It was the Dania reservation back then. My father was tribal chairman, or, like, the chief of the tribe back in the '70s, and my mother was a, is an entrepreneur, a [00:02:00] very successful entrepreneur. You know, she run, she was running a lot of place, uh, running businesses and stuff like that.

So my father, now that's, you know, our tribe, you know, we've had a lot of financial success, but my, my father was a chairman when we did not have any of this financial success. We were very poor as a tribe, and we were actually slated for termination by the United States government. And, uh, well, then our people got together, that was like in the 1940s, 1950s actually, and our people said, "Well, can you please let us get our act together?"

Let us get our kids in school and let them learn what's going on, and so that when they do go out in the world, you know, they'll at least be able to be self-sufficient." And during that time, a lot of tribes were slated for termination, and it wasn't until Richard Nixon came through that he ended termination and gave us something called self-determination, and that allowed tribes to, uh, basically go in and, and decide what they wanted to do, of course, with [00:03:00] the help of the US government and, you know, backed by treaties, et cetera.

And so, you know, that allowed us to, you know, kind of find our own path and, and, uh, my dad was very successful bringing the tribe to where it is today. He's the one that first started gaming in the country. We had the first bingo hall, and then we also... Well, it started with the cigarettes actually. We started with tax-free cigarettes, and then it moved into gaming.

And so that eventually has got us into the Hard Rock International and, and to where we are now. But the thing about it is that that's very important to understand is that we were the first tribe to do that, and my dad, my dad's vision wasn't just for this tribe, but to help all of Native America so that we could have the funds to be more self-sustaining.

And so this was like a precedent setting, not just for us, but for other tribes to be able to self-determine their own future and be able to collect, you know, to start businesses and collect funds. And in the end, uh, you know, I think a lot of reservations or a lot of tribes, and, and ours especially, was very focused on, [00:04:00] uh, health and education.

And so, uh, you know, my dad, you know, we didn't have a lot of good health services, and my dad was, like, very determined to make sure that we had the same health opportunities as everybody else. You know, making sure that we got, you know, uh, doctors from the Indian Health Service and, uh, setting up clinics and making sure that we had doctors and, and, uh, nurses, and it grew from there.

And then, of course, educating our children and, you know, to go to school and, and become productive members of society and, and, and come back to the tribe

and help, and help with, uh, with whatever they can. That's kind of where I come from. That's kind of my understanding and where I was motivated to come back and help

**Dalia:** Wow, that's so cool.

What's your dad's name? He's like a celebrity.

**Karen:** My dad's name is, uh, Howard Tommy. He was called Mr. Self-Determination, and he was tribal chairman back in the '70s, early s- you know, between the '70s. I was a child at the time. You know, he was very, a very busy man, so I kinda d- you know, kinda had, uh, kinda had a family, kinda had a father, but, but he was out a lot because he was, he had [00:05:00] a lot to do.

He was very definitely, you know, s- you know, very historical figure in the Native American landscape all across the country. Worked with a lot of other, uh, up-and-coming tribal people, you know, with the same vision. Uh, he's, you know, he's very, very historical. And then on my other side, my, my husband's family, um, his mother was an, uh, award-winning Native journalist.

Her name was Minnie Two Shoes. And yeah, so we got it from both ends. My kids are just wonder- happy about that. And, um, the reason why I loved her so much is that, well, back in the day, b- before I did any of this, my other life is what I call it, I was a media person. Um, I was a radio DJ, I worked in film, uh, et cetera.

And I went to a Native American Journalist Association conference, and she was a founding member, and her name was Minnie Two Shoes. Uh, but one of the reasons I really liked her, and, and I've always kinda stood out, is that one of her groundbreaking articles back in the '90s was Fry Bread Kills. And, uh, she came out talking about [00:06:00] how fry bread is a, is a colonized food, and how it doesn't do anything for our health, and how it can...

And back in the '90s, that was very, that was a very taboo thing, you know? And she got a lot of flack for that, but she always stood her ground and, you know, talked to... One of the first times I ever heard about colonized nutrition. Um, and she put it in her place. She goes, "Yes, we needed those foods, you know, uh, because that's how they survived.

These were foods that were given to us by the, by the United States government." She goes, "But in all actuality, when it comes right down to it,

that's not our Native foods, and that's why we experience a lot of the health problems that we have today."

**Dalia:** Yeah. Wow, your whole family is amazing. This is so cool.

Okay, I don't wanna take up too much of your time, so I'm gonna, uh, skip ahead a little bit, but, like, how does maybe the traditional Seminole diet compare to- what people are eating today in your community? Like, what are the biggest challenges for you? You know,

**Karen:** my mother and my father, they both grew up in the Everglades, you know, and they were born out in the Everglades.

They were not born in hospitals. And, and same thing on my other [00:07:00] side. My husband was born in a tent out in, um, Montana. So you know, this isn't like 100 years ago or 200 years ago, so it's very tangible or very touchable, our past. And, uh, the thing about it is that with, with the Seminole tribe, we're kind of a mix, a blend of a couple of tribes, uh, surviving from, you know, from what happened in Florida, and we kinda got chased down here.

So we've only been in this areas really kind of solidly for a couple of hundred years, since the 1700s, you know? And you gotta put that in perspective with a lot of other Native tribes who have been on their lands forever. You know, like, uh, you talk about people in Minnesota, you know, and wild rice and, and cranberries.

They've been doing that for thousands of years. And so they've got it down. They've got a lot of nice traditional foods, and their, their lands are pristine and they can go and pick and choose their s- their, uh, herbs and spices. Here, we were kind of forced down here and had to kind of make do with what was down here.

So of course, it was, you know, there wasn't a [00:08:00] 7-Eleven on every little na- you know, on every corner. You know, it was about hunting and fishing and, um, and there was some agriculture. You know, my grandmother didn't speak any English, and she was, uh... I remember her teaching me, um, how to shred deer meat, you know?

And she would have trash cans out in the front and be trading for things, and they would throw turtles in the trash can. And at the end of the month when we didn't have enough of food from the government that the government gave to us, we'd go out in the back and we'd start hacking these poor turtles up for stew.

That- that's what I remember. My da- I remember my dad hunting. And so when it comes to that, when you think of it in that context, there is a lot of things that doesn't happen like that today in the Everglades. The Everglades are very, very polluted. My mother talks about being able to drink from the canals, and bathing in the canals, you know, and eating certain foods, you know, uh, even wild citrus.

And a lot of that things, you can't do those anymore due to lots of pollution. You know, resources are li- limited, you know? The gopher tortoise is on the [00:09:00] extinct list, you know? And that was one of... Uh, that's one of the things I remember eating when, as a child. So a lot of that is very much changed. So a lot of our traditional foods from back then are just, it's just not feasible to have any of those foods anymore due to the landscape or pollution.

Now that being said, it's like the, a couple of the other reservations are very rural, um, like Brighton up by Lake Okeechobee. And they still do a lot of hunting, you know, a lot of deer, bear, you know, things like that. They do a lot of fishing still. Same thing with the Big Cypress Reservation. But then you got the Immokalee reservation and this reservation, and it's a lot less so.

We're more, uh, urbanized. And so, you know, it's about McDonald's and, and, uh, Lone Star Steakhouses and stuff like that. You know, life is very d- turbulent. Life is very hard and you, you know, we're running from here to there trying to get the kids to soccer practice, et cetera, et cetera. So sometimes it is more easier just to drive through and grab some food.

And that's some of the challenges that we definitely face when it comes to, you know, uh, a lot of our traditional foods just [00:10:00] aren't available anymore or we can't harvest them anymore. Um, and it i- it's just simpler to drive through sometimes, you know, depending on where we're at.

**Dalia:** Yeah, I get it. I'm taking my son to soccer practice right after this.

So it sounds like it's, it's twofold. You have some systemic issues, like the environment, that are preventing traditional food practices, but then it's just the culture that we're all a part of now. It is easier to go to McDonald's. So what does a typical day look like for you, as far as your work?

**Karen:** Oh, as for me.

Okay, as far as my work is [00:11:00] concerned, you know, I, I, I work with a tribe. Um, I didn't go back to school, um, until I was, uh, 47. I'm gonna be 60 this year.

**Dalia:** Oh. And, um- Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Okay, you don't look- ... you don't look 60. You don't look 47. So I gotta ask you what you're eating. Um, why did you, why did you decide at 47 to go back to school for this, and then get into what does a typical work day look like?

**Karen:** Okay. Well, I was, you know, I told you I was a, a, a media person and back in 2000, and, and I did not have a good diet, you know, going back to what we grew up on. We grew up on the food... I wrote this down, the food distribution program on Indian reservations, which is basically government commodity foods. Br- you know, government cheese and, and canned pork and canned meats and fruit drinks, all that stuff.

And that's how we grew up. That's how I grew up. But those are the foods you grow up on. And of course, you know, that's not very healthy. It's like high fat, high salt, you know, and it's basically foreign foods. These aren't foods that we grew up with. You know, they're, they're foods that don't, you know, that we had to learn how to eat.

So, you know, and [00:12:00] when you have that as a child, you know, it's not like all of a sudden you get a couple dollars and you wanna run out and get a salad. So, you know, that, that has to... That's a learned thing. So, and I was like that very much so in my 20s and the '90s and around 2000, right about when I met, met my husband, my future husband at the time Um, I had the diagnosis of diabetes.

You know, I really, really took it seriously, but I also didn't have, like, a doomsday type of thing, like, like... But I know I didn't want to be another statistic, like another Indian with diabetes. And I also knew I wanted to marry my husband and I wanted to have kids, and I wanted to be around for my kids and be able to, to be with them, and also teach them healthy ways.

So I took the bull by the horns, and I remember going and buying Diabetes for Dummies, and it said you can do this with, you know, a healthy diet and exercise. And, and it was a learned experience. It wasn't something I could go to my mom and say, "Well, you know, how many, you know, how many miles do you have to jog?"

You know, she didn't know. She didn't, she never ate a vegetable either. So, you know, that was a wake-up call. So I took 15 [00:13:00] years off of any kind of, of my, of my track to, you know, have kids and raise them and work on myself and, and learn how to be healthy and pass those things on to my children, 'cause I wanted them to be healthy as well.

And I lost a lot of weight. I lost about 80 pounds, and I got my blood sugars under control. But the other thing I remember is a lot of tribal members, you know, they were very... It was a very much doomsday. A lot of them didn't think you were gonna survive diabetes at the time, and I wanted to prove them wrong.

I wanted to prove that you can be healthy and have diabetes a- and still live a healthy life. And so after 15 years, I really wanted to go back into the workforce, you know, and do something meaningful. And so I had a lot of ideas, but I had a lot of number of people say, "Karen, you know, you taught me how to eat well.

You know, you taught me how to help control your diabetes and get good numbers and still be healthy and happy. You know, you really should think about, you know, food, you know, be a dietician." And, uh, I got that enough, and I thought, you know what? You know, then you can come back and work for the tribe, and you can help other [00:14:00] tribal members.

So at 47, um, I enrolled and became a dietician, and immediately got a job with the tribe here. And definitely, it was, it was a life-changing experience and, and I enjoy every single moment that I do. Absolutely.

**Dalia:** Wow, that's incredible. Oh my gosh. You said, you said, "I didn't want to be another Indian with diabetes."

As somebody who's not indigenous, I don't know, like, how prevalent is diabetes in your community, and what are some of the other big health risks that you're, you're trying to help people manage?

**Karen:** Well, diabetes is, is definitely a scourge a- among all Native Americans, you know? And I, I believe it's because we were forced with these non-healthy foods that were basically foreign foods, like, you know, white sugar and, and wheat, you know?

These weren't foods that were in our diet, you know? And so, you know, we have a lot of diabetes and, uh, and the other, the other, uh, disease that we

really, uh, fight, which I think is more of a gateway disease, is obesity. And, uh, you know, that was classified [00:15:00] as a disease back in 2012, and now we have all these amazing medications.

But it's, it's always been about, you know, weight. A lot of us carried a lot of weight. I know that I was over 80 pounds more than I am now, you know? And it's a struggle to keep it off, no less. So obesity, I think, is kind of the gateway, the, kind of the gateway malady that kind of affects us. And so, uh, it leads to diabetes, it leads to kidney disease, it leads to, you know, cardiovascular disease.

There's a lot of people in my age group, you know, 'cause we're a transitional generation, a lot of people in my age group didn't make it, you know? Uh, either through self-harm or, or disease, you know? Uh, people passing away at, like, 45 from kidney disease, you know? They just, you know, going to dialysis and not making it.

And, and, uh, it's really prevalent. And the IHS, uh, I- Indian Health Service, has, you know, a big, huge program geared towards, you know, getting grants to help with diabetes programs, and that is a lot of what we go on. We get a, a grant from the [00:16:00] CDC, from the Indian Health Service, and so a lot of our, our programs are geared towards diabetes awareness.

And then with the advent of these medications, we have some weight management programs going on. And because we're such a high-risk group, we have access to these medications. And, um, we took that bull by the horns and I had a lot of... You know, when the program started, we had a lot of the patients come in, and, uh, my first question is always, like, you know, "Well, what brings you here today?"

Why, why do you want to take this medication?" You know, and it wasn't about losing weight and being a size six. I never had anybody ever say that to me. Most everybody said, "I wanna be healthy and I don't wanna get diabetes. I saw my mom die from diabetes. I saw my, my dad, you know, get amputated until he had nothing left."

And, you know, it's always been about health. And I think that's, that's where it really starts, is with the weight.

**Dalia:** Yeah. Do you have any success stories? Mm-hmm. Besides your own.

**Karen:** I absolutely do I do. You know, with these medications, these anti-obesity [00:17:00] medications that are out now, teaching people how to eat vegetables and how to live a healthy lifestyle has always been tough, and it's tough for everybody across the board, not just Native Americans.

With this medication, you know, and understanding the, the disease of obesity, you know, what it does and how it makes you, you know, obesity is basically a survival mechanism. The body wants to have weight because it, it helps it survive in times of famine or, you know, it's only been a short amount of time where most of, most of the time people have been...

there's been a lack of food, and now we don't. It, you know, no, you know, so our bodies don't understand that, so it wants to hold onto the weight in case the next famine comes on. Now you take these medications, and it controls that, and a lot of people understand that, and it's a lot easier to adopt a healthier diet when you're not craving all these energy-dense foods.

So I have my star patients, you know, and some of them haven't even lost a lot of weight. But they have, you know, they've corrected their pre-diabetes, or they're not on, uh, heart medication anymore, or, you know, their, uh, [00:18:00] kidney levels, you know, their kidney function has gone up or has stayed the same and is, is not, not declining.

Um, and then I have patients who have lost a lot of weight. I've had my, probably my biggest star patient, she lost about 170 pounds. It took her a while, and she, she was one that had a diagnosis of diabetes and got very scared and came in, you know. And they do it healthily. That, that's our goal, is to do it healthily.

They come to, they're, they're required to come see a dietician when they get on these medications, um, because I always tell people, "It's not about losing weight. It's a weight loss medication. You're gonna lose weight. You know, it's about nourishing the body and, and, and helping your body adjust to a new weight and a new lifestyle, and with, with healthy habits and learning healthy habits."

And so that, that I think is, is, is the most success. Well, I, I just, I... but I really do love when a patient comes in and, you know, regardless and just says, "I just wanna be healthy, you know? That's, that's all. I really wanna- I don't wanna get diabetes."

**Dalia:** Yeah.

**Karen:** Being proactive. Mm-hmm.

**Dalia:** So what does food sovereignty mean to you?

[00:19:00] You told me earlier about your dad sort of taking back power and efficacy for the tribe. But for some people, food sovereignty means I get to eat whatever I want, whenever I want, and if that's going through the fast food drive-thru every day, maybe that could backfire. I don't even know if you like that term.

I know not everyone does like the term food sovereignty. So how do you think about that?

**Karen:** Well, food sovereignty, I think it's gonna be very different for wherever you are. I mean, like I t- spoke about the, you know, the, the natives in Wisconsin and in Minnesota who have been there for hundreds of years, and they have tribal practices.

They can go back to, you know, growing cranberries and wild rice and, and, uh, and, and things like that, and it's very difficult here. I kind of call it, like, a work in practice for us. You know, it's something that, you know, we have to work around all the problems that we have. You know, access to, you know, uh, healthy foods is, is, you know, uh, because of, you know, there was no pollution.

You know, the [00:20:00] environmental probabilities of, of being able to sustain food and su- sustain life, and a lot of that isn't available to us anymore, so what do we do? You know, we still wanna go back to tribal practices, but it's about finding our way. What can we do? You know, what foods are available to us, you know?

And we do have some traditional people, and they're very hard to talk to. I'm not gonna lie. They are trying very hard to teach our children how to eat some of our traditional foods, even just citrus. We have citrus all over the place, all the different kinds of oranges, and what to do with the different oranges, or growing sweet potatoes.

I remember my grandmother growing sweet potatoes, and she'd just throw it in the fire and we'd have sweet potatoes. And also, just going hunting and making sure that you know how to dress a deer. But again, we have to be very careful because sometimes it, it, it, the food that we're eating just isn't healthy anymore because of the environmental issues that we have to contend with.

So it's a work in practice. We're trying to figure out how to maneuver with all these, like, pitfalls that have b- you know, befallen us and d- that our [00:21:00] ancestors really didn't have to deal with.

**Dalia:** Yeah. It does feel like pitfalls, you know? Regardless of your culture- Yes ... you're just trying to eat healthy. It, it's like there's all these landmines.

Like, oh my gosh, I just fell into McDonald's. I just fell into, you know, french fries and ice cream and all that fun stuff. So if you had a magic wand and you could change one thing to help you do your job, what would that be?

**Karen:** I would wish for our land to be back, go to that pristine state again so that we could really go back and eat the way that our ancestors did, you know?

One of the things I would love to be able to make, uh, you know, a cabbage stew, you know, and they don't really have that anymore. The plants are, you know, are, are not healthy anymore. Um, you know, we don't wanna wipe them out either. Um, swamp cabbage, you know, is, is the what it is, and a lot of our, uh, citrus trees were wiped out with the canker, you know, years ago, and a lot of them have never recovered.

So for me, e- even something as simple as eating an orange, you know, uh, finding, going out into the wild and finding an [00:22:00] orange can be, can be really tough. That's what I would, I would like. I would love our land to go back to what we can so we can eat the way, learn and eat the way that our ancestors did eat.

You know, I always plug, you know, it's never too late. I mean, I went back at 47. You know, it's never too late to go out there and get into healthcare and bring it back to your tribe because nobody understands us the way, you know, we do. And it, that's true for any ethnicity. You know, nobody understands the why we eat the way we eat better than we do.

You know, I remember when I was a child being shamed to death about eating certain foods and that, you know, "Don't eat that fry bread." And I'd be like, "Well, you know, don't insult my grandma's fry bread," you know? And, and you know, and we're not gonna fin- we're not gonna not eat fry bread, you know, but education is where it's at.

You know, I used to eat Spam all the time, but I got educated on what Spam does to my body, and it was my choice to reduce my Spam intake. And I think that's, that's where it really is. It's not about telling somebody what to do. It's

about educating them and, [00:23:00] and giving them the power to make those decisions on their own, and how much they're gonna eat and how much they wanna eat.

Like, and I've seen it time and again, especially with these medications and, and, and people learning healthy lifestyles, you know. I'm like, "You can eat whatever you want. I'm not gonna tell you you can't eat. You know, if you love this, if you love that, let's figure a way to keep those foods in. But let's also figure out to a- let's add some other foods that's gonna be on the healthier side and balance out those comfort foods."

You know, I don't believe in good and bad foods. I, I just believe in comfort and nourishing foods, and there's room in the diet for both of those things, for sure.

**Dalia:** Karen Two Shoes is a registered dietician and nutrition coordinator for the Seminole Tribe of Florida. She shared her family's recipe for bison with grits, and you can find it on our website, [thezestpodcast.com](http://thezestpodcast.com).

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