

StoryCorps interview at the Museum of Northern Arizona

Robert Breunig, former director of the Museum of Northern Arizona, and his daughter, Lydia Breunig, talk about their time together at the museum and the surrounding land and cultures, and how these things have affected their lives.

Robert Breunig: What is it about this place that you remember, and what is it about it that you love so much?

Lydia Breunig: Of course the first thing is our time together here. Summers were like the magical time. This was my playground. This was the space I inhabited, the woods I ran around in. I remember you'd take me to work with you, we'd walk together through the woods. And I would spend hours at the museum. How many kids get to roam free in a museum? It's like living in a documentary. I don't think at the time I had any idea how unique and fortunate I was, but as an adult, I feel it acutely.

RB: I remember you so well back then. Not only walking through the woods with you, but carrying you on my shoulders all over kingdom come around here—you were really little. And the landscape and the character of this place really affected both of us and really helped bond us in so many ways.

LB: We did so much together. You really wanted to share some of the experiences you had as a child with me in exploring the world.

RB: The first time I came out this way, when I was 13, I just knew this was going to be my place because I grew up in the Midwest and this was such an incredibly different world. There was something about the spirit of the land and the spirit of the people and the interconnection of those two things. And so it was the big sky, to see to the far horizon, to see the clouds billowing in the summer.

But then I would hear the Native perspective that they weren't just clouds, they were also ancestors. And the ancestors were coming to bring rain. People would look at the clouds and see their loved ones and it was just a completely different perspective. It affected me and how I look at things.

And the day of my retirement party—remember that huge rainstorm that came down during that retirement party?

LB: Yeah, oh it was a deluge. Yeah.

RB: Well that very afternoon, I had been lying on a hammock looking up at the clouds and thinking about my good friend Mike. And I kind of wondered if Mike came back. You don't think that way when you grow up in Indianapolis.

LB: I'm sure it was him. He would've liked the joke—

RB: Rain on my parade, right? (*laughs*)

LB: Yeah, exactly. (*laughs*) Yeah.

RB: But it's the spirit of the place, and capturing that and reflecting that so that people who come through the museum can be touched by that—that's what we're here for. We don't exist just for ourselves, we exist to communicate something deeper and more beautiful, and we need to do it every single day that our museum is open.