

Steph Littlebird BFA'15 strives to change lives with her art

by Linda Lenhoff, April 26, 2023

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Steph Littlebird recognized that no matter what job she held, her real passion was creating art whenever she had the chance. This realization spurred the Banks, Oregon native and member of the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde to dedicate herself to earning a BFA in Painting and Printmaking from PNCA (<https://pnca.willamette.edu>), despite having been out of school for 10 years. At PNCA, she recognized another passion, that of speaking truth through art and addressing concerns faced by other native artists—and her career has taken off.



AN ILLUSTRATION BY STEPH LITTLEBIRD FOR THE NEW BOOK *MY POWERFUL HAIR* (ABRAMS BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS).

Coming to PNCA helped Littlebird, also a writer and curator, refine her philosophy of art. She found a course with former PNCA faculty member Sarah Sentilles that examined how white privilege plays into the ethics of art especially meaningful. “She taught me so much about myself and how I was powerful as a woman, and that I could speak truth to power through my work,” Littlebird said. “That, for me, was the biggest takeaway that I got from being at PNCA and it’s what drives my work today.”

Utilizing her desire to make a difference, Littlebird was thrilled to take on the illustrations for the children’s book *My Powerful Hair*, written by Carole Lindstrom, which came out in March. Lindstrom comes from a tribe in North Dakota, but Littlebird says the story is similar to that of her own grandmother and many Indigenous people in Oregon.

“The story is about the descendants of an Indian boarding school; those were created following the Oregon trail era to assimilate Indigenous people in Oregon.”

In the story, a young girl tells how her grandmother had her hair taken against her will at one of these boarding schools, where children were required to wear their hair short. “These stories are like part of my own family history, part of my tribe’s history.” Littlebird says the book “teaches both Indigenous people and all kinds of people about the power of their hair—and that our hair connects us to our memories.”

Littlebird’s illustrations are gorgeous and brim with life and identity—and beautiful hair. “Carole calls hair ‘a living scrapbook,’ which I think is such a beautiful way to think about your hair. All of the people you meet and experience are in your hair.” At the end of the book, the girl chooses to cut her hair in

honor of her late grandfather—making her own decision. “That’s a tradition in many Indigenous cultures that when you lose a loved one, you cut your hair to give them the energy of the experiences you had together and send them to the next world.”

“The book has really beautiful, subtle lessons representative of our culture, but that absolutely apply to so many cultures,” Littlebird said.

Along with her artwork, Littlebird has a number of other passions: She has written a series of articles for the Oregon Arts Watch called Indigenous Resilience in Oregon, interviewing Native creatives in Oregon as well as institutions working with natives. And she has a book cover coming out in May for Star Wars that has her very excited. “I came from a tiny little town in Oregon that has 500 people in it, so to sign a Lucasfilm contract was just crazy to me,” she added. Even more exciting, Littlebird just got a \$20,000 fellowship from the Grand Ronde to create a book specifically about Pacific Northwest tribal stories.

Littlebird advises other students with an interest in art to attend PNCA. “I firmly believe that you get out what you put into attending art school,” she said. “If you want to do something with your talents, then it’s really up to you. That’s what’s beautiful about the art world: There’s really a place for all of us and groups of people who will love your work. You just have to find them.”

“If you put your heart into it, then you will reap so many rewards,” Littlebird said. “I know that personally.”

Check out [This IS Kalapuyan Land \(https://fiveoaksmuseum.org/exhibit/this-is-kalapuyan-land/\)](https://fiveoaksmuseum.org/exhibit/this-is-kalapuyan-land/), an exhibition of contemporary Indigenous art work alongside a selection of historical panels curated by Littlebird, currently at the [Pittock Mansion \(http://pittockmansion.org/\)](http://pittockmansion.org/).

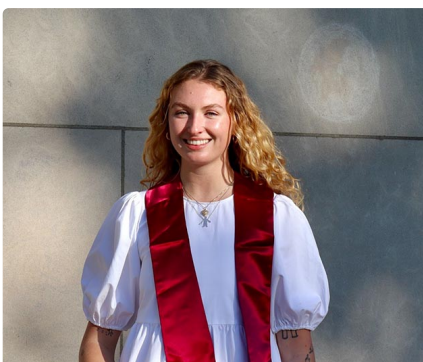
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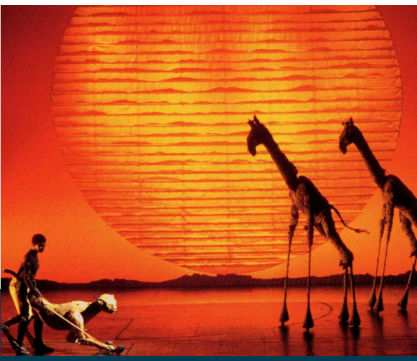
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