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Biography

I grew up poor. We had no money for toys and I learned at a very early age to take good care of the few things we had. If they broke, we fixed them or found new uses for them. Our bicycles were typically an amalgamation of several old bikes. My brother and I built our own forts, skateboard ramps and tree houses with whatever materials we could scavenge.

My father was an alcoholic and my mother had her own issues. They divorced when I was 6 years old and my mom moved us to town. Luckily, my dad was good about picking me up every other weekend and in the summer so I could spend time with him and our extended family on the reservation.

The elementary school I attended was progressive in terms of arts education and I excelled in the arts. I received several awards in elementary school for my class art projects. My ability to “build” and “fix” was translated into my efforts in drawing, printmaking, sculpture, etc.

Before graduation from high school, I was told I was not “college material” by the guidance counselor. I think what she really meant was that I was “too poor” and “too brown”. So, I entered welding school, which later proved invaluable to my work as an artist.

Eventually, I decided to give college a try. I decided to major in art because of my passion for making things, but also I felt like I had a unique perspective that I wanted to share with others. After receiving my BA in art, I went on to graduate school and earned MA/MFA degrees in painting and sculpture.

Culturally, I was raised with an understanding of the importance of family and community. Even at a young age, I appreciated the wide-open spaces of the reservation to wander, play and participate in the tribe’s cultural activities.

I was a very sensitive and empathetic kid and I carry those traits with me today. I am greatly offended by prejudice and inequality. I want my work to appeal to any person who seeks understanding and acceptance.

The contemporary art world’s emphasis on the individual “genius” and the “cult of celebrity” are in direct opposition to the traditional beliefs I was raised with. While many contemporary artists stress the importance of self-expression, I feel the weight of the responsibility I owe to my ancestors. I believe self-expression is as natural as breathing and I do not focus on it at all. Instead, I focus on trying to make art that is honest to the life I’ve led as a contemporary Native person.