Performing Arts: Creating Pathways for Native Youth to Reconnect, Reclaim, and Revitalize
Dressed in her full regalia — rug dress, turquoise jewelry, and a belt she received during her womanhood ceremony — musician and poet Lyla June (Diné/Cheyenne) stands in the middle of a high school gymnasium, surrounded by Native youth awaiting her performance. Performing while wearing the traditional clothing of her ancestors is her intentional way of showing Native youth to embrace and celebrate their identity. Between songs she explains each piece of her regalia and her journey of reconnecting to her Diné traditions, unpacking her experiences in relationship to the long history of the artforms and languages of Native people.

“It looks like art, but it’s a device that explains everything,” Lyla says, in regard to her work with Native youth. “If we can give children the literacy to actually be able to read these devices, then they are not just art anymore — they’re a tool that can feed your whole nation.”

Regalia, songs, dances and other forms of expression often considered “art” by Western viewpoints were, and are, so deeply ingrained in all aspects of Indigenous cultures that many do not have a word for art. And because Indigenous ceremonies, languages, and cultural practices were prohibited by federal law until 1978, Native peoples were stripped of their rights to carry on the traditions and lifeways of their ancestors — simultaneously prohibiting Indigenous art forms. Now no longer illegal, but still recovering from decades of suppression, Indigenous art forms are returning. By intentionally acknowledging the role of Indigenous traditions in her work as a performing artist, Lyla illustrates not only the contemporary validity of Indigenous wisdom, but provides a pathway for others to follow.

For more than twenty years First Peoples Fund (FPF) has been dedicated to uplifting the wide range of expressions in Native communities, helping to illuminate a more accurate and nuanced understanding of who Native people are. Supporting artists and culture bearers is a proven way to nurture culturally informed, locally led community development that not only enhances tribal economies, but strengthens Indigenous communities’ ability to sustain and pass on generations of ancestral knowledge.

Three Native performing arts programs supported in part by First Peoples Fund — Dream Warriors Management, Dances with Words™ (FPF youth development program), and the Jilkaat Kwaan Heritage Center — are creating pathways for Native youth into performing arts-based enterprises rooted in land, Indigenous knowledge, and values.

Lyla is one of the Dream Warriors on a mission to show youth the beauty of their people that reaches back thousands of years. She often sings in Diné Bizaad, the Navajo language, a language her grandparents were forbidden to speak in boarding schools.

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All across the country, Dream Warrior Frank Waln (Sicangu Lakota; 2012 & 2013 FPF Fellow) directly engages youth in reconnecting with their Indigeneity through hip-hop songs. Many of his lyrics are in Lakota.

According to Cultural Survival, of the estimated 154 Indigenous languages still spoken in the United States, about half are spoken only by elders and are not being actively taught to young people. Reconnecting, reclaiming and revitalizing Native languages needs to happen quickly, and involve whole communities to save these languages from going extinct. Dream Warriors is part of the next generation of young people who are language warriors, doing their part to encourage Native youth in understanding what it is to speak their language.

“I realized the importance of language and what a privilege it is for us to learn our language and be able to speak it even if we’re disconnected,” Frank says. “About a year ago, I made a conscious decision that I was going to integrate learning Lakota in my songwriting process, that I’m going to overstep my fears and insecurities and take the leap because I realized even if I mess up, that is what it’s going to take for us to learn.”

What he discovered in the process was the poetry of the Lakota language flowing into the cadence of hip-hop.

“Those songs I made became tools for other young Native people to reconnect to and reclaim their Indigeneity,” Frank says.

Tanaya Winder (Duckwater Shoshone Tribe; 2017 FPF Fellow), the founder of Dream Warriors Management, says, “What we try to do as artists is actively portray that act of reclaiming in front of [the youth]. We’re speaking our language, we’re telling [our own stories] about how we survived.”

Dream Warriors believe in pursuing passions, dreams, and gifts to better loved ones and communities while also uplifting others.

“Each of the Dream Warriors has our own story of how music, how poetry, how art has helped us heal. If we can help youth find healing pathways towards empowerment by sharing our journeys, we can help heal our people.” — Tanaya Winder (Duckwater Shoshone Tribe; 2017 FPF Fellow)

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“Youth are used to seeing things in themselves in a certain way,” Tanaya says, “but we help to break them open in a way that they can reclaim all the parts of themselves instead of who society tries to tell them they are.”

When Tanaya lost a close friend from her reservation community to suicide several years ago, it led to her journey of healing through poetry.

In 2018, Dream Warriors took healing on the road with the Heal It tour, performing at several Native schools — grade school to university — in Arizona, Oklahoma, and South Dakota. They performed for more than 2600 youth in total, using their Native languages and culture for healing.

“Our youth struggle with coping mechanisms to heal their traumas, and without healthy methods of processing their mental and emotional needs, their lives are at stake,” Tanaya says. “Multiple times a Dream Warrior has had a young Native person struggling with depression, suicide, and thoughts of not being enough, tell them our art saved their life.”

Dream Warriors in the Heal It tour included several First Peoples Fund alumni — Frank Waln, Paul Wenell Jr. (Tall Paul) (Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe; 2017 FPF Fellow), Mic Jordan (Ojibwe; 2017 FPF Fellow), and Tanaya. Lyla June was on the tour as well.

In gymnasiums and on other stages at these schools, the Dream Warriors talked about how performing arts changed their lives.

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“We can choose to heal not only future generations but past generations...through reclaiming our language, our ceremonies, our dances,” Frank says. “We were taught time is a fluid thing for us, and whenever we tell our stories and sing our songs we time travel, we are with our ancestors, and we’re with future generations. I realized that the performance aspect of my music became a way to revitalize, to share that reclamation process with the world. It’s a healing process for everyone involved.”

On a gymnasium stage in Oklahoma, Lyla helped youth to not grow up disconnected from culture like she was. “Reconnect, reclaim, revitalize is my life’s mission, not just for me but for others,” she says.
Dances with Words™ are finding their voices in spoken word poetry. They tap into emotions of fear and love, letting it flow out each time they step up to the mic. They have created a place of healing inside themselves and through the kinship of being together as a family.

“Within the space, we have codified kinship into how we conduct and how we hold space with one another,” says Dances with Words poet Marcus Red Shirt. “I think that’s part of this reclaiming ourselves and healing ourselves from the history that we still live with today.”

Marcus was one of the first youth in the Dances with Words™ program and suggested the group’s name. The program strengthens youth in their identity and times of vulnerability as they speak their truth through poetry.

Dances with Words™ is a youth development initiative of First Peoples Fund that works with young people, adult mentors, high schools and nonprofit partners on the Pine Ridge Reservation located in southwestern South Dakota and homelands of the Oglala Lakota Nation. It empowers participants to become fully engaged students and community leaders through literary, spoken word, and other art forms. In 2015, Dances with Words™ was invited to become one of 19 organizations across the country that make up the Youth Speaks’ Brave New Voices Network, and to participate in the accompanying national spoken word poetry competition. That is a time when the Dances with Words™ youth come together to share the poems as a team, as a family.

K.F. Osterman’s research article, “Students’ Need for Belonging in the School Community” (2000) explores the need for students to experience belongingness. This sense of belonging in Dances with Words™ — creating community and kinship — supports student outcomes and performance, and contributes to less anxiety and more positive emotions such as happiness and calm. Graduation rates are directly impacted. Graduation rates for youth in the Dances with Words™ are 100%, compared with the statewide graduation rate of 50% for Native students.

When Araceli Spotted Thunder (Oglala Lakota) first joined the Dances with Words™ program, she never imagined it would take her to a national stage for the Brave New Voices competition.

“I had only known poetry to be on paper,” Araceli says. “When I went to my first workshop, it was different because one of our exercises was vocal. That opened me up to knowing that your voice isn’t always going to be on paper and that it can be spoken.”

Youth in Dances with Words™ are reclaiming themselves through spoken word poetry, often incorporating the Lakota language. Dances with Words™ emphasizes the use of the language as a connection to Lakota oral tradition.

Araceli experienced this kind of healing through community in the Dances with Words™ program as she found her voice to share poetry.

“The community we have helped me deal with my healing a lot more comfortably,” Araceli says. “Knowing that I wasn’t alone in the healing process was comfort enough.”

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Dances with Words Poets Photo: Angel Two Bulls (Oglala Lakota); Right: Santanna Yellow Horse & Marcus Red Shirt Photo: Angel Two Bulls (Oglala Lakota)
Heritage Center took shape. Lani was instrumental in the planning and construction of the Heritage Center. FPF also awarded the Jilkaat Kwaan Cultural Heritage Center grants to build additional resources to support local artists, youth and culture bearers.

As a community, they built a space for culture and performing arts in Klukwan, an ancient Tlingit village with a population today of less than 100. They are dedicated to one another in their endeavors.

“The whole community benefits,” Lorraine Casko (Tlingit) says. “It makes us stronger...because we all work together when we’re doing this.”

Lorraine, a community member, is reconnecting with missing pieces of her heritage. Alongside youth at the Jilkaat Kwaan Heritage Center in Klukwan, she practices songs and dances, and is learning in classes that teach Ravenstail weaving, sewing, beading, and button robe making. The most renewing class for Lorraine was making moccasins — something she hadn’t done since childhood.

“We are teaching our traditions,” Lorraine says. “We’re teaching [youth] values, what our ancestors taught us, and now we’re passing them down to the youth.”

Jack Strong (Tlingit) is a culture bearer who teaches the youth dance at the Jilkaat Kwaan Heritage Center. “Having [youth] involved is of the utmost importance because they are the ones who will pass it on when we are gone,” he says.

Beneath the vaulted ceiling of the modern Jilkaat Kwaan Heritage Center building, youth and elders sway back and forth to the beat of handcrafted drums. Their traditional robes swing in rhythm as they dance.

“One of my most cherished memories is having the children down here at the Longhouse and cooking fish out front and dancing,” Jack says. “Just dancing with them and seeing that grandparents are crying, the mother is crying. It moves me to see that.”

“Reclaiming that part of our culture and embracing our cultural heritage, that’s where the healing is,” Lani says. “No longer denying that part of ourselves but embracing that and being proud of who we are.”

At a community gathering in 1992 to mark the beginning of Lani’s Healing Robe project, highly esteemed elder Joe Hotch, Lani’s uncle-in-law, told the story of ancestors who went on long, cold journeys — trading expeditions — traveling over the icy lake Dezadeash. The elder likened the years of cultural oppression to a long, cold journey, but the weaving of the Healing Robe signified the ending of that journey.

“Our grandparents knew that our culture was being taken from us and they put it all in a box for later,” Jack says. “It’s wide open now, we’re still digging in it and finding new things.”

Set against the backdrop of the Chilkat River and the Jilkaat Kwaan Heritage Center, Jack leads youth in song and dance. “We are a culture that has been and always will be,” he says.

**JILKAAT KWAAAN CULTURAL HERITAGE CENTER**

For the village of Klukwan in Southeast Alaska, coming together as a community marked the beginning of reconnection. For decades, Tlingit clan and ceremonial items were stolen — piece by piece, word by word. The trauma of those losses impacted generations.

Since the 1970s, the return to Alaskan Native ways and tradition based practices rooted in land was slow in progressing. Today, though, generations are working to reconnect with this part of their history. In Klukwan, this momentum began as Lani Hotch (Chilkat Tlingit) started weaving the Klukwan Healing Robe in the fall of 1992 that was finished in 2000. Lani was honored in 2011 with an FPF Community Spirit Award and received FPF Cultural Capital fellowships in 2015 & 2016 to continue her critical work.

In 2017, Lani’s tribe declared her a Culture Bearer.

Lani comes from a long line of Chilkat weavers in remote Southeast Alaska and works primarily as a weaver in the Pacific Northwest coast style that is Chilkat, Ravenstail and contemporary interpretations of those methods. As the Healing Robe was finished, a plan to build the Jilkaat Kwaan Cultural Heritage Center took shape. Lani was instrumental in the planning and construction of the Heritage Center. FPF also awarded the Jilkaat Kwaan Cultural Heritage Center grants to build additional resources to support local artists, youth and culture bearers.

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His words were prophetic for the village of Klukwan and the thriving arts healing their community and opening a pathway for youth to walk into their culture.
Through these case stories, we found Performing Arts (music, dance, oral traditions, and new expressions of these) is key in engaging youth through reconnecting, reclaiming and revitalizing their communities. These three programs—Dream Warriors Management, Dances with Words™, and the Jilkaat Kwaan Heritage Center— are preserving knowledge and keeping languages from becoming extinct. The culture bearers and artist-leaders forge and maintain kinship relationships while forming positive narratives that help youth feel strong, confident, and secure in themselves, their culture, and their family.

Artists creating pathways for Native youth into performing arts-based enterprises that are rooted in land, ancestral knowledge, and Indigenous values ensure these things will be carried forward into the future.

Daniel Klanott (Chilkat Tlingit) Photo: David Cournoyer (Sicangu Lakota)