Marissa Carr

Marisa is an artist of multiple disciplines and resides in the Twin Cities community. She has worked in the Minneapolis American Indian community since completing her degree at the University of Minnesota. We asked her a few questions about her work, art, and thoughts on role models.

Q: What do you in the Minneapolis American Indian community?
A: I work as a musician, composer, and performing artist. I also work at the Division of Indian Work as youth program coordinator.

What do you at the Division of Indian Work?
At the Division of Indian Work I am the cultural coordinator, which means I teach about native culture and reasons not to use commercial tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs, and not to do things that put them at risk to hurt themselves and their communities. I do that at some of the after school programs we provide.

How long have you done that for?
Five years.

When did you begin your career as an artist?
My dad had been a musician and stopped playing to get a day job and my mom had studied theater in college, so I always grew up around music. One of my earliest memories is watching my dad play guitar in our basement and thinking it was magical people could make those sounds.

There were always a lot of instruments around the house, so while other kids were playing with toys I played keyboards and guitars. I started playing piano when I was five, playing cello at nine, and as a teenager I started training as a classical singer while learning drums, bass and guitar. I had also grown up going to see performing arts because that was something my mom was really interested in. I started training in theater with First Stage, a children theater company in Milwaukee, and kept it up through high school. I almost can’t remember a time when I wasn’t doing art.
What projects are working on at the moment?
I wrote my first play this year and am in the process of revising it, which will be produced in November. I wrote it and will act in it. I also get hired for composing projects, to write music for videos or dance and theater projects. I still perform as a musician and to continue to work on my music so I am in good shape to perform. Today I am starting a three-week training program with the Wesley Balk Theater Institute for opera singers and actors. At any given time, I am working a number of different projects simultaneously, but I like it that way because that’s a good way to be creative and bounce ideas off each other and get inspiration from different sources.

How do you view the relationship between art and culture?
I think that art is an integral part of any culture. If you look at a lot of traditional native cultures, their art was utilitarian. They didn’t make art to hang in a museum or music for people to just sit and listen to, but the art was part of their life, clothing, tools, ceremonies, and everyday practices. I think that remains true today and if you expand your idea what counts as art then art is everywhere and is part of what we do.

How do you view the difference between a role model and hero?
A hero is somebody who rises to the challenge in an extraordinary set of circumstances. A role model is a person who does good things and tries to be a positive force in their everyday life. Not everyone ends up being a hero, not because we aren’t all capable of heroic acts but some people never face the kind of challenge to rise to. I think everyone can be a role model just by trying to live a good life and doing good things everyday in your community. It’s a bunch of little acts that add up. I think almost everybody is a role model for somebody, whether you realize or not. One thing I have learned from working with young people is that there is always someone watching you, so it is important to keep that in mind when you’re making decisions about how to live your life and what kind of person you want to be.

Who have been some of your role models or heroes?
My grandma has been a big role model for me. I admire her for the work she has done to support her community and the kind of grandmother she was to me as I grew up and remains so today. I remember as a kid she came over to the house in a buckskin dress and I had been polishing the house as my mom had asked, including the seats of the chairs in the kitchen. My grandma came in and sat on one of the chairs and when she got up the whole back of her dress was covered in a giant grease spot from the polish. My parents were horrified and they began scolding me and I was horrified because I had ruined her dress. My grandma came to hug me and wiped my tears away and said, “My girl, you didn’t do that on purpose. You were helping your mom. Don’t worry about it. We can clean the dress.” That was the kind of grandmother she was to me growing up and so is someone I have always looked up to.