

## Heart like a tomb: Northern Cheyenne students raise their voices to make art of heartache

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Lama Deer High School students participating in First Voices are from left, Lisa Eaglefeathers, Shandiin Kaline, Burton Tallwhiteman, Santesa Rowland, Kaleb Mason, and Paradise Killsnight. Photo courtesy Jaci Webb

Even with masks on, the smiles were so wide on the faces of six Lama Deer students recently that you could see joy shining in their eyes.

The First Voices program connected students with New York City dancer and choreographer Preeti Vasudevan; Billings poet Tami Haaland, who is acting Dean at Montana State University Billings; and Billings filmmakers Pete Tolton and Stan Parker.

The chance to get away from their school campus and work with arts professionals was significant for the students.

Paradise Killsnight, a 17-year-old junior at Lame Deer High School, said she needs opportunities like this to help her to find her voice.

“If you think about it too much, you don’t do it. You need to be ready to be yourself in the moment and not let fear stop you from new opportunities,” Killsnight said.

The students have all been impacted by COVID, losing parents and grandparents and important elders in their Northern Cheyenne community. That sense of loss can be crippling and so painful it keeps students from expanding their horizons and experiencing new opportunities like First Voices. Some of the students responded to that loss through their writing, and even though it was painful to express, students said they felt better after writing about grief.

Shandiin Kaline, a 16-year-old junior at Lame Deer High School, said she “bawled like a baby” when she read her poem about her late mother, “Dragonflies at the Sundance.”

In the poem, her mother comes to her as a dragonfly and tells her everything will be OK.

“I never poured my heart out on a piece of paper like that before,” Kaline said.

Burton Tallwhiteman, a 16-year-old sophomore, responded to the loss of his grandfather and father by writing a song.

“I was talking to a friend on the phone who also lost someone, and we were talking about loss, and I started writing lyrics to a song,” he said.

One of the lines compares loss to broken glass and describes his heart as being “like a tomb.”

The students agreed that being able to trust each other and have confidence in expressing themselves is vital.

Under Haaland’s direction, the students wrote dialogue for a Northern Cheyenne story about a race as told from the perspective of different animals, including deer, magpie, eagle and buffalo. Part of the goal of First Voices is to build a story library, allowing students to create a modern interpretation of ancestral stories, Vasudevan said.

“At the end of the day, we want their voices. That is why it’s called First Voices for the First Nation, the idea of their voices being heard. I wanted the students to feel that this is exciting and they can do this,” Vasudevan said.

The plan is to have a public performance of the piece at the end of April or beginning of May, and script and record another eight to 10 ancestral stories over the next two years.

“Ultimately they will work with different disciplines, choreography, music, visual art, literary art, and music composition. We’re trying to get them to a point of being proud of what they have produced. That message is very important,” Vasudevan said.

First Voices is an initiative conceived by Vasudevan’s Thresh Collective, which is a performing arts collaboration founded in 2005. Vasudevan’s earlier visits to Montana with Turnaround Arts and partners Silkroad helped her establish a strong relationship with the Lame Deer community. The first workshop with First Voices was held in September 2021, and included guidance by Joseph R. McGeshick, a storyteller, poet and educator.

Seidel Standing Elk, who teaches Cheyenne language and culture at Lame Deer, said he encourages the students to follow “the Cheyenne way.”

“I have 130 Cheyenne beliefs that I go over with them. It keeps the culture alive and strengthens them,” he said.

Susan Wolfe, who has taught art at Lame Deer High School for 12 years, wrote a grant to help Lame Deer get involved in the Turnaround Arts Program. Lame Deer was one of eight schools in the U.S. selected for the 3-year program.

“I want them to meet people from other cultures, I want them to find their place and learn how to share their thoughts,” Wolfe said.

Ultimately, Vasudevan hopes this initial group of students in First Voices will inspire others as the project expands to the Crow Tribe, and other tribes across the region.