

Leo White Horse and Princess Bass-Mason Transcript

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Princess: [00:00:12] Hi Leo, can you introduce yourself, please?

Leo: [00:00:15] Hi there, I'm Leo White Horse and I'm originally from South Dakota. I come from the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in Rosebud, South Dakota.

Princess: [00:00:27] Can you tell us a little about yourself and your ties to this area?

Leo: [00:00:33] I'm a graphic artist, as well as a fine arts, Native artist. I've been doing it for, I don't know, ever since I was a little kid. My dad used to give me sketches and I used to kind of draw in the missing pieces. He kind of taught me how to do it, or got me interested in it anyway. My connection here was [that] I came to visit my brother, because he was going to school here. He eventually went back to South Dakota, and I decided I liked it here so I stayed here.

The description of my art would be that it's Lakota style artwork. It's basically an expression of what was around me, or what cultural things that I knew of are [what] my elders, you know, talked about. And mine is kind of a, I guess, a more modern deal with it, due to the fact that I use some computers for some of it, but mostly it's just traditional style artwork. Using, I guess, colors, just the imagery that you get from, like, pow-wows and being around on the reservation that we would see. Luckily, we had buffalo and horses and things that were kind of, like, more like what you would see on television. You know, so those things kind of worked its way into it.

When I was, let's say, I was think I was, my parents died, I guess, when I was 11. And then I got sent to a boys' home in South Dakota, where they sent me to Vermillion, South Dakota for an art

summer program. And where I learned, or I had seen an exhibit they had called, or I don't know what it was called then, but it was of Oscar Howe, so a Lakota artist. So in the week that I was supposed to be there learning something, I ended up going to the exhibit studying his artwork. And they had, probably about a year ago now, they had that same traveling exhibit with that same artwork in it in Portland, called Dakota Modern. And I didn't realize what I had seen when I was 11. And now, to see it again...I'm still trying to use that as an inspiration for what I do. And I still do, I think he's a really fantastic artist. And he also was an advocate for Native art. And that, some of the things, if you ever get a chance to see it, it's well worth it. He captured something that I can't quite describe, but it has the soul of what the Lakota people were and still are. And we're, I guess, fighting to get back to that, you know, learning our language. And I guess just trying to have a sense of where we came from. We need to learn that and nourish that and bring that back. The younger people need to learn a lot of things about where they came from.

Princess: [00:05:08] Would you say that there were a lot of Native or Indigenous artists or authors when you were younger? I know you just explained one that you look up to, but did you have a lot of other role models, for example?

Leo: [00:05:23] That was one of them. There was a lot of, or, it seemed to me as a kid that a lot of Native children knew how to, you know, do artwork and stuff. Or they always were drawing something or doing something like that. So you had a bunch of people around you that did the same thing, and it was kind of a neat thing. So in some ways, I don't really take what I do for living in my artwork. I don't really have this ego about it. It's more that it's just something I do because I did it as a kid, and they did it as a kid. It was not like anything special, it's just something that you do that, you know, you're trying to, as one artist said, that artwork is an expression of something that probably can't be verbally translated. So by me doing what I do, I'm trying to express a feeling or an idea without, not necessarily having the words to translate that. So that's kind of what my artwork is doing, is trying to—I feel that if I do a good enough job at it, that people will see that. And they think there's more to it than just, “oh, what a pretty picture that is,” you know? You're trying to express something that they, and if you do it, I think well enough, I think people actually recognize that, and they see something in themselves that helps

them do whether it inspires them or they just like it, so that's kind of what I'm trying to do, I guess.

Princess: [00:07:36] Do you think that, because you mentioned when you were younger that a lot of other Native kids did art, do you think that was nourished by the community, or their parents, or like within an academic setting, or is that kind of something that they pursued of their own volition?

Leo: [00:07:56] Well, we were in boarding school. You had, after breakfast, you went in this meeting room, basically. So all the kids were in the same room. So you were sitting there, and you'd have paper to draw stuff. And they'd kind of keep you occupied, is what the people [who] were watching us were trying to do. So you'd sit there and draw different things. And that, I think it was, I don't know, it was just a community thing, you know. So you felt comfortable in that situation doing that, you know, nobody made fun of you. And so I think it was just something that—but I don't know that, outside of that atmosphere, you know, I mean, we were sitting in an age when the government figured we were one of the generations that had finally been assimilated, right? So our parents didn't, weren't, as traditional because they were brought up with a lot of alcohol and all that stuff, they took on the lifestyle—so being white and not Native.

So you're, as a little kid, unless you're exposed to [your family heritage], you're kind of going to go down that road. Because you're, even though you're living in a boarding school, you have to go to a mixed school, I mean, [with a] bunch of white kids. So their lifestyle is different, they have everything, and you don't quite understand, being a kid, why you don't have the same things that they have, right? So, [art] wasn't really encouraged outside of that environment, you know, unless somebody, some school teacher went, “oh, I really think they have a talent for that,” and would kind of nurture that. But for the most part, it was just something I liked doing. And it's, I think it takes your mind off the situation that you're in, to be able to express that to, doesn't matter to who. It's just that you're being able to sit there and kind of take your frustrations out and what you were bothered by and whatnot, and...

Princess: [00:10:29] An outlet.

Leo: [00:10:30] Right, so, that was the, I think, the reason for a lot of it. and, because they were in boarding school, they don't really teach you anything that, you know, that, as far as crafts, or, you know, painting or anything like that, it's just...

Princess: [00:10:48] Yeah, you're discussing your time at boarding school. Would you mind telling us which one you attended and for how long?

Leo: [00:10:56] Mission, South Dakota. There's a school there that at the time was run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. And they had a boys' dorm, a girls' dorm, and then they had a cafeteria. And the BIA had built a high school there and built these things, and they built housing for all the teachers and stuff off the side there. It was, and different communities had different things. The Catholic Church, like in St. Francis, was run by brothers, and the BIA kind of ran the one that I was in. And it really, I don't know, it didn't, all it was like a, I don't know—you're just being held there and educated, or not, but you're not taught your own culture. That's the last part of assimilating, it was that you went to school and learned how to be like them. That was just a, you can't, you know, it's something that you [have to] live with. It's not something, I mean, as a kid, you know that it's not quite right. Because you have, you stayed there, and then on certain vacations, days, like Thanksgiving and Christmas and stuff, then your parents would come and get you and take you home, and you'd get to spend whatever time that is. And then they would bring you back to the boarding school. So there wasn't a lot of teaching of anything [related to your culture] you know. But if you knew when you went home, if you had traditional parents, they would teach you stuff. Or traditional somewhere along the line, with all that alcoholism and everything that was [happening]. My belief system was based upon [my culture].

And then the Catholics tried to teach you how to live their way, you know. I, for me, it didn't make any sense, so that was kind of my drawback to it. I mean, this work became a rub. You know, you're constantly having, once a week you have to go to Catechism, and they'd preach to you about God. And the only thing that I kind of had to say about it was that if this religion, the Catholic religion—for what we were [being taught] was [those beliefs]—if [these are] the best people that are supposed to be here that you sent to, you know, convert us, you didn't

exactly send the right people, you know. They were not the nicest people in the world. So I was like, you're wanting me to convert to your, you know, belief system, But your people are not exactly the people I want to be around, you know.

So, it was a different time. Really, it's changed a little bit, but the problem is with the reservation, it's gotten poorer than they used to be, from when I was a kid. They used to have all this, I mean, they had like bowling alleys, this little town, and a general ,and now they don't, because Walmart moved in about a hundred miles away and everybody just disappeared, you know, all those small businesses.

Princess: [00:14:51] You mentioned that your family, at least, were a little bit more traditional. Do you think that really helped you when you were in boarding school and you were getting all of these alternative Christian Catholic ideologies projected onto you?

Leo: [00:15:08] I didn't quite understand it, right? I ended up– but I went to a Catholic priest once I asked him, I said, I kept getting in trouble because I don't get your view, you know, but inside of me, it doesn't resonate and I don't understand it, you know. And so I'm always going to be on the wrong side of this. And I said, I don't get it, I said, so you're going to have to give me something to hang my hat on here because I don't get it. And I asked him, I said, you know, for me, I said, I was brought up to believe that I'm part of the world. I'm just a, you know, [I] belong to it. I don't, you know, I don't own it, it's just I'm part of that system.

So I said, if you don't take care of the Earth, the consequences are that you're going to die. Because that's just really simple. I said, that's tangible to me, you know? I said, I understand if I don't feed a plant that's going to nourish me and keep me healthy then chances are I'm going to die. So that makes sense to me, I said. But you are telling me that you've got these three guys, as far as I'm concerned, fictional characters, that I'm supposed to ask help from them and they're going to help me. I said, that doesn't work with me. I mean, I'm eight years old, I'm arguing with this priest. And he got really irate about it. And [he goes], “Well, that's where faith comes in.” I'm going, it's still not making any sense, you know, so I just kind of left it at that. And I'm not

going to be able to convince somebody that it's not going to be, [to] understand what my point of view is coming from.

So that's the, [I] don't have hatred towards those people. I just didn't, you know, they had their way in. We had our way in. You know, it's kind of easy to go around them, to go to your way in, let them keep believing whatever they want, you know. It's not, it's never been my problem, is how I look at it. So I go around them and I find the people that think the same way I do and believe the things that I do. And as far as I'm concerned, it's a happier life for me.

Princess: [00:17:56] Thank you for sharing that. I guess my next question kind of relates to your experience of art in school. And I know you mentioned that you didn't really think it was special because at the time everyone was also doing a lot of art, but do you think that—I mean, I think you should be proud because there's not so many amazing artists. There [are], but there's not at the same time. I think it's really special that, you know, you're a Native artist and that you're still working. And I guess, do you have any source of pride for that, because it did sound like besides in the classroom there wasn't a lot of positive attention towards people that did arts?

Leo: [00:18:50] No, I'm, I'm— due to the fact that I'm, [I] look like a white guy, *wasi'chu*, which in Lakota that's [the term] for a white man. I have a lot of pride in it, in the fact that since I've looked—because I'm a quarter I don't know what, I'm three quarters Lakota—I've always, people around me that I grew up with and stuff, I was Native, I never was white, right? That was, you felt it, you've seen it, regardless of having to fight with whites and Natives, right, because of one saying you're not [Native]. But you're still Native, so I'm proud of what I did, and I hope that other people see it. The pride that I have in what I do, I just am not one to go out and say that I am, I mean it's, I let [my art] speak for itself, you know, and this is what I do if it happens to go across well and people see something, or hopefully I'm expressing the right thing, then I'm, yeah, I have pride in that.

Princess: [00:20:19] Yeah. I guess as an artist that is a little bit older, how do you feel about up and coming Native or Indigenous artists, like have you seen some of the more recent artwork and does it ever influence the art that you are continuing to make?

Leo: [00:20:39] Yeah, it does, I mean there's, you know, I'm glad to see younger artists expressing themselves and that the world's changed quite a bit. So, I mean, they have a lot of different avenues to express themselves. And for me, I think it's all really neat to watch and see how it does. And if I can have an impact on something like that by encouraging them, or maybe it's something that I can teach them, I don't know, that for me would be really a nice environment. It's just that we're, as a Native community in Eugene and Springfield, we have a kind of a separation. We need to have a tighter group of people, you know, so when those opportunities come up, we're able to help those people express themselves and whatnot. So whatever may be made, you know, whatever form it takes.

Princess: [00:21:52] If you wouldn't mind expanding on the separation, I did go to University of Oregon so I know a little bit more about the immediate [UO Many Nations] Longhouse in the Eugene Indigenous community, but not so much about the Springfield community. And it sounds like you've been here in the Eugene-Springfield area for a long time, so if you'd feel okay with discussing that a little bit.

Leo: [00:22:15] Well, it's changed over the years. I used to come to the [UO] longhouse when it was a white longhouse that was here. Before any of this was built. And we used to have community potlucks, and we used to do different things, which all came from the [Eugene] 4J School District, you know. We had kids in school; they all got together because we used to have a newsletter, and then we'd come here to [the UO Longhouse] to have potlucks or do different events. And it seems to fluctuate on how we stay [connected] as a group, you know. It's like for a while there was a lot of students here that were U of O students, and then all of a sudden it kind of tapered off. I don't know what was going on, but there weren't a lot of Native students so there weren't a lot of, like, NASA or what is it, NASU, you know, there weren't a lot of events with that, they were... so it kind of just kind of peters out, you know, and it has...

Princess: [00:23:28] Ebb and flow.

Leo: [00:23:29] And I need to, I mean, I think that just, it needs to be more interaction. So, you know, it's like, we started that—Marcy Middleton started that—Native American Arts and Crafts Market. So if we can connect that with [UO] Longhouse, with LCC, 4J School District, you know, create a bigger community of things and events, you know, that we all can go to. You would find more support, I think, when you're around that group of different students. Some of them went to boarding school, but they all kind of have a similar lifestyle, they understand what that's like. So they're more sympathetic to what's going on. Because, but it makes it easier for us all to connect together.

Princess: [00:24:32] Yeah, that makes sense because at least for the [UO] Longhouse, [it] has more students that are in their late teens, early 20s, versus Lane Community College Longhouse versus these other communities. So I definitely think having them connect more would be really great for everyone involved, more of a support system for everyone.

Leo: [00:24:55] Right.

Princess: [00:24:56] You mentioned Marcy's Native American [Arts and Crafts] Market, have you attended that or...

Leo: [00:25:02] Yeah, I'm one of the members of it.

Princess: [00:25:06] Would you like to talk about it a little bit?

Leo: [00:25:08] Well I think it's, for me anyway, I think it's important for us to create the avenue for people to have the opportunity to do different things that traditional [Native] people do, you know. Whether it's jewelry, artwork, dancing, whatever. And this is something that we're just now, we're still in our infancy, but we're trying to create a bigger connection to people, you know. I mean, we've gotten the City [of Eugene] to let us use that building that's really nice [the Eugene Farmer's Market Pavilion and Plaza]. I mean, so it's not like we're in a little hole somewhere, you know. I mean, we're out in the open, and we've got the room and the place to

express ourselves, you know. And then this city is willing to help us do these things, so we just got to take advantage of the situation that's there, you know.

Princess: [00:26:14] [How do you feel when you] encounter non-Native people that are using the likeness of Native people or heavily inspired Native art when they're non-Native?

Leo: [00:26:19] My issue is that they don't understand the culture that they're, you know, exploiting. They're not correct in why, I mean, of the paintings that they have, you know. It's like for me as an artist, because I'm from South Dakota, they expect me to, you know, [they] come up, "You got a picture of a painting of a wolf?" and I'm going...[shakes head] And certain things that are stereotyped, you know, in the way that these artists use the stuff for...that they just don't understand. Because it's like, "If I draw a picture of an Indian Chief, then that will be able to sell." Because people buy it for basically "white guilt."

Princess: [00:27:22] Sure.

Leo: [00:27:23] They see these pictures, "Oh yeah, I'm gonna have a picture," you know, but they don't research it or anything, they'll just take it at face value... where this guy who did it, you know, [did it] because you see that [imagery] all over the place. And there's nothing much you can do about it, because of social media. They're able to, you know, put these up there, put these for sale. And people don't understand it and don't even really want to research the culture. They'll take what the guy is [presenting], what the artist expresses, "Oh, this is what this means." And it may not be true, but it's still out there. They'll accept it as being truthful, [because] they want, you know, "Well I'm supporting Native Americans"—no, you're not, you're supporting a guy that, you know, [is] exploiting our cultures to make money off it. But there's really nothing you can do.

The only thing that I do is, I express that my-I'm a Lakota artist, I'm not a Native artist, right. I don't know what Klamath people do, I don't know what Navajos do, I don't—that's a different culture, they have different belief systems. They, you know, prize certain things that [are] different [from Lakota culture]. So it's like, I stick within what I know, so when people are

asking me a question about my art, how I'm expressing it, this is Lakota art, this is what I grew up with. I know these things, and I'm trying to give you the best truth that I can from my point of view where I'm standing. I'm not taking somebody's, you know, so I have, you know, taken a bunch of pictures of, what, The Godfather, and I'm selling it as "gangster" stuff you know, making money off of that. But I'm exploiting that because I don't really know what Italian culture is or anybody else. I'm just taking what has been popularized by people and then I, you know, I exploited that, put it out there as true and it's not, so... I can only be true to what I know, you know. I think that any artist that wants to express themselves, express himself as being a Native artist, you know, if you stay within the belief system of what you know, you know, if I'm Navajo there's certain things about Navajos, but you know these things, grow up with them. And all you're doing is expressing what your culture is to other people and hope they understand, you know, through this you can get them to understand it. Because you want them to ask intelligent questions. You don't want them to be asking, you know, stereotypical things that, you know, have been wrong forever, so... You're hoping to try to correct that. That's what I try to do anyway.

Princess: [00:30:27] Yeah, the importance of refusing to pander to the white gaze.

Leo: [00:30:32] Mm hm.

Princess: [00:30:34] I really like what you had to say about that, to be honest. It's good to know that there's role models that are really staunch in their morals and set standards that children and the younger generations can look up to. With that, I was wondering if you could speak a little bit about what it's like to be an artist in the Eugene Springfield area specifically.

Leo: [00:31:06] Yeah, I've been a graphic artist to make money for most of my career. I became a fine artist more only because I could afford to do those things. I mean, it's well received, I guess, but it's not something that, I don't think you could really make money if you're looking to do that. [chuckling] The one thing I've learned from all these years, I've talked to artists that are very popular or well-known, but the one thing is that fame doesn't equate money. So, you know, I mean, you could be really famous and not make a living out of it, you know. I mean, just

because people heard of you and know of you. So you have to do it because you like doing it. You can't do it because, you know, you think that you're going to make all this money, it doesn't work that way, you know. You do stuff that you're, I mean, you're hoping what you're doing is going to open up that platform of, you know, changing the view of what white people think [Native people are like], and you're hoping that, well, for me, because here I'm living in a, people are from Klamath and the different tribes, like Siletz and Grand Ronde, their imagery and their culture is different from mine.

So I'm out here promoting the Lakota artwork in a total different format than other people. So it's like, they identify it to a degree, but it's still not their culture. But I'm not going to go and start making paintings of, you know, [other Native] people, I mean, of their culture, because I don't, not that I don't want to know it, it's just I don't know enough about it.

Princess: [00:32:23] Right. It's not your place as someone that's not a part of that tribe to, to pick that necessarily.

Leo: [00:32:28] Right. So what I do is try to create an opportunity if somebody wants to know something about the Lakota people, I'll tell them what I, from my point of view, what it is. I'm not trying to take somebody else's culture and share it with other people, so, all right, that wouldn't come across right.

Princess: [00:33:47] What would you say to up and coming Native artists, and just, do you have any words of encouragement for them?

Leo: [00:33:57] My words and encouragement are just do it, just keep doing it. Because it's not a matter of—first of all, you've got to really like what you're doing. And you're going to, you know, stumble and fall quite a bit, because most artwork is, like—people come up to you and tell you, “Oh, I used to do that, but I was too much of a perfectionist,” and I [would say], if you look at my artwork, that's a whole series of mistakes. I [would say], I learned a little bit on this one, and I keep that, and I make another painting and that thing that I learned from that one makes this one better. And it's just a matter of just doing what you want to do, you know. And if it's about

your culture, you know, stay true to that, and just keep moving forward. I mean, you can't let these people dictate what you should do and what you shouldn't do, because in the end, you can't pander to the public. You have to show your real self with who you are, what you believe, and if you do that, then your artwork's going to come out. Showing [those things], you know, people go, that's relatable to me, you know, that's something I understand. [Those things] that are from your own culture, you know, people go, yeah, that's—and they will encourage you to be better at it, you know. It's, there's, you can't just give up. You gotta, if it's something you like doing, you just gotta keep doing it. You'll eventually get to the point where you're going to be more happy with it, and you're more prideful in it, and stuff, but you have to do the work to get there, you know. You can't just, if you fail once, you can't just give it up, you just gotta keep going through it, so...

Princess: [00:35:50] How do you maintain connection with your homelands after living so long in the Northwest? How do you keep that, you know, feeling good, and whatnot?

Leo: [00:36:04] I have relatives that still live on reservation. I talk to them constantly, I have a little brother that lives there, and my older brother, and I have a nephew, a couple nephews and stuff. So I talk to them, and they kind of tell me what's going on, on the reservation. And I get, also get feeds from the tribe that I get on Facebook and stuff. So I kind of get an idea of what's going on. And so you're still connected, but you're not, you're disconnected at the same time. Because there's, I mean, like anybody that's lived on a reservation, it's a very small world, you know. I mean, everybody's relatives know each other, or, you know, different things. So it's like, I talk about certain people, they go, oh, and I know them, they live over at Grass Mountain, or they live here, so, you know, just different things that are going on there. But in a small community like that, you just got to understand that they are living in that small community. And they, you know, their life may not be as, or what they perceive as being more exciting here than it is there, you know. But they're just people trying to get along, so.

I think anybody would probably want them [local institutions] to do more [for Native people], but then at the same time, it's just now coming up, I think, that with the political situation that we're in, if it goes the way that—it goes back to really having a real political system that's

operating. Then the opportunities are going to be better. I mean, we've got the first Native American [Lieutenant] Governor of Minnesota now [Peggy Flanagan], and Deb Haaland [U.S. Secretary of the Interior], you know, so, I mean, there's some things that are looking up. But there's a lot of changes that have to go in, and unfortunately, it's something that, eventually, you have to get up and say something about it, you know. You can't be the, if you want something, you have to ask for it, and you have to keep doing that. I mean, because the way that the system is now, we're kind of the most unrecognized people, you know. I mean, we're, for Native people, you never hear about them, never see them, you know. [One statistic] said, 40% of this country thinks that there isn't any Native American people. So, you know, in order for us to change that, we're going to have to be more visible, be more outward, you know.

So, I guess the “white guilt” [part] of all this stuff [comes in too], you know, you're kind of, they're kind of fumbling all over themselves to get—“I've got to help you!” And I'm going, no, we're totally capable of standing up for ourselves. We've just got to have, you know, whatever, your specialty of, whatever you're doing for a living, you know, you have to keep that in your mind— that the Native community is something that can use your skills, or, you know, help us become more visible. I think that's the only way I can see that, you know, for it to change. You can't just, you know, they'd love to see us all go away, you know, because they don't have to deal with that, you know, so.