

gallupARTS selects artist for residence program

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Sun Correspondent
Friday, 08 July 2022 07:54



Teaching kids the art of circus performance

Meek Watchman (Bit'ahnii, born for Ts'ah yisk'idnii) is a mother, aerialist, poet, and painter. She received her M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the Institute of American Indian Arts in May 2016, and now she's GallupARTS's Summer 2022 Social Justice Creative-in-Residence.

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From June through August, Watchman will be working at ART123 Gallery to develop a youth-focused Indigenous social circus curriculum that brings together aerial arts, creative writing, and the principles of K'e to help pre-teens and teens build self-esteem, develop trust, and establish a sense of belonging.

In an interview with the *Sun*, Watchman explained how she got involved in circus art and aerial work.

While she was attending IAIA, Watchman met a woman who asked her if she'd ever tried aerial arts, and she showed her a video of Crystal Worl, an Indigenous woman from Alaska. From that moment on, Watchman was hooked.

"It was the most beautiful, mesmerizing thing I've ever seen," Watchman said. She was 26 years old when she discovered aerial arts, and she said she sees it as the answer she'd been looking for.

Now, six years later, Watchman is still one of the few Indigenous circus art performers. Watchman said that when she started, she was only the eighth Native aerialist in the world. Now there are several dozen, but Watchman is still trying to increase that number.

"Indigenous circus is brand new. I'm pioneering this art form," Watchman said. "Circus art hasn't been around very long in the area."

The curriculum Watchman is currently building is something she hopes to take to colleges around the United States. She is currently doing research on things like safety, injury prevention, knowing the body, and overall learning how to make sure her students don't hurt themselves.

"With this program, I would love to travel around to other Native communities, to reservations, to Pueblo, to villages, which I have done in the past, just not with this curriculum that I'm developing," Watchman said. "... [With] this curriculum my hope is that I would be invited to universities and colleges that have a large indigenous population and share this work that I've

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been doing for almost a decade now.”

When asked how circus art relates to the topic of social justice, Watchman explained that social justice is one of the main reasons she got into circus art.

“The avenue that I like to focus on is social circus, which targets marginalized and at-risk youth to go into their communities and work with them,” Watchman said. “The skills that you need to learn and the fundamentals of aerial skills are huge components of leadership and confidence and so many strengths and skill-building aspects of aerial skills.”

Along with creating a curriculum, Watchman is also teaching a student one-on-one in an eight-week class.

“I am truly excited for this opportunity to work with GallupARTS and address social justice with circus arts,” Watchman stated in a GallupARTS press release. “This summer I will be creating an aerial art studio in downtown Gallup that will host [an Indigenous youth]. The intention is to demonstrate how circus and aerial arts creates meaningful space that promotes growth and deep personal development in a young person’s life.”

The program will end with the student putting on a performance in late July/early August that will show off what they learned from Watchman. Watchman also said the student will be incorporating poetry into the performance, and their spoken word piece that will reflect on what they’ve learned will be played during the performance.

Watchman said one of the reasons she wanted to teach circus art is because it’s not something that is readily available to people in America, especially black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color.

“While I was in Paris, I learned that European circus is something you’re born into, it’s something your family does, but here in the United States circus is something that’s in the top tier of athleticism, so it’s a very privileged sport and something that not a lot of people, especially marginalized people, black, Indigenous, and people of color, have access to,”

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Watchman said.

Rose Eason, GallupARTS Executive Director, is very excited to have Watchman as the 2022 Social Justice Creative In-Residence.

“gallupARTS is so excited to support Meek’s Indigenous social circus project for so many reasons,” Eason said in a press release. “Not only is Meek introducing our community to a new art form, she’s breaking ground by Indigenizing that art form. And through her work exploring the intersections of Diné perspectives and social circus, she’s opening up new possibilities for young people in our area. Youth development is such an important, if often overlooked, social justice issue—when we’re talking about youth, we’re talking about our future.”

Watchman is only the second artist to be featured as GallupARTS’s Social Justice Creative In-Residence. Hannah Manuelito, a Diné photographer, was featured for the program in 2018. Manuelito’s project focused on taking photographs of all the matriarchs of her family. GallupARTS gave her the money to complete the project, and Manuelito also led youth workshops and artist talks.

“It wasn’t directly addressing the [Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women] issue, but it was right around when #MeToo was taking off, so it had a lot to do with the roles that women play in families and society, and the respect that the traditional Navajo value system has for women,” Eason said.

Eason said that the Creative In-Residence program was initially planned to be something the gallery did every two years, but then COVID hit. She said that the program could become an annual program if GallupARTS found enough funding. Right now Eason said she hopes they’re able to bring it back for 2024, but there’s no concrete plans as of yet.

GallupARTS gave Watchman a \$5,400 stipend to help her reach her goals, with an additional \$1,000 stipend for supplies. The funding is provided by the Western States Art Federation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

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For information about Watchman and her work, visit galluparts.org.

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