

Sand painter recounts 50 years of experience

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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In his early days growing up in Wide Ruins, Ariz., Shawn Nelson learned how to focus on something he wanted to create, while sharing his perspectives and lessons learned through art.

These lessons were passed onto him through his grandparents, Albert and Gloria Nelson.

“They taught me how to respect the elders, respect people, introduce yourself,” Nelson said in an Aug. 28 interview. “[They taught me,] feel proud of who you are.”

Nelson was born in 1958 and lived in eastern Los Angeles, Calif., until 1963, when his family returned to New Mexico. He currently lives near Rock Springs.

The journey begins

The concept of identity and its preservation were first given to Nelson after his first meeting with his grandfather, Joe Yellowhorse, when his family returned to the state.

“I wore a three-piece suit because that was the style in LA,” Nelson said. “He didn’t believe I was his grandson. I went and put on my old jeans and a T-shirt, and then he believed me.”

Nelson considers this to be the moment his grandfather started to show him who he really was. And Nelson’s journey of sharing his knowledge of Diné culture through his work has continued to this day.

At times, Nelson said, while living in Wide Ruins, he had just one candle or a fire to light the area where he worked. He began practicing what he wanted to create — sand paintings.

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“I would take a metal iron, the kind used to iron clothes,” Nelson said. “I used my mom’s to make the desert where we lived.”

His parents poked fun at his desire to use such tools.

“They told me, ‘Since you like those stones so much, we’re going to call you Turquoise Boy,’” Nelson said.

This nickname was first given to him in the ’60s, and it has stuck with him. Now, as an adult, he’s known as Turquoise Man.

Nelson ventured into jewelry making for a short time, too, but the endeavor was dismissed when it became necessary for his grandparents to pawn his work.

“They threatened to change my name to ‘Boy Who Won’t Pawn,’” Nelson said.

Nelson considers this particular moment of special importance. It’s the kind of moment he aims to remember and share with the people around him through his work.

“I share that to this day,” he said. “[It tells people] who they are.”

Sand heals

After attending elementary school in Sanders, Ariz., Nelson’s family moved to Phoenix, where he attended high school and eventually college. There, he learned more about running a business and establishing his concept as an artist.

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“I got more involved with western medicine,” Nelson said. “Navajo sand painting connects to [the] healing process.”

When asked how sand paintings connect to healing, Nelson recounted how he felt sand once saved his life.

“I was ill at the time, my grandparents told me [I was] at the stage between life and death,” he said. “[I decided] I would rather go a traditional way. I used herbal medicine.”

Nelson feels both people and the environment can benefit from his sharing of the power of herbal medicines.

The life of the work

After graduating with an associate’s degree as a medical assistant, Nelson was called to demonstrate sand paintings in Phoenix, where he was commissioned to make them for corporate entities.

“I just kept pushing myself,” he said. “I practiced every day; [I] went from water colors to oils to sand.”

This work ethic brought Nelson many opportunities. He said he introduced the concept of a logo with an eagle to American aerospace manufacturer Pratt & Whitney, as well as a special painting for Super Bowl XXX in 1996. He also had a part in the 1995 film *The Prophecy* and rode horseback in the 1998 Rose Bowl parade with friend and fellow artist Robert “Tree” Cody.

Nelson’s work has been featured by organizations like the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, the University of New Mexico and the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock, Ariz. He was recognized at the New Mexico State Fair, as well as at the Gallup Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial.

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Today, Nelson is a board member and Native American advisor with Clearinghouse CDFI in Lake Forest, Calif.

“CDFI really appreciates who I am as an individual, the positive part of me as an artist and a person,” Nelson said.

In addition to people such as Gallup-based Bill Donovan and Octavia Fellin Public Library Deputy Director Tammi Joe, Nelson said he owes a debt of gratitude to his late wife, Edith Nelson. Her father was a medicine man who shared his knowledge of sand paintings and performed many blessings.

“I give her a lot of credit [for] who I am today,” Nelson said. “I was grateful for a lot of the blessings they did for me. She was kind of my backbone.”

Nelson has also worked with clients in Barstow, Calif., where his work hangs in Barstow Indian Health. According to Nelson, the paintings bring positive energy to the patients.

Nelson believes focusing on a goal can lead to its fulfillment. He wants his work to reflect to its viewers what he’s learned throughout his life.

“I just feel real fortunate that it’s going to be part of who I am, part of my life,” he said.

To learn more about Shawn Nelson and his work, visit: www.rawartists.org/turquoisema
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