

One good thing about controversy is that it gives us an opportunity to learn and grow, and hear other points of view.

During recent debates about sports mascots, cultural appropriation and racism at Turners Falls and Mohawk Trail Regional High Schools, we heard the same refrain over and over – that Native people are invisible, that they are only a part of “history” and that to use their names and images is somehow “honoring” that romanticized image of the “Noble Warrior”. Statements were made that by removing the offensive imagery and names, the entire story of Native people in the region would be erased.

The idea for this installation was born during those contentious meetings. It grew with each passing statement that rendered us as historical, dehumanized and caricatured, thus invisible – and tried to reduce us to stereotypes.

These stereotypes are part of what creates small, unseen, accepted biases that add to marginalization and oppression of Indigenous people today. Stereotyping and the bullying that it engenders contributes to the suicide crisis of Native youth 14-24 years old, a rate that is more than double the national average for any race, as documented by the Center for Disease Control. Objectification and marginalizing Native humanity contributes to the outrageous numbers of Indigenous women and children who are missing, murdered, and sexually assaulted, at a higher rate than any other race. Biases and generalization contribute to documented police shootings and incarcerations of Indigenous men at a higher rate than any other race.

Our sacred ceremonial grounds have been subject to extractive industry, toxic waste dumping, sold for cattle grazing, and stolen despite the guarantees of International treaty rights. We are not a historical side note or a caricature. We have faced intentional genocide and cultural genocide, and yet we remain, our cultures, and our identities intact. Indigenous people are the fastest growing population, working towards a better future for our next seven generations.

My idea was to facilitate an art installation that brings to light the local Indigenous community that seemed so invisible; to make their faces, their voices and their very human-ness a part of the public consciousness.

I was guided in this mission by the inspirational work of Indigenous photographers like Matika Wilbur (Swinomish and Tulalip) of Project 562, Josue Rivas (Otomi), and Brian Adams (Iñupiaq). Their work brings agency of identity, culture, and contemporary issues to the forefront. This challenges the dominant narrative and brings about Indigenous led narrative change. I asked participants to choose a location or a “happy place” that was meaningful and have agency over how they chose to represent themselves, their clothing, their cultural items, and their very expression. Giving them all the space they needed to convey their message, I asked each person for a statement about their portrait. The result of these photos and thoughts is this installation; a portrait of Native America right here in this area. These are people who are Professors, Teachers, Doctors, Artists, Council Members, Lawyers, Students, Grandparents, Mothers, Fathers, Children, all living their daily lives among the rest of the population.

The Powwow Brick Wall series was done as a way to include others, who we were not able to reach during our limited time for shooting more personal portraits. With more time, and with a bigger installation space, this project could have been so much larger. We hope to move forward and grow this extraordinary gallery exhibit to include many other Indigenous people who want to share their portraits and their thoughts.

We hope this installation inspires you to get to know the many and varied Indigenous people of your area, ask them how to lift their voices. Get to know their history, as we are missing Native voices in the writing of history. Also, learn about the current issues facing Native people. Many of those issues will also be important to the general populace, as Native people have always been the teachers of ecology, stewards of this land, and the Protectors of the Waters.

And we hope it will be written in your hearts and your minds – We Are Vital. We Are Vibrant. We Are Visible. We Are Still Here.

– **Rhonda Anderson**, Iñupiaq - Athabaskan