

## A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change

A collection of writings depicting the wide range of ways the arts make community, civic, and social change.



Textile weaver Lani Hotch receives a dance from youth on the occasion of the First Peoples Fund Community Spirit Awards honoring Hotch.

## The Spirit of Sovereignty Woven into the Fabric of Tribal Communities: Culture Bearers As Agents of Change

By Lori Pourier (Oglala Lakota)

*For centuries, cultural assets have been inextricably linked with the wellbeing of Native peoples. Native arts and culture are fundamental to the societal fabric of tribal communities, and cultural expression is a means to ensure cultural continuity and the very survival of Indigenous peoples and sovereign nations. This paper describes how asset-based organizing in Native communities and nations focuses on cultural renewal as essential for creating systemic change. It provides context for a recent rebirth within Indian country regarding the role ancient traditions and teachings play in rebuilding tribal nations. It portrays individual culture bearers from Native Alaskan and Indian Nations who, not only preserve, teach, and pass on ancient traditions, but also, in the spirit of their ancestors, have become agents of change. The stories of a new generation of culture bearers demonstrate how they commit to learn the ways of their elders and exercise leadership to make change in their communities from a collectivist approach where everyone is valued as part of the whole. These stories illuminate how art and culture are essential elements in changing attitudes, behaviors, institutions, and policies that limit equity and justice in Native Americans' lives.*

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Culture is the most critical asset within Native Alaskan and Indian Nations. For centuries, cultural assets have been inextricably linked with the wellbeing of Native peoples. Native artists carry and embody these assets not only in their creations, but also in how they live their lives. They represent critical vehicles for community revitalization and stronger tribal nations.

Asset-based organizing that focuses on cultural renewal is essential for creating systemic change.

In spite of centuries of government policies designed to assimilate and terminate, Native language, art and spirituality all have endured. In Native communities, art is not a commodity produced by a few; art is ingrained throughout Native lifestyles, spiritual beliefs and social systems. Native arts and culture are fundamental to the societal fabric of tribal communities, and cultural expression is a means to ensure cultural continuity and the very survival of Indigenous peoples.

This paper describes how individual culture bearers from Native Alaskan and Indian Nations have dedicated their lives to sustaining arts and culture at the community level. Culture bearers are not simply basket weavers whose primary goals are to preserve, teach, and pass on ancient traditions; rather, in the spirit of their ancestors, they have become agents of change. On many fronts, they have dedicated their lives to strengthening the sovereign rights of the members as a whole and it is through individual acts of sovereignty that whole new generations of culture bearers are singing, dancing, and celebrating ancient traditions. At the same time, their acts of leadership represent a collective approach that values interdependence and fosters an economy and practice where everyone is valued as part of the whole.

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## “QUIETLY TAKING A STAND TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE”

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Since 2000, First Peoples Fund has honored nearly 70 tribal culture bearers from across America who are self-determining their futures while remaining deeply rooted in their traditions and tribal values. Selected by members of their own communities, these honorees are bringing spirit back to their communities. This work often begins with a handful of humble leaders who, like their teachers before them, are quietly taking a stand to make a difference.

In Southeast Alaska, more than 30 years ago, Jenny Thlunaut, Jennie Warren and non-native weaver Cheryl Samuel inspired a new generation of weavers and equipped them with tools, skills, and knowledge to become agents of change like themselves. They instilled in this next generation—Lani Hotch (Tlingit), Anna Brown Elhers (Tlingit), Delores Churchill (Haida) and Clarissa Rizal (Tlingit)—the idea that if they didn’t act, it

would be detrimental to the future of their peoples<sup>1</sup>. This next generation of weavers patiently learned from the elder teachers in their community and, through their teachings, began to realize their roles going forward were much greater than learning to weave. More importantly, they had a critical role in sustaining ancient cultures that, in some instances, were being lost.

What does it look like when Native cultural expression ensures cultural continuity and the very survival of Indigenous peoples? In southeast Alaska, it is the Tlingit village of Klukwan (*Tlakw*, translated in Tlingit means eternal and *aan* means village or land<sup>2</sup>) whose population is 100 people. Textile artist Lani Hotch describes 1992 as a year when her tribe was in “turmoil.” The small village of Klukwan experienced several decades of loss of land base, language and their once-thriving subsistence economy. The Klukwan Whale House collection of ceremonial objects, their last thread of cultural traditions, was stolen. All this was coupled with the devastating loss of Jenny Thlunaut who passed only a few years before.

Some employment opportunities still exist in the tribal government. In addition, the Klukwan Village continues to preserve what remains of their subsistence economy of commercial fishing and hunting. However, Lani describes self-employment activities as “few and sparse.” “A few of us manage to eke out a living here,” she stated during a recent visit.

The Village’s tribal government recently launched a tourism enterprise to create more employment opportunities for its members. It is noteworthy that this enterprise was largely cultivated from a handful of Lani’s students and community members who had already begun to rebuild a tradition-based economy as a way to heal social ills related to historical trauma. And it all began with Lani’s simple act of exerting her sovereign rights by using her hands and the gifts of Jenny. She began to weave the Klukwan Healing Robe, a raven’s-tail robe that took seven years to complete and was inspired by a local weaver’s work from the 1870s. What seems like a simple act of generosity is actually an act of social justice that spawned other acts.

Lani completed her Masters of Art in teaching in 1992 and, as a self-employed artist, began teaching the Tlingit language, which opened the doors for others in her community to learn the language, songs, ceremonies, and dance of the culture. She established seasonally based cultural camps, the Salmon Camp and Moose Harvest camp, and inspired the one or two remaining carvers in her Village to teach carving.

Her grantwriting skills brought enormous opportunities for her village. When First Peoples Fund traveled to the remote Village of Klukwan (four hours by ferry and car) in August 2011, we experienced first hand the fruits of her work. This included a salmon harvest camp, an entire processing area with sinks and drainage in the river overlooking the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve where more than 4,000 bald eagles migrate annually.

Lani's tireless efforts over several years resulted in a Tlingit Language and Culture program at the Klukwan School and a series of commissioned carvings for the newly built Hospitality House at the newly constructed Jilkaat Kwaan Cultural Heritage Center. Lani inspired a few remaining adult male carvers to teach the boys and young men how to carve posts of the long house and most recently a large canoe that was launched only a few months before First Peoples Fund visited Klukwan in July 2011. It was awe-inspiring and hard to imagine that where the new structures stood had been a salvage site for wrecked cars only a few years before.



Artist Lani Hotch with her healing robe. Hotch was recognized by First Peoples Fund with a Community Spirit Award.

The last surviving wisdom keepers such as Jenny Thlunaut (born in 1894) remembered what it was like to live in a society that operated from a set of principals and core values that were essential to the very survival of a nation. Jennie's generation clearly understood that a community and its nation are sovereign when the entire village is strong. The few remaining elders continue to hold on to the richness of a once-thriving culture. Those "change makers" of this generation who took the time to pause to listen and who are truly invested in learning the ways of their elders

understand that a healthy and surviving community is one that operates on a principle that the family, the community, and the nation are interdependent. This is the true spirit of sovereignty.

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## REINVIGORATING TRADITIONS THAT KEEP THE COMMUNITY ALIVE

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In the lower 48 states, nearly 2,000 miles from Klukwan Village, there is another compelling story and a history deeply rooted in ancient traditions of ash and sweetgrass basketry; gathering; hunting; and fishing. The Wabanaki (People of the Dawn) tribes of Maine consist of the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Mik'maq, and Maliseet. The four tribes' Creation story tells them that the Wabanaki came from the ash tree, singing and dancing after Gluskabe (cultural hero) shot an arrow into the tree<sup>3</sup>. It is said the people were made from ash and, therefore, in taking care of the Earth they are ensuring cultural continuity from one generation to the next.

The Wabanaki tradition of weaving spans generations. Families began selling to tourists on the coast in Maine’s tourist locations (Mount Desert Island and Bar Harbor) dating back to the early 1800s. At the age of six, Jeanette Molly Parker (Passamaquoddy) began weaving baskets from scraps of materials that fell at the feet of her mother and grandmother as they wove baskets for market. By the early 1990s, Molly was one of a handful of remaining master basketweavers. She has lived her entire life in Indian Township in Washington County, Maine, home to 2,000 tribal members. When she wasn’t weaving baskets she managed to serve as the lieutenant governor of the Passamaquoddy tribe and on the tribal council.

By 1993 a handful of weavers, including Molly (board president), founded the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance (MIBA) [[www.miba@gwi.net](http://www.miba@gwi.net)]. They were concerned that the art of ash and sweetgrass basketry was being lost. At the time of its founding the average age of master weavers was 63. Because of an aggressive apprenticeship program during the first 10 years, today the MIBA has 200 members with an average age of 40. This represents a tremendous feat achieved in less than 20 years considering that, at the turn of the century, basketry was a primary source of income for the Wabanaki families.

Under the leadership of executive director Theresa Secord, MIBA and its members have received national recognition and awards, including the Maine Arts Commission’s Traditional Arts Fellowship, the National Endowment for the Arts Heritage Awards, First Peoples Fund Community Spirit Award,<sup>4</sup> and high honors at national Indian Markets in the Southwest. At the 2011 Santa Fe Indian Market [[swaia.org](http://swaia.org)], the youngest MIBA board member Jeremy Frey<sup>5</sup> (32 years old) was honored with the Best of Show, competing against 1,000 other American Indian artists. This was Jeremy’s second year at the Santa Fe Indian Market and only the second year of the Basketry category.

It has been more than 60 years since Molly began to weave. Although a child at the time, Molly Parker recalls a generation of elders who understood what it was like to be a sovereign people.

Today, Molly’s great-grandchildren are following in the footsteps of their ancestors. She says, “Basket making assumes teaching the next generation. It is my obligation to my family, my community, and for the future of our people. Our craft is a way of keeping our community healthy. It is a way not only to make our art form endure, but for our values, our belief in family and



Basket created by Molly Parker, founder of the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance.

**S**overeignty is absolute. We are unique to this land. And with that uniqueness comes special powers of sovereignty. We are still here today, and we are asserting our sovereignty. We are not going away.

*Reuben "Butch" Phillips, Penobscot<sup>6</sup>*

community and our culture to thrive."

These examples illustrate the difference that culture bearers are making and the change that is occurring, often in small, remote, tribal communities. With populations of fewer than 5,000 people, many of these communities

are economically disadvantaged, viewed as the "poorest of the poor." They are tribal communities that remain unrecognized and undervalued in society as a whole.

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## TENETS DRAWN FROM THE DISTINCT CULTURAL ASPECTS OF COMMUNITIES

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First Peoples Fund's theoretical framework is uniquely modeled on the distinct cultural aspects of its constituency and the Native communities it serves. A central tenet of this framework is: *Culture is the most critical asset within Indian Nations, and asset-based organizing that focuses on cultural renewal is essential for creating systemic change.*

Other tenets include the following:

*Change occurs from the ground up.* American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawai'ian's hold the solutions to their own problems. Models of reservation development based on external resources have resulted in failure; they have mimicked the service-oriented models of religious and government institutions that do not acknowledge local assets but instead perpetuate poverty and dependency. The seeds of a healthy and vibrant community sit within the ancestral memory and knowledge of tribal peoples. The Fund's role is to nurture change agents and organically catalyze a movement that fully honors this intrinsic knowledge. Further, this movement can unleash and leverage the collectivist-oriented energy within Native people.

*Promoting a clear, positive vision of the future is critical in effecting and galvanizing change, and such a vision must emerge from and affirm the cultural strength of Native communities.* Native art/culture is the vehicle through which Native communities can revitalize traditional lifeways that literally define tribal identity. Artistic expression encourages tribal peoples to recognize their own resilience and vitality, envision a hopeful future, and even re-imagine new tribal institutions that do not mirror American

institutions but instead achieve effectiveness because they are based in cultural values. Art and culture are essential elements in changing attitudes, behaviors, institutions, and policies that limit equity and justice in Native Americans' lives. Critical questions will provide the framework for dialogue between tribal leadership and their community-spirited artists: How are tribes using tradition-based practices to sustain and restore tribal government systems and structures, e.g. court systems, education, health, and economic development programs? What federal policies have negatively impacted and distorted cultural efforts to rebuild traditional systems and practices? What pockets of community are successful in restoring cultural practices through self-determination policies that began in the 1970s?

*When one of our People is honored, we are all honored."*

*Theresa Secord,  
Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance*

First Peoples Fund honors artists who serve as culture bearers for their tribes. It structures programs to foster artists as change makers and honor their success in playing critical roles in their communities. Through community-spirited actions, these artists bring their people into the full beauty and expression of their own unique heritages, thereby playing a crucial role in social and economic change. When First Peoples Fund brings honor to one, it lifts up the spirit of the entire community.

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## HOW NATIVE COMMUNITIES DEFINE CHANGE

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It is important to note that in Native communities, defining change (along with such concepts as community organizing, movement building, and leadership) is conceptualized in a distinct way that does not fit any conventional model. Rather than the individualist-oriented mainstream model, Native people espouse a collectivist worldview that defines leadership as the result of dynamic interplay of multiple actors. Change is a complex process emerging from a common focus on the collective good. This focus reinforces and catalyzes continuous success and sustainability.

For more than a decade there has been a rebirth within Indian country about the role ancient traditions and teachings play in rebuilding tribal nations. Ingrid Washinwatok El-Issa, a selfless, long-time activist and leader, dedicated her life to amplifying the voice of Native culture bearers. Several months before her passing in 1999, Ingrid spoke eloquently about sovereignty as understood from a place of spirit and as a binding force for the collective.

*Since the time that human beings offered thanks for the first sunrise, sovereignty has been an integral part of Indigenous peoples' daily existence. With the original instructions from the Creator, we realize our responsibilities. Those are the laws that lay the foundation of our society. These responsibilities manifest through our ceremonies...Sovereignty is that wafting thread securing the components that make a society. Without that wafting thread, you cannot make a rug. Without that wafting thread, all you have are unjoined, isolated components of a society. Sovereignty runs through the vertical strands and secures the entire pattern. That is the fabric of Native society.*

Today Native voices are amplified on many fronts. At the 2007 Honoring Nations summit at Harvard University, Brian Speepots Cladoosby, Chairman of the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, described the desired change that is needed to heal and rebuild sovereign nations:

*Our ancestors preserved the great blessing of the salmon for us in the northwest and the buffalo in the plains and the sweat lodges, and the pipe and the kivas and the longhouses throughout Indian Country...our sovereignty means today what it has meant and will always mean. Indian people know what our people need to strive and thrive. As long as we know who we are, no one can touch our sovereignty and we will always understand who we are.*

This next decade brings new promise for our culture bearers such as Lani Hotch, Delores Churchill, Molly Parker, and Theresa Secord, who collectively are the wafting thread of the next generation of emerging agents of change. Native societies are stronger as a result of these individuals. It is time for our tribal leaders to embrace their community-spirited artists. No longer can their work be undervalued, isolated and only seen as single vertical strands within the blanket. The raven's tail is woven, the pattern secured and sovereignty breathes life into fabric of our nations.

Lori Pourier's philanthropy work began at First Nations Development Institute based in Virginia where she served as the Associate Marketing Director. Following her tenure at First Nations, she operated her own marketing consultant business specializing in developing marketing strategies for nonprofit American Indian organizations, multicultural arts organizations, and tribal communities. Pourier served on the Board of Directors of the Western States Arts Federation, the Honor the Earth Fund, the Chinook Fund, and the National Indian Business Association. She currently serves on the board of directors for Grantmakers in the Arts and is the co-chair of the Indigenous Resource Network. She also is a board member of the Native Americans in Philanthropy and Red Cloud Indian School. In 1993, she participated in Americans for Indian Opportunity's American Indian Ambassadors Leadership Program funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. She holds a Masters of Science from Southern New Hampshire University, Graduate School of Business. Nominated by The Ford Foundation, Ms. Pourier was selected for the Center for Social Innovation (CSI) fellowship at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, a partnership between Stanford University and National Arts Strategies. [The Executive Program for Nonprofit Leaders-Arts \(EPNL-Arts\)](#) honors fifty outstanding arts and culture leaders by selecting them to receive a CSI fellowship for the program.

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#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> All are First Peoples Fund Community Spirit Award recipients.

<sup>2</sup> Source; Lani Hotch's nomination application to First Peoples Fund, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> As told by Theresa Secord, Executive Director, Maine Indian Basketweavers Alliance.

<sup>4</sup> Theresa Secord (2009), Jeanette Molly Parker (2008), David Moses Bridges (2006), Donald and Mary Sanipass (2004) are all First Peoples Fund's Community Spirit Award recipients.

<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Frey is a 2012 First Peoples Fund Artist in Business Leadership Fellow and a 2010 United States Artist Fellow.

<sup>6</sup> Source; Bangor Daily News, Earth Day 2001