As COVID fueled the drug crisis, Native Americans hit worst

Rachel Taylor clutches a buckskin satchel filled with the ashes of her son, Kyle “Little Crow” Domrese, pictured at right, who died of an overdose. (Photo by David Goldman/AP)

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Rachel Taylor kissed her fingertips and pressed them to the crow sewn onto a leather bag on the couch in the living room. “Oh, my baby,” she whispered. She hugged the buckskin satchel filled with her son’s ashes.

Nearly a year ago, she opened his bedroom door and screamed so loud she woke the neighbors. Kyle Domrese was face down on his bed, one of more than 100,000 Americans lost in a year to overdoses as the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated America’s addiction disaster.

When he was 4, the medicine man had given him his Ojibwe name: Aandegoons – “little crow.” She traced the outline of the black bird on the sack.

“Love you,” Taylor said to the bag, as she does each time she leaves her home in this city surrounded by three Ojibwe reservations in remote northern Minnesota.

As the pandemic ravaged the country, deaths from drug overdoses surged by nearly 30 percent, climbing to a record high. The drug crisis also diversified from an overwhelmingly white affliction to killing people of color with staggering speed. The death rate last year was highest among Native Americans, for whom COVID-19 piled yet more despair on communities already confronting generations of trauma, poverty, unemployment and underfunded health systems.

Taylor’s tribe, the White Earth Nation, studied the lives they’ve lost to addiction.

“Theyir death certificates say they died of an overdose, but that’s not right,” one member of their study group said.

These deaths were a culmination of far more than that: Despite their resilience, Native Americans carry in their blood 500 years worth of pain from being robbed of their land, their language, their culture, their children. In living people’s memory, children were taken from their families and sent to boarding schools with the motto, “Kill the Indian, save the man.”

“What they died of is a broken heart,” the study says.

For years, Taylor tried to break the cycle. Her grandmother was sent to a boarding school, where she was taught to be so ashamed of her Ojibwe language that she would only speak it once she’d eased the pain by drinking.

Taylor had her daughter when she was 19 and her son a few years later. She’d lost custody of them for a couple years as she battled her own addiction. She told them she wished she could fix all the dysfunctional things that happened when she was using.

Native artists make big splash within Twin Cities public art projects

The COVID-19 pandemic and continuing outbreaks of variant strains hurt artists about as much as any group of creative entrepreneurs but Twin Cities public works projects are helping keep three Native American artists toiling in their fields.

In early December, the City of Minneapolis held an open house at its new Public Service Building, 505 Fourth Ave. S., across the street from City Hall, to showcase 17 major artworks included in the new civic building. Among these paintings and sculptures were works by prominent Twin Cities Native artists Rory Wakemup, Marlena Myles and Angela Two Stars.

In late December, the City of St. Paul stepped forward and announced it had chosen two local artists – Myles and Wakemup – to develop multiple art forms for the huge Highland Bridge development site near the Mississippi River. It is on the old Ford Motor assembly plant grounds in St. Paul.

“Art is personal for both the artist and a buyer or someone appreciating the art, said Wakemup. “That relationship is hard (to keep) with the pandemic.”

Public works projects, however, are planned and budgeted over time and do continue on, he said. “This keeps us going post-pandemic,” he said.

The Dec. 22 announcement from St. Paul and its Public Arts Saint Paul unit said Wakemup and Myles were unanimously chosen. A field of 170 artists from across the U.S. submitted proposals to provide art for the $146,000 public art portion of the development.

What St. Paul officials saw and appreciated is that Wakemup (Boise Forte Ojibwe), an artist, activist and community organizer; and artist Myles (Spirit Lake Dakota/Mohogan/Muscogee) want to connect the Highland Bridge project’s location by the Mississippi River with its historic homeland area for the Dakota people.

The public art project will help visitors and area St. Paul residents understand the Dakota people who lived in this center area of what is now the Twin Cities and appreciate the culture and stories of the Indigenous Twin Citzens.

The artists’ proposal is called The Story of Creation that will combine sculpture, murals and newer art forms, such as a website and handheld technology devices, to share these stories and history.

Myles told The Circle that some research is still underway on where different artworks will be installed. The artwork is to be completed in 2022 and will be placed in UIMaka (Grandmother Earth) Park, a new park being built within the 135-acre Highland Bridge project.

In the city’s announcement of the artists’ selection, Myles said she looks forward to creating artwork to “honor the significance to our homelands and pass on the teachings of Unci Maka (Grandmother Earth) Park to the future generations.

The historical ties to the Dakota presence were stressed in the city’s announcement.

Colleen Sheehy, executive director of Public Art Saint Paul, said the art will “weave together the past, present and future” referencing Dakota stories and beliefs from hundreds of years. It will allow people to use cutting-edge technology, such as cell phones, to access and share images and these stories.
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St. Paul City Council member Chris Tolbert, who represents the southwest St. Paul district by the river, added to the historical ties to the Dakota. “With water flowing from the Unci Maka Park to nearby Bdote (where Haha Wakpa, or Mississippi River, and Mnísota Wakpá, the Minnesota River) come together, the area “is central to Dakota spirituality and history,” Tolbert said.

Art is fulfilling at many levels. Education about people, places and how they connect to make histories and traditions is among art’s greatest contributions. As a result, public art is usually supported by designated allotments from capital improvement projects such as 1 percent of revenues raised from public bond sales.

The Minneapolis Public Service Building is an example of these connections. The building now has artwork from 17 artists on display, including elevator lobby ceiling sculptures and bird-safe glass and vinyl murals.

Like the city itself, the collection of art is from a diverse group of artists. Many have works on display around the Twin Cities. They include Tristan Al-Haddad, Laurie Borregreve, James Brenner, Christopher Harrison, Iroha Ito, John Kim, Andrew Lucia, Adama Marcus, Aaron Marx, Molly Reichert, Connor Rice, Will Stasoco, Alexander Tylevich and Kao Lee Thao in addition to Myles, Two Stars and Wakemup.

The city said goals for its public art project include having public space in an inviting and pleasant place, reflect the city’s diversity and culture, and reflect the mission of public service.

The three Native artists contributed to those goals.

Myles has two ink on vinyl murals displayed. One of them, Protecting the Generations, is on the skyway ramp and the other, Indigenous Wealth, is on a sixth-floor hallway. Both carry forward her use of Dakota language and storytelling.

In Protecting the Generations, Myles uses Wódakhota (harmony with all life), Wichóichage (generations/growth of the people), Wóabdeza (understanding), Wóinina (awareness of silence), Wichóhan (responsibility/way of life), and Wótakuye (relatives/kinship) as lessons with Dakota words.

Indigenous Wealth, meanwhile, projects Dakota history in Minneapolis and gives lessons for how to care for community going forward. It notes how Minneapolis economic wealth was created around Saint Anthony Falls that had different economic meaning to the Dakota. One example is the legend of where the “Horse Nation” met the Dakota/Lakota people and that horses would bring economic benefits to the people.

*continued on page 9*
The U.S. Department of the Interior and the Minnesota-based Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition have signed an agreement to collaborate in the search for records of Indian boarding schools. The goal is to establish an online archive of the records starting in late 2022, so families can access them.

A memorandum of understanding will allow for the sharing of records and information in support of the Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative, which was announced in 2021.

The Minnesota-based coalition started working on the issue nearly a decade ago. This agreement marks a shift in the federal response.

“We had asked the federal government back in 2016 through a FOIA request to answer how many boarding schools the U.S. had, how many children went to those schools, from which tribal nations they went, and how many died or went missing,” said the coalition’s CEO Christine Diindiisi McCleave. “They weren’t able to answer our questions. So what’s unique about this initiative is that the federal government is now putting some resources into researching their records.”

“The first step to healing is acknowledging the painful truths of federal boarding school policies and gaining a fuller understanding of their impacts,” said Interior Secretary Deb Haaland in announcing the agreement in December 2021.

“Today’s action will help strengthen our efforts to gather necessary information and records so that we can unravel the threads of trauma that linger in Indigenous communities.”

The Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition has identified 367 Indian boarding schools. Some of the records from those schools are in the National Archives, but others proved difficult for the nonprofit to access, with some organizations refusing access to records.

“We found that some of them were held in church archives, universities or private collections, so access to those records is still an issue,” said McCleave. “But this investigation that has been launched by the Interior Department means that they are looking into records that are not at the National Archives, so they’re opening new collections of records that were not previously accessible.”

The limited access to records means some families have been unable to learn what happened to children who went to boarding schools and never returned. “The records are a central point, it’s part of the truth telling that has to happen for us to know what the experiences were, what the impacts were of these policies,” said McCleave, who is also pushing for a commission to gather stories about boarding school experiences as part of a search for truth.

For more than 150 years, Indigenous children were forcibly relocated to residential facilities. The purpose was cultural assimilation by forcibly suppressing native language, culture and identity. The Department of the Interior estimates that hundreds of thousands of children were taken from families under the government policy.

Establishing a record for all of those children will be a time-consuming, challenging task.

“What we’re aiming to do is to publish a digital archive, meaning that we will scan these records and make them available on the internet,” said McCleave. “It will take some time. But we’re planning to launch the first collection of our digital archives in the fall of 2022.”

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Danielle Crowell was born in Fargo, North Dakota. Her mother is of Norwegian descent, and father was White Earth Band of Ojibwe. Danielle was the second of three daughters. At the age of four, Danielle’s family relocated to Crookston, Minnesota, a place she still calls home. Crookston provided a wonderful environment for Danielle to explore her childhood interests. She swam in lakes and spent time in nature observing the beautiful scenery and wildlife. Today, Danielle is still a nature lover. She and her partner of 12 years, Jeffrey, an avid fisherman, enjoy spending time together in the outdoors fishing and hiking. Wherever they go, Cubby, their smart and adventurous Jack Russell-mix, is along for the ride. Danielle’s other hobbies include reading mystery novels, watching a good comedy, cooking her specialty soups and chilis, and baking scrumptious cookies for her nieces and nephews.

Apart from her hobbies and leisure time, Danielle also finds great meaning in her work. For the past eight years she has cared for adults with physical and cognitive disabilities in a group home setting. “It’s very rewarding,” says Danielle. “We all are one accident away from becoming a client ourselves. If I were in the same situation, I would want someone to do a good job caring for me.” Her compassion and consideration for others runs deep. In hopes of reaching others, Danielle has courageously opened up about her cancer diagnosis that occurred only a few short months ago.

Danielle estimates that it had been 25 years since her last Pap smear. She believes it was a combination of fear and stubbornness that prevented her from keeping up with routine health screenings. Additionally, Danielle encountered an access barrier in 2019 after losing her Medicaid coverage. The loss of medical coverage came after she received a raise from her employer. Fortunately, due to her American Indian heritage, Danielle learned that she was eligible to receive health services through White Earth Health, a partner of the Sage Screening Program, which provides free breast and cervical cancer screening to eligible women. Through Sage, Danielle received her Pap smear and mammogram free of charge. Danielle was relieved that her mammogram result came back normal; however, her Pap smear was abnormal and required additional tests and imaging.

Danielle unfortunately received life-changing news—the tests had revealed that she had cervical cancer. Having lost her father to bone cancer in 2014, this was not the first time that cancer had touched Danielle’s life. Compounding the situation, her imaging tests also revealed a tumor and cluster of cysts on her liver.

Thankfully her doctors acted quickly. Luckily for Danielle both the cervical and non-cancerous tumor/cysts on her liver were able to be surgically removed in just one procedure. The surgery was a complete and total success.

Danielle is now cancer free, and her doctors will continue to monitor her overall health and provide support and assistance if needed. Two months post-surgery, Danielle reports, “Feeling better now than I have in years.” She has been on medical leave since mid-October and is feeling so good that she cannot wait to go back to work to connect with her clients, and once again, be a wonderfully compassionate and empathetic caregiver.

Danielle’s story provides hope for her and others. She is focused on creating memorable moments with her loved ones. She finds great joy in spending time with friends and family to experience good food and conversation, while reminiscing over old photographs.

When asked how this experience has changed her and those close to her, she reports “This all happened so fast that we didn’t have time to dwell. But it makes us appreciate everything more.” The message that Danielle wants to share with others is clear. “Fight your fear and go to the doctor, ladies. The longer you put it off, the worse it could get. Take advantage of programs like Sage if you qualify, it could save your life.”

Danielle’s cancer journey and intervention represent a season in her life. Now being cancer free post-surgery, thankfully her future is wide open. Finding a sense of purpose in adversity can indeed be healing. Danielle hopes that her testimony will also serve as a powerful call to action to ultimately help save lives.

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“Then I thought, well, then my mom would have to go back and fix things, and then my grandma would have to go back, it would have to go on like that for generations,” she said.

Taylor had lived in more than 50 places before she turned 18, and faced sexual, physical and mental abuse. She prayed to her creator to spare her children, and told her son every day that she loved him.

White Earth Nation too worked hard to save its people from addiction, and in many years lost no one to overdoses on the reservation. But then the pandemic arrived and proved too painful for some.

Taylor and her son quarantined together at her home in Bemidji, a city of 15,000 people.

He’d started abusing pills as a teenager when he got a prescription after having surgery for an infected finger. Then, consumed by the madness of addiction, he would smoke anything – methamphetamine, heroin, fentanyl – that might quiet his anxiety and depression.

The months of isolation dragged on, and he said it seemed like the pandemic would never end. He told her he felt like a bum.

“He just gave up,” she said. All around them, people were dying.

On the White Earth reservation, ambulance calls for overdoses tripled. They posted big red signs in gas stations and tribal buildings: “overdose alert.” The number of overdoses the regional drug task force investigated skyrocketed from 20 in 2019 to 88 last year, said Joe Kleszyk, its commander. Fifteen of those were fatal, triple the year before.

This year, there’s been 148 overdoses, and 24 of those victims died. The vast majority were Native American.

On the morning of Jan. 11, she opened his bedroom door. His skin was purple and ice cold.

“Come back, my baby, come back,” she screamed.

The toxicology report said that he’d died of a combination of alprazolam, the drug in Xanax, and fentanyl.

At first she put his ashes in an urn, but it was sharp metal. A friend made the buckskin bag that she could hug.

The anniversary of his death is approaching on Jan. 11, and it is customary in her culture to return him to nature after a year of grieving.

But every morning, she kisses his bag. He’d always loved to laugh, so Taylor teases it.

“Keep an eye on the cat,” she’ll say. Then she tells the cat to keep an eye on him.

“The medicine man says I have to let him go back to the Earth,” she said. “But I don’t think I’m going to be able to do that. He left me too soon.”

Smith introduced a bill this summer that would usher $200 million in grants to Indian organizations to bolster mental health and addiction treatment. It is stalled in Congress.

“I’m sick of telling people that their kids are dead,” Kleszyk said.

In January, Rachel Taylor’s heart began aching.

“It was like my heart knew before I did,” she said. “My heart was broken four days before he even died.”

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“Drug Crisis” continued from cover
This mural also teaches that within the “tribes’ thiýo paye (community), one must be a good relative to one another and to the natural and supernatural worlds.” This, the city’s virtual tour notes, becomes a way to encourage all to be “stewards” of the city for future generations.

Wakemup’s Anangokaa, or “There are Many Stars,” is a mirrored polycarbonate and lighting ceiling sculpture on a closed floor only visible to the general public under special arranged tours. It salutes water and the star-filled night sky, both relevant to city, state and Indigenous peoples’ lifestyles and culture.

Two Stars (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate), has an ink on vinyl mural on the eighth-floor hallway that stresses public service. Called The Number One Goal, it shows cityscape, housing and neighborhood views that depict home and caring for community. In words for the city’s tour material, Two Stars described it: “An acknowledgement of understanding and empathy for a job often thankless and judged, my work acts to distract from what cannot be forgotten and highlights the experiences of those in law enforcement.”


Wakemup doesn’t have a website to promote his artwork or community activism, relying instead “on the moc-casin telegraph,” he said. But that works. He has been involved in several high attention-grabbing actions including the thousand red dresses placed on the State Capitol grounds for the May 5 National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Native Women and Girls.

Myles has extensive Internet coverage on her artwork and activities. It can be accessed at her website https://marlenyml.es/about. A special public art presentation is explained at https://marlenyml.es/dakota-spirit-walk for her work at the Bruce Vento Nature Sanctuary in downtown St. Paul. She also has Wiyou kihipi (We Are Capable) Productions, a publishing house for Dakota language and culture and is a special resource house for children’s books. It has a website at http://wiyoukibhipi.com.

A virtual tour of the artwork is available on the Internet at https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/b5137e50933f46c80ae49ac487ad09f.
One of the top scoring hockey players in the state of Minnesota made a full circle coming back home to Warroad HS for his senior season. The Class 1A second ranked Warriors currently have a 10-0 record. The number one state ranked team is Hermantown.

Daimon Gardner, Ojibwe, recently scored a hat trick, three goals in a 12-0 shutout first round game versus Grafton/Park River (ND) on December 29th in the Hockeytown Holiday Classic hosted by the Warroad HS Warriors.

“I think with him coming back to Warroad has allowed him to grow as a player and a person,” said Jay Hardwick, head boys’ coach of the Warroad HS Warriors hockey team. “He gets to play hockey again with a lot of the same players he did growing up.”

“It’s been a great opportunity for him to flourish as a hockey player with the ice time and the playing time he is getting. He seems to be having fun and has been a tremendous addition to our team.”

The Warriors are 9-0 overall and tied with the Roseau Rams with 3-0 records in the Mariucci Conference this 2021-22 season. They finished the 2020-21 season with a 13-5-2 record and Mariucci Conference runner-up to Roseau.

The Warriors and the Rams play each other in a conference game on January 5th.

Daimon talked about his team when he had his recent hat trick: “My line has a lot of chemistry this year. I usually play with Jayson Shaugabay and Murray Marvin, or Matt Hard. We all have a lot of skill and we usually outwork other teams. Jayson set up two of my goals, and Murray set me up for the other one.”

Jayson Shaugabay is also Ojibwe and was featured in a past The Circle story: https://thecirclenews.org/profiles-native-americans-in-sports/jayson-shaugabay-warroad-warrior-hockey-player-is-1st-round-draft-pick.

“We left Warroad after his grade seven year,” said dad Vince Gardner, Migsi Sahgaigan First Nation member, and also the Zamboni driver at home games. “He attended Starbucks Academy just outside of Winnipeg for his grade eight year and played AAA Hockey in Winnipeg.”

“He attended Starbucks Academy just outside of Winnipeg for his grade eight year and played AAA Hockey in Winnipeg.”


He earned the Most Valuable Player award in 2019-2020 in the Canadian Sports School Hockey League (CSSHL). He played for the Rink Hockey Academy of Winnipeg, Manitoba. The teams in the CSSHL are from Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. He had a league leading 34 goals during the season.

Daimon signed his NLI (National Letter of Intent) this past November to play NCAA Division One hockey at Clarkson University in Potsdam, NY. He verbally committed to Clarkson University before his 17th birthday. He returned back to Warroad, MN after starting the season with the USHL Omaha Lancers playing in seven games.

Casey Jones, head hockey coach of Clarkson University talked about his new recruit: “We are very excited about Daimon as a player and a student. He is a serious student athlete that we feel will fit right into our culture here at Clarkson.”

“Daimon has a high ceiling with his size, skill set and skating ability. We think he is a player that can make an impact at our level and play beyond college,” added Coach Jones.

“We have recent big forwards that have signed with NHL teams,” said Coach Jones. “We think he has that type of potential.”

“I made the move back from Omaha in hopes of winning a state title and more exposure,” said Daimon. The 6-4, 205 lb. left handed shooter has 15 goals and 9 assists for 24 points for the season.

Daimon’s dad Vince said, “He was thinking about going back to Warroad at the beginning of last season. He wanted a chance to play in the state tournament because he knew that Warroad had a strong team.”

“It’s his NHL draft year and he knew he would receive a lot of ice time playing in Warroad,” added Vince.

“He may play another year of junior next year before going to Clarkson to pursue his education and hockey career,” said Vince.

“It’s exciting to see what’s going to happen,” added Vince.
(WARNING: There are plot spoilers for the movie “Don’t Look Up,” which is streaming on Netflix. It’s enormously popular, so you might want to see it just to know what people are talking about.)

**What ‘Don’t Look Up’ is about**

The social-political satire “Don’t Look Up,” directed by Adam McKay, concerns the discovery by an astronomy grad student, Kate Dibiasky (Jennifer Lawrence), of a comet on a collision course with planet Earth. She contacts her Ph.D. adviser, Dr. Randall Mindy (Leonardo DiCaprio), who confirms her startling find – the large heavenly body measuring about six miles across will hit in some six months.

Kate and Dr. Mindy raise an alarm, and soon they’re waiting outside the Oval Office. However, President Orlean (Meryl Streep) and her demented chief of staff and son, Jason (Jonah Hill), have other pressing concerns: a burgeoning sex scandal with a prospective Supreme Court nominee and the midterms in three weeks. The meeting about the looming destruction of the planet will have to wait for a few hours.

When they finally get their 20 minutes with the president, Dr. Mindy tells him that the comet will have the impact of “a billion Hiroshima bombs.”

“Madam President, this comet is what we call a planet killer,” explains Dr. Teddy Oglethorpe (Rob Morgan), head of NASA’s Planetary Defense Coordination Office (it’s a real thing). But the president, a Trump-like narcissist, and her idiot son decide they will “sit tight and assess.”

Of course, this response freaks out Dr. Mindy and Kate, who go to the press. We are treated to their appearance on a network news/variety show, where the emphasis is on making the scientists bringing news about the end of the world.

The TV hosts, played by Cate Blanchett and Tyler Perry, are more interested in the break-up of a celebrity couple, Riley Bina (Ariana Grande) and DJ Chello (rapper Kid Cudi). And the mainstream press is no better: a fictional stand-in for the New York Times runs the comet story, but finds that it gains little traction on social media, so they lose interest in Comet Dibiasky.

This rough account of the movie, so far, sounds grim; but I thought it was hilarious. I’m a fan of this kind of satire, and the film evokes other sharp movie satires, including Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 masterpiece “Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb,” which mines a rich comedic vein in a potential nuclear war between the U.S. and Soviet Union.

(MORE PLOT SPOILERS AHEAD.)

And speaking of mining, a plot thread in “Don’t Look Up” involves the president’s largest donor, billion-naire smartphone mogul Dr. Peter Isherwell (Mark Rylance). Isherwell has the ear of the president and imposes his plan to break up the comet into “30 smaller meteoroids” and mine them for rare minerals worth “almost 140 trillion dollars.”

Isherwell represents the tech gods of Silicon Valley and elsewhere: Zuckerberg, Bezos, Musk, et al., who are guiding capitalism to a brave new future. The movie character’s comet mining scheme has a real-world analog in the controversy over mining minerals needed for batteries and other devices that ostensibly will usher in the green economy – the “Green New Deal” – to replace fossil fuels responsible for the climate crisis.

The problem is that, as is usually the case, these minerals are on Native land. A front-page headline in the Dec. 28 edition of the New York Times reads: “Clean-Energy Gold Rush Alarms Tribes in the U.S.” The article begins with the case of the Nez Perce, in Idaho, who are facing off with a mining company, Perpetua Resources, that proposes to build a “vast open-pit gold mine that would also produce 115 million pounds of antimony – an element that may be critical to manufacturing the high-capacity liquid-metal batteries of the future.”

The Times article notes that the Environmental Protection Agency “found that Perpetua’s initial plan for a 20-year operation would inflict ‘disproportionately high and adverse impacts’ on tribes.”

Here’s the overview, as per the Times: “Across the American West, tribal nations are on the front lines of a new debate over how to balance the needs and costs of clean energy. Extracting the fuels of the future is a process that is often far from clean, and just as fights over the environmental costs of oil exploration helped define the fossil fuel era, conflicts like this one are creating the battle lines of the next energy revolution.”

As for “Don’t Look Up” – which can be seen as an allegory of the existential climate crisis – critics are quite divided on the merits of the movie. I think that some of the issues raised make folks uncomfortable and a fascinating back and forth has ensued.

https://www.who.int
https://www.cdc.gov)
Photographer Nia MacKnight never met her great-grandfather John B. McGillis, but she did have a window into his storied life as an Anishinaabe man in early 20th-century America: a steam trunk where he stowed away undated photographs and stray objects such as an address book, a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, and a single eagle feather.

McGillis, who was born in Minnesota, lived through decades of oppressive actions against Native peoples by the U.S. government, and MacKnight says that in a world where he couldn’t fully be himself most days, this collection reveals how her great-grandfather worked to reclaim his identity.

“I was filled with joy to be able to hold his personal items,” MacKnight writes in a Q&A with National Public Radio (NPR). “I was also haunted by the fact that the only photographs that he left behind marked a time of trauma and violence that Native Americans faced due to assimilation policies.”

Like many Indigenous people his age, McGillis was forced to attend federal boarding school for Native American children. He also fought in World War I and later secured a position at the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, where he worked towards improving employment opportunities for Indigenous people.

MacKnight’s family recounts a man who spoke his tribal language in the company of friends and relatives, while learning the language of the white dominant culture to expand opportunities for his people in his professional roles.

Using her skills as a documentary photographer and interviews with relatives and family friends, MacKnight is piecing together McGillis’ history and reflecting on questions of identity and self-determination that persist to this day. She shared some insight into her process with NPR.

What story do you hope these photographs tell?

It is my hope that my great-grandfather’s story will invite viewers to expand their perceptions of Indigeneity, and further acknowledge the diverse contributions of Native Americans within the framework of American history. Contrary to dominant Eurocentric narratives, Indigeneity did not vanish when the United States was founded. Instead, folks like my great-grandfather applied their Indigenous knowledge in a new way to carve out spaces for his people. His story ultimately conveys the creative tactics used by our ancestors for survival, and the fight for self-determination that Indigenous people still face today.

How do you decide which objects to photograph and how to construct each photograph?

Initially, I sifted through the hundreds of photographs in this trunk to piece together the different chapters in his life. As I began interacting with the images, I noticed the photographs that he left behind conveyed his life post-boarding schools. I discovered letters and diary entries that expressed the obstacles he faced as a Native American man navigating a rapidly shifting world in the early 1900s.

I felt that the intensity of the modernization of the times and the use of nat-
ural textural elements in the background conveyed the duality of my great-grandfather’s experience. It was also important for me to photograph this project in the South Bay region of Los Angeles, also known as Tongva Territory, where my great-grandfather spent his last days before transitioning to the spirit world.

Would you say this has been a personal project for you and in what way?

This project started out as an inquiry into my relative’s life, and evolved into experiences of deep inward reflection and healing. I was confronted with the violence and trauma that my great-grandfather experienced at the time as an Anishinaabe man forced to leave his ancestral homelands due to federal assimilation policies. However, the contents of his trunk that he left behind embody a spirit of resistance through images of growth, change and joy. One relative reported that his exceptional hunting skills were what helped his personality through various family stories that are not conveyed in the contents that he left behind in the trunk.

In order to further understand the impact that my great-grandfather left on his relatives, I reached out to multiple relatives about their memories of him. I was surprised at the creative ways that my relatives connected, despite our geographic distance, to share stories about my great-grandfather John B. McGillis. This project demonstrates the power of intergenerational storytelling, and the ability of our ancestors to transcend place and time.

Special thanks to Kevin Locke, Sheridan MacKnight, Winona Flying Earth, and Thelbert Milligan for contributing their knowledge about the life of John B. McGillis to this project.

Elle Barnes, 10, wears her great-great-grandfather’s U.S. Army cap as she sifts through the contents of the trunk with her cousin Keala Sabla, 10, on Thanksgiving in Los Angeles.

Various contents in the trunk such as a newspaper, a handwritten letter and a U.S. army cap illustrate his experiences in France while he was serving in World War I. The photograph of McGillis was reportedly taken after the war, in an unknown location. While in uniform, he shows off his artifacts collected from war.

Items that MacKnight’s great-grandfather collected in his trunk: an Idaho driver’s license, horn-rimmed glasses, and an eagle feather.

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Items that MacKnight’s great-grandfather collected in his trunk: an Idaho driver’s license, horn-rimmed glasses, and an eagle feather.
I don’t have the friends I thought I had. My family doesn’t understand me. I was told I should only grieve for a year, but this was my son.” She’d been coming in to see me for almost a year before she volunteered that information. I should have asked her earlier and I thought I had, but maybe she wasn’t ready to talk about it.

I had seen her several times over the past year for chest pain and she had a very comprehensive evaluation and had seen a Cardiologist twice. She had a stress test initially, then finally an angiogram. This is the gold standard for testing for heart disease and involves a catheter inserted into an artery in the groin and advanced to the blood vessels that supply the heart itself. Contrast is injected into the coronary arteries and if there are any blocked arteries, they will show up on the monitor. There was nothing wrong with her heart.

“If you want to talk about it?”
“I’m all I want to talk about. No one wants to listen.”
“I will.”

OK. Andrew died eight years ago and I think about him every morning when I wake up and every night when I’m falling asleep. He was only nine years old and he shouldn’t have been playing by the river. He knew better than that, but there was a neighbor boy who liked throwing rocks in the water. They were on a steep bank and Andrew slid into the river and it was too slippery to climb back out. It was the next day before they found his body a half-mile downstream.

Do you know what it’s like after the funeral to have everyone pretend life goes on as usual? How can anything be normal or usual? My husband buried himself in his work and our marriage lasted for two more years. My friends didn’t want to talk about it and their invitations to lunch and their phone calls were less and less and finally they stopped altogether.

I had people tell me, ‘At least you have two other children.’ I know I have my other children, but that doesn’t make losing Andrew any easier or different. He died in the fall and that first Thanksgiving and that first Christmas were the hardest, but all holidays are hard. This is the year he would have graduated and I think about what he would be like at this age and what his plans would be for after high school. He liked sports and I always wonder if he would have been an athlete. The people around me don’t want to say his name, I think because they’re afraid it will remind me of him, but everything reminds me of him. Saying his name would make me forget, but it made me remember even more. One morning I woke up on the floor with my five-year-old daughter sitting cross-legged next to me and scolding her doll for having her life so easy. A week later I lost my driver’s license for driving while intoxicated and I had to go to treatment.

I was angry with my husband for leaving and angry with him for not grieving like I was. I was angry with my daughter and my other son for laughing and playing at Andrew’s funeral, but they were only four and seven at the time.

My mother-in-law told me, ‘It was God’s will.’

Really? REALLY?

How is that possible? I lost faith for the longest time and I still don’t know if I have it back. How could it possibly be right to take a nine-year-old when there are people who don’t value their own lives? How can a nine-year-old die when there’s somebody somewhere right now shooting heroin?”

My pager went off for my next patient and she apologized for taking so much time and asked if she could reschedule. I ended up seeing her often for visits for her blood pressure and for general health visits. I was angry with what she said about others remembering and most times I was the one who mentioned Andrew first. She scheduled a visit with me on his birthday and she cried through most of the visit.

It was a couple visits later when she stated maybe her husband burying him in his work was his way of grieving and she felt bad for holding that against him. I cried through most of the visit. My time in Seattle was drawing to an end as I was finishing my residency and I sent a letter to all my patients letting them know I was leaving to go back to Minnesota. She was one I really feared would see me as abandoning her and I walked into the room with some trepidation.

We talked about her blood pressure and reviewed her home blood pressure readings. They were finally under control. She had not had any chest pains since that first visit she talked about Andrew. I asked her if she got my letter and she said she did. I asked her if she was going to be all right.

“At first, I didn’t know if I was. I will always hurt and nothing will ever change that. It had been so long since anyone would me talk about Andrew without giving me advice or empty promises. You simply listened to me and I appreciate that more than you will ever know.”

She handed me a box wrapped with a red ribbon and told me I could open it later. Later in the day I got a chance. Inside were a dozen cookies and a note: “I am a mother and I will always be a mother. I still have three children and one of them would have graduated last year. I love them all and one loved my oatmeal raisin cookies. I haven’t had a chance to make them for him for a long, long time. Please remember him for me. Thank you.”

Arnie Vainio, M.D. (Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe) is a family practice physician on the Fond du Lac reservation in Cloquet, MN. Email: avainio@hotmail.com.

The Circle is once again being delivered to your favorite drop off sites. Find out where and pick up a copy on our website at:
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Here we go again, hey-ho, hey-ho! This year I didn’t make any New Year’s resolutions to fail at, so I should be fine and not disappoint myself and others. Much easier this way, yanno? Way too much pressure and besides, I’m already good. Well, I don’t have much of a choice, even if I did feel like acting up. The past three years have been a lot and I’m still recovering. We have all been living a nightmare with the Covid-19 pandemic still raging on and increasing personal issues, ennit? I have wanted to pout, sticking my big ole lip out because I’m so frustrated and feel helpless. Truth is, I have nothing to be mad about at home except that it is still in disarray. I do get mad at some people’s actions or lack thereof (GET THE VAX!) so we can all resume some sort of normalcy in our lives.

Thinking about that, I don’t remember the last time I left my house. I think it was to get fresh groceries. That must be the last time I left the reservation. Now with coronavirus restrictions in place everyone knows what it’s like to be Indian. It is a fact that in the past Indigenous people were forced to stay within reservation boundaries or risk being jailed or killed.

Which brings me to the pink people. Oh, ya, I’m going there yo! That the anti-vaxxers are sick and dying does not concern me one bit. They still had a chance. No, it’s the effect of transmitting a proven deadly virus on to others that infuriates me. I have some people near and dear to me who are immuno-compromised and I am diabetic, so I have that going on. I just don’t understand the ignorant and callous objections, then I remember, “Oh ya! The Republicans and the internet!” So many formerly deadly diseases have been eradicated due to science. We are living in a time of insanity, the apex of what will be the end of our species. I’m cool with that. Re-set.

The menu wasn’t much but it’s all I had at the time. Leftover frozen pizza, pieces of a biscuit, manoomin (wild rice is a must) and a Godiva chocolate with salted moon water. So ya, I need to make some mac soup for the spirits to keep coming around. Pretty sure they appreciated the gesture though. I’m sending a shout-out to my Indigenous family who are or have been incarcerated. My son told me y’all read my column and I love it! My bad for not saying “Boozhoo” before this. It’s as though I write this column like it’s all about me! Nay! While I have never done hard time, it’s only because I ain’t been caught. For those of you in Minneapolis, I was ‘under the clock’ twice; first for domestic while defending myself and then for probable cause, which was a sham.

Short story, I am innocent and when I went to sue the city the record of my arrest for PC was non-existent as though it never took place. I have anxiety and PTSD from the horrific experience. I’ve never felt so de-humanized as I did then. I am sorry for your current situation. I know how things can go sideways. So now, for Auntie Ricey behave!!! I love communicating but I’m not able to reply any longer. Just know I got you in my heart.

So back to me. Ayy! My appearance has deteriorated to the point that I scare myself in the mirror. I have become a Hag who doesn’t care who she frightens, but no one comes over anyway so I spose that ain’t a thing. The only people who know I’m still breathing are the mailgirl and Gruel on Fuel.

But yanno what? I will get through this too, and I clean up good, too. I won’t even recognize me! I do see your good hearts and that is what keeps me here. Miigwech.
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