

Tribal member’s new book offers a path for healing

By Nicole Montesano
Smoke Signals staff writer

In writing a workbook to help others heal, artist and Tribal member Kitana Connelly found healing herself.

Connelly has spent the past year producing her book, “Sacred Flow: Creativity as Medicine,” which offers Indigenous readers help in working through difficult emotions and experiences.

On Friday and Saturday, Jan. 31-Feb. 1, the Confluence Project, along with the Native American Youth & Family Center’s Microenterprise Program, will host a Creativity as Medicine art show and book release, intended to “showcase a unique blend of art and literature aimed at empowering Indigenous peoples and their peers on their journey of healing,” according to a press release from Confluence.

“This workbook has been designed as part of Confluence’s year two Emerging Indigenous Artist/Educator program, generously funded through the Roundhouse Foundation. ... (It) invites readers to embrace self-exploration through cultural heritage, guided by ancestral knowledge systems and ways of being,” the release stated.

Connelly said she has always been an artist, but it’s only in recent years that she’s ventured away from the more formal and structured world of graphic artistry into the abstract paintings she now markets through her business, Twahna Creation.

It was in working on those paintings that she was able to work through her own need for healing.

“I set out a year ago to try to make a workbook that prioritizes Indigenous ways of being, seeing and believing and that focuses on our historic lifeways, like practicing



Kitana Connelly

ing the medicine wheel and other ways we had of being mindful of our wellbeing and the land,” she said. “My own personal brand (is) connecting with the land and healing through that relationship, whether its ourselves, our communities or the land.”

The work involved hours of researching records and interviewing Tribal Elders, Connelly said. The finished book includes plenty of space for people to create their own artistry as they work to heal themselves.

“The community I’m making it for is Indigenous, so it has Northwest themes: Lamprey, cedar, camas, some First Foods,” Connelly said.

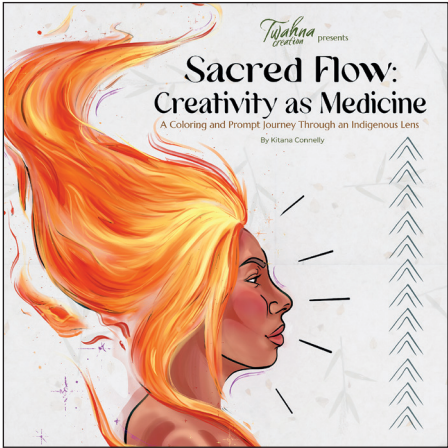
There are pages for coloring in, pages for journaling and activity prompts designed “to get the reader thinking about certain things; thinking about what wellness looks like for them. ... There are prompted diagrams, so a couple of activities in there; interactive activities to help you dive deeper into your priorities or your personal wellness or your beliefs, even,” she said.

Connelly, who grew up in Willamina, had intended to be an artist, but in a very different vein.

“I was in college, in southern California, and I was in my seventh year for college,” she said.

Connelly supported herself throughout school by working for Nike. She was studying to be a video game artist.

“I made environments for video games, digital painting and 3D modeling,” she said. “I was getting



Tribal member Kitana Connelly’s book cover.

close to graduating, but I ended up having to take in my little brother, so I couldn’t go to school anymore. I knew I didn’t want to lose my brother to the state of Oregon and him going somewhere else; I felt like I’d rather take care of him.”

In 2021, she asked Nike to transfer her to Oregon and moved to Portland with her brother.

“After seven months at Nike here, it was just really different,” Connelly said. “I loved my job in California, but I did not like my job here. I think a part of that was my soul saying, ‘You don’t need to be here anymore, so why are you still here?’”

Connelly took another leap of faith and left her job to focus on her art.

“I got my business license, took a small business course ... I have gotten a lot of support from the Native community here to support my business,” she said.

The digital work she had been doing was very different from the work she now found herself free to pursue.

“I would say it’s a very technical side of art. I spent a lot of time at my computer and a lot of time stuck in perfectionism, because that field of work was all about delivering for what other people needed,” she said. “And it was awesome, but when I did get my little brother, it was because something had happened to my mom and that triggered so many emotions for me, because like a lot of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) communities, and growing up in a BIPOC household, it’s not always OK to express your feelings. I just got so used to holding in all these feelings and I didn’t even know I had all this inside, and it just started flowing out.”

Connelly said she used her painting to work through things.

“That was the first time I did abstract painting,” she said. “I’m much more able to take care of myself now and focus on creating for myself instead of delivering for others. I’m much more able to focus on healing now.”

After two years of running her art business, she said, serendipity stepped in. “Someone at Chachalu told me about this position at Confluence.”

Confluence is a non-profit organization in Vancouver, Washington, that works with Indigenous artists.

It was a perfect match, Connelly said.

“I thought it was too good to be true,” she said. “The job was artist in residence, but they pay you like a job. Half my hours (are) working on my art, which was this book, and the other half was going into schools and teaching about my culture. I do art with kids and spend time talking about Indigenous art with them.”

The opportunity was invaluable, she said.

“It was so healing, like it was literally my job to spend time with my culture and learn about us and spend time with people in community talking about culture,” Connelly said. “It was definitely a time of reconnecting for me. It was also when I learned what family I’m from. I grew up not really knowing. (I) was able to use the research room at Chachalu and found out I’m from a pretty big family. I didn’t know that; thought I came from a small family. ... It was also healing just having a job like this. A job that sees the value in Indigenous voices and uplifting that and sees the value in healing art and connecting communities.”

Both the art show and book launch will take place in Portland, at munk-ye?lan saxali, 4636 NE 42 Ave., Portland.

From 5 to 8 p.m. Friday, Jan. 31, the site will host an art show, featuring the abstract paintings that Connelly worked through in her own healing process.

From 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 1, there will be a book release, featuring spaces for attendees to work with the book themselves, or engage in its activities. Connelly will give a special presentation at noon. Light refreshments will be provided.

For more information, visit confluenceproject.org/event-post/workbookrelease/. ■

February 2025 is
Teen Dating Violence Awareness Month

LOVE ROCKS

PRIZES

*Rock Painting

Lunch & Punch

Friday (no school)
February 14th, 2025
10:30am-1:30pm
At the Community Center

1 in 3 American teens are affected by Teen Dating Violence. Let's come together to discuss the facts, and paint Love Rocks to promote awareness and healthy relationships within our community!

All are welcome; however, we ask that guardians use discretion with children under 10 years of age. Children under 10 must be accompanied by an adult or guardian for the duration of the event. Discussion topics include: Forms of Teen Dating Violence, Domestic Violence, Healthy Relationship Traits, and available resources.

*While supplies last.

Tribe offering support to incarcerated members

Grand Ronde Tribal members who are incarcerated, have been recently released from prison or are involved in addiction treatment programs don’t have to face challenges alone.

The Tribe has a post-prison/post-treatment peer support specialist, Tribal member Joe Ulestad, who is also a certified recovery mentor.

“I want our members who are incarcerated or need help to know we haven’t forgotten about them and we’re here to help,” he said. “They can call me, email or text.”

Ulestad can be reached at joe.ulestad@grandronde.org, by text/call at 971-237-5262 or on his office line, 503-879-1389. ■