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in Portland. She started her blog, "Who I Met," as a way to begin juicy conversations with interesting people she meets. The blog has migrated with her from Montana, Europe, and, finally, to her new and dearly-loved home in Maine. You can see more of her work at www.gretarybus.com

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THERESA SECORD- PENOBSCOT ASH AND SWEETGRASS BASKET MAKER

Written by: Greta Rybus



Theresa has a photo of her great-grandmother, Philomene Saulis Nelson, holding a basket in both of her hands. In front of her, a table piled high with baskets for sale. The photo was taken around the 1940s,

during a renaissance period for Maine basket makers, when styles of baskets evolved to satisfy a high demand for native artistry. In the decades between Philomene and Theresa, the traditional craft of basketmaking became nearly extinct, with less than a dozen Maine weavers younger than the age of 50 in 1993. Theresa began learning the craft from a Penobscot elder and, five years later, she helped found the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance. There are now over 200 Maine basketmakers, including Theresa, who now has a photo of herself with a basket cupped in her hands, surrounded by beautiful baskets.



DO YOU REMEMBER THE FIRST BASKET YOU MADE?

Yes, I made a “button box” in 1988 when I was 30 with my beloved teacher, the late Madeline Tomer Shay on Indian Island. It was only about three and a half inches in diameter, but it took me about 20 hours to weave. My dog, a treeing walker hound, snatched it off the table when it was nearly done and she and a beagle puppy played with it, ripped it apart. My teacher thought that was so funny and told the story for years!

HOW DID YOU LEARN TO MAKE BASKETS?

I began weaving with my language teacher who was the last fluent speaker of the Penobscot language. It was originally through an apprenticeship through the Maine Arts Commission. Madeline taught in the old way by demonstrating and then pulling apart what she showed to make me weave independently. She would take apart any area on the basket that was incorrect and have me do it over again. This traditional instruction was taught with very few words, nothing written, the knowledge handed down for centuries.

HOW ARE THE BASKETS TRADITIONALLY USED?

They are used in hunting and fishing. The more artistic style evolved in the Victorian times in the 1800s. The coast of Maine has a nearly 200 year history of wealthy families, from New York and Massachusetts and Philadelphia in particular, coming to Maine for the summer. The tribal people plugged into that economy really early on. In 1840, the Penobscots were in Bar Harbor selling to the tourists. These were the

wealthiest families in America, including the Roosevelts on Campobello Island where the Passamaquoddies sold baskets. The baskets evolved and the tribal people, especially the Penobscot, plugged into the tourism immediately. From Kennebunkport, all up and down Bar Harbor, there was strong summer presence of native craft. In the photo of my great-grandmother, you can see baskets for every purpose: to hold ladies' handkerchiefs, there were baskets to hold men's collar stays, there's sewing baskets and napkin rings. So, all styles of baskets were being woven- to serve on hunting and fishing trips and the many purposes in the large coastal homes. This is Maine's oldest art form, "made in Maine" for hundreds, perhaps even thousands of years.



TELL ME ABOUT YOUR MENTOR

My teacher and I became close friends while I was living on the reservation. In exchange for basketry lessons I would take her shopping, to the post office on errands and help around the house. We worked together for five years, from when she was 73 to 78, until her passing in 1993. She taught me some of the language and many stories about the basket makers on Indian Island, including my great-grandmother, who I had known until I was a young adult but wasn't able to learn to weave with her.

WILL YOU TELL ME ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT AND THE AVAILABILITY OF THE NATURAL RESOURCES THAT YOU USE TO MAKE YOUR BASKETS?

Presently, there's a big concern for the traditional materials that the basket makers use. The primary material is the ash, which in the tribal language here is called "wikepi." The wood is highly threatened by an invasive beetle, the emerald ash borer. The Wabanaki (Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Micmac and Maliseet) basket makers here have been very proactive, starting an Ash Task Force about 20 years ago when we formed the Maine Indian Basket Makers Alliance. This includes foresters from the Maine Forest Service, the University of Maine, the US Forest Service, the tribes and the basket makers. The beetles are

attacking all species, including the brown ash, the wood that we use for the baskets. It's really sad because there's not much that can be done about it. We helped to get a bill sponsored to stop the import of firewood into Maine but it's difficult to have that enforced. The beetle now is as close as New Hampshire and has killed hundreds of millions of ash trees between Michigan and New Hampshire. The USDA had told us in 2005 that it would take 25 years to get to Maine and now it's on the doorstep less than ten years later. We've been very proactive as indigenous basket makers and were the ones to herald the issue in the beginning because we were hearing reports from our Anishinabe basket maker brothers and sisters in the Midwest that they weren't getting access to their traditional materials any more. One of the biggest issues for us here in Maine as Wabanaki people is that the actual creation story is based in the tree. Our culture hero, who lives on Mount Katahdin, created all the landforms and special places in Maine, and it's said that he shot an arrow into the ash tree and from the ash came the Wabanaki people singing and dancing. Tribal history and culture are literally rooted in the tree. People have noted that other indigenous basket makers, such as the Eastern Band of Cherokees weave with white oak, but it's not that simple to start weaving with other materials.

DO YOU PUT YOUR OWN CREATIVE VISION OR DIRECTION INTO HOW YOU MAKE YOUR BASKETS?

I incorporate cedar bark into my baskets. I started working with it to show conservation of the endangered ash. It's also my own style and aesthetic so it's a way I've taken the basketry in my own direction. I use red, yellow and eastern white cedar.

TELL ME MORE ABOUT THOSE CREATIVE DECISIONS

Well, it's kind of interesting because like most artists you evolve, but I'm still based in the traditional forms and I still teach what I learned all those years ago. I have an apprentice now who's one of my cousins and I've taught my sons and nieces, so I still really like the classic forms. But at the same time, as an artist you're always wanting to innovate. The purple in these baskets is ash that's been dyed with wild Maine blueberries. When I'm weaving a piece like that, it's really beautiful from an aromatherapy standpoint. I'm smelling the sweetgrass, cedar, blueberries- and even the ash has a great scent. There's nothing like it.



*Theresa Secord's great-grandmother, Philomene Saulis Nelson on Indian Island, Maine, circa 1940's.
(Image courtesy of Theresa Secord.)*

TELL ME ABOUT THE COMMUNITY OF ARTISTS WHO ARE PART OF THE MAINE INDIAN BASKET MAKER'S ALLIANCE?

As the founding director of the Maine Indian Basket makers Alliance, I am credited with helping to lower the average age of basket makers from 63 (in 1993) to 40, today and increased numbers from the 55 founding members to nearly 200 basket makers in the Maliseet, Micmac, Passamaquoddy and Penobscot tribes today.

TELL ME ABOUT YOUR WORK IN GEOLOGY AND WITH MAINE'S LAND AND RESOURCES

I worked for my tribe for 14 years, heading up a mineral assessment program and then a geographic information systems mapping program on 300,000 acres. This was just a couple of years after the Maine Indian Land Claims Settlement, where my tribe called home their natural resource professionals; such as attorneys, foresters, geologists, etc. to work for the tribe. I was finishing up a masters degree at the University of Wisconsin – Madison and had a brief stint with Mobil Oil in the Inyo Mountains of California. I also served on the tribe's land committee and the powerful state Land Use Regulation commission for several years.

WILL YOU PASS ON YOUR CRAFT TO OTHERS OR TO YOUNGER TRIBAL MEMBERS?

I have taught many to weave baskets in my family and tribe. One of my apprentices' apprentices now has an apprentice, and so I guess that means I'm a great-grandma Master basket maker! I have also mentored others in their professional development and art businesses, including a well-known, very successful Passamaquoddy basket maker, Jeremy Frey, who is considered one of the foremost, young Native American artists in the nation.

CAN YOU TELL ME A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE CONSULTING WORK THAT YOU'RE DOING AND WHAT THAT TRANSITION HAS BEEN LIKE FOR YOU?

I retired as the founding director of the Maine Indian Basket Makers Alliance in May. Still, I've always had an interest in helping basket maker artists, especially next-generation basket makers, develop their art as businesses, where they learn to track income and expenses, etc. Marketing is a big issue, also. You can't just be a good skilled basket maker to be successful you have to be able to find the right markets for your art. I've been working with the First Peoples Fund for about five years as an Artist Success Coach Trainer, utilizing a curriculum that's been developed into a two-day training. Together with a business success coach (another Native American trainer for First Peoples Fund) we'll go to different tribal nations in the U.S., present the materials and coaching emerging artists and small arts businesses.



IT SEEMS LIKE THERE'S BEEN A LOT OF SUCCESS WITH THE BASKET MAKERS ASSOCIATION HERE, SO YOU'RE HELPING OTHER ORGANIZATIONS.

I'm applying some of the similar methods, yes. There's a lot of interest in bringing art forms back from the brink? The funding for the arts is cyclic; ebbs and flows. In 2010 I was a keynote speaker at a large international indigenous weavers gathering in New Zealand which included people from Tasmania, New Zealand and Japan all networking, trying to figure out best practices and strategies to make sure weaving art forms continues to evolve and transcend generations. It's still really difficult work with the hand-gathering of natural materials in the wild and processing, even before the weaving begins. Today of course, there are so many distractions and so many easier things to be doing rather than working with traditional materials. The baskets just don't make themselves, I wish they would!. There's the wood and there's the grass and getting it from those raw stages to the finished high craft art form is a pretty arduous, time-consuming process, even for someone who's experienced.

WHAT DO YOU WISH PEOPLE KNEW ABOUT MAINE NATIVE HISTORY OR MAINE NATIVE CULTURE OR EVEN TRADITIONAL CRAFTS? WHAT DO WISH YOU COULD SAY OR IMPART ON OTHER PEOPLE?

That's an interesting question. I think one of the things that I wish they didn't see so much about is the negative focus on the casino tribes in Connecticut and the gambling. I travel extensively across the country and I see that casinos have both a good and a bad side with support for some tribes who never had anything. And there aren't any here in Maine! So I wish people would understand the deep cultural connection and pride that the tribal people here feel about their culture; present and past. I think that all Maine people should also feel a pride about the ash basketry tradition that's very unique and authentic. Maine has a very rich craft history and culture in a lot of different art forms and cultures. People need to read up on Maine Indians and our contributions to history and the work we're continuing to do.

The basketmakers alliance, from some of the most remote tribes in New England, has produced artists with national recognition, 3 National Heritage Fellows, for example. Jeremy Frey, a young Passamaquoddy won a United States Artist's Fellowship in 2010. His is a remarkable story of overcoming severe obstacles from his youth in Washington County. I think that's something, too that people can embrace and be proud of: that there's always been a strong work ethic here in Maine people, as there is in the Native American communities. There's also remarkable resilience in the people here, the President of the Maine Indian Basket Makers Alliance is 76 and she's proudly carrying on the tradition and has taught about 2 dozen members of her family to weave baskets. I was always inspired by the older basketmakers who kept the ash and sweetgrass culture alive during times when there was very little financial return and virtually no recognition for doing so. They kept weaving the baskets in those decades when no-one else was and they did it for the sake of tradition and culture. There's a lot of underlying richness and story there.

HOW DO THESE BASKETS CONTINUE TO CONNECT YOU TO THE TRIBAL COMMUNITY?

Usually by the time I've woven one of these baskets there may have been as many as four or five people involved in it. The guy who sells me the ash is Micmac and he and his son go out and harvests the tree. His son probably pounds the log to get the growth rings and the splints off. Then, there are families who pick the sweetgrass and sell it to the basket makers by the pound. At one point – there aren't so many anymore – there were older women who would braid the grass and sell it to us by the yard. So this is a community art form in every sense of the word. I think that if I lived somewhere else, say Boston, I wouldn't be interested in doing this because I like the fact that the art is so community based.



WHAT IS MOST IMPORTANT TO YOU?

My family and a wide network of Indigenous friends, artists and cousins, and my work as a weaver and a national Native American art consultant.

TELL ME ABOUT A LESSON YOU'VE LEARNED RECENTLY OR ARE LEARNING NOW?

Recently I've learned that not everyone appreciates you for what you think you did and for who you think you are.

WHAT IS THE GREATEST GIFT OR BLESSING IN YOUR LIFE RIGHT NOW?

My greatest gift is my circle of artists, friends and family, and my connection to my ancestors.

WHAT IS THE GREATEST STRUGGLE IN YOUR LIFE RIGHT NOW?

My greatest struggle is to live in the present.

IF YOU HAD A MOTTO OR A MANTRA, WHAT WOULD IT BE?

Walk in your own truth.

WHAT'S THE BEST MOMENT OF AN AVERAGE DAY?

Usually there's a moment during yoga, weaving or a walk, anything, when there's a break through, something that's been unclear and becomes clear. Like a fog lifting.

SEE THERESA'S ART AT WIKPIBASKETS.COM

FOR MORE MORE ABOUT THE MAINE INDIAN BASKETMAKER'S ALLIANCE:

MAINEINDIANBASKETS.ORG

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