Congratulations to 'Dr. Brauker'

Aanii Niiji, Boozhoo Akina, Dabik Giizii Muckwa Indignikoss:

I just welcomed you and introduced myself in my Native Anishnabemowin Language. Hello Friends, Greetings All.

The Native name that I am known by is Moon Bear, or better translated as "Bear of the Night time Sun." I am a member of the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians here in Michigan. A sister tribe to the Saginaw/Chippewa People whose historical, ancestral land we stand on today.

I feel honored and humbled that my art career, my reputation and my personal spirit have been noticed and selected to speak to you. I am a Teller of Stories. I hope you are able to take away something from the following stories that may enhance your journey forward.

I moved to Mt. Pleasant in 1978 and started taking classes at CMU, after receiving a scholarship from Mid-Michigan Community College. Shortly after I started producing art, I was given a monetary gift by the Mt. Pleasant Women's Club, a gift given to Native Artists to purchase art materials. A few weeks later they asked me to come to their monthly meeting to talk about myself and my art. I was very nervous to speak in front of people, especially talking about myself.

As I walked up the steps I gripped the apple crate that held a few examples of my pottery. My hands were sweaty, my heart was racing and my knees were actually shaking as I found the courage to knock on the front door. The women were very gracious and must have sensed my shyness and said not to be nervous because who else could better tell the "Shirley Brauker" story, than ME. It was the beginning of my speaking engagements.

Oh, by the way, unlike today, there were only 8 people in that room.

Since then, my art career, my personal character, and hopefully my speaking abilities have grown.

The 2 most important things in my life are family and creativity.

Family gives me the ability to love and appreciate nature, the Spirit world and the people around me. My parents gave me a solid foundation and the knowledge of how to live a productive, simple and grateful existence, much of the time living off the land.

My son Austen gives me hope for the future through children and grandchildren. He shows me by example how to live by following our cultural teachings. He also gives me a reason to challenge myself and excel by taking that one extra step to complete any project, through our friendly competition.

Creativity, well that's the other force. It comes from somewhere deep inside. It is as important to me as the air I breathe. It is the light that burns inside me, the light that illuminates my life.

You have heard the saying "follow your passion." Joseph Campbell spoke of it. Follow this passion and you won't work a day in your life… It's TRUE. If you are lucky enough, or rather should I say imaginative, resourceful, diligent or creative enough to combine a career with your passion, then you can experience this too. Plan your path, visualize your options.

I have been doing art all of my life…for over 60 years. My earliest recollection was at age 4 or 5. The reason I know this, is because I was still not old enough to attend school. I was waiting for my sister to get off the school bus at the end of our driveway in Indiana. It had rained the night before and there was a mud puddle that had clay in it. As I waited, I created an entire village. A log cabin made out of sticks complete with clay chinking, stick people, horses and of course pottery. I loved it. I went back the next day, but it had dried up. I was puzzled and very disappointed. Even at that early age, I understood creativity – but I did NOT understand science or the effect the sun had on mud puddles.

Years later, while I was at CMU I had the pleasure of being a student of Dr. Jay Shurtliff. The first day I touched the clay, I remembered the feeling I had at the end of my driveway. The feeling of the clay on my hands, the desire to create – and I knew I was HOME. I knew I could do this forever.

Dr. Shurtliff influenced my career more than any other professor. He was full of encouragement and inspiration. He told me to follow my heritage and I could be the next "Maria Martinez" one of the top Native potters of all time. It was a wonderful compliment that seemed way over my abilities and aspirations. Years later I was working at a newspaper, deciding if I should quit so I could devote all of my time to my pottery.

I Prayed and asked the Creator for a "sign" and that very day I received a CMU newspaper in the mail. It had a large article and picture of Dr. Shurtliff on the front page. As I sat there reading it, I had tears in my eyes. He was retiring and telling stories about the students he taught during his 35 year career. He said some of them went on to be potters, some art teachers, but most moved on to other professions all together. Then I read something that changed my life forever. He said of all those thousands of students, there was one that stood out in his memory… A Native American girl who he told to follow her heritage... It was ME. It was the "sign" I asked for. I wiped my tears, rode my bike back to the newspaper and put in my resignation. I have never looked back. I have no regrets. Don't be afraid to ask that voice inside of you for guidance.

I continue to see in 3-D. Seeing in "3-D" is something I tell my students. It stands for Desire, Determination & Discipline. First you need Desire; you need to WANT it whatever that may be for you. Next, you need Determination or strength of mind, willpower, and purpose. Finally, you need Discipline. It consists of Self-control, personal regulation and education. Learn to see in 3-D.

___ In 1989 I packed my truck with my potter's wheel, my guitar and fresh tomato sandwiches, tomatoes I grew in my garden. I knew I wouldn't be around for the final harvest. I headed west to Santa Fe, NM, camping alone along the way. I was accepted to attend the Institute of American Indian Arts, IAIA, the premiere Native American art school in the U.S. At this point I already had my Master's Degree. While there I was actually able to visit San Ildefonso Pueblo, the home of Maria Martinez. Dr. Shurtliff's words resonated as I stood there on the hot plaza ground, with deep humility and gratitude, thankful for his guidance and faith in me.

The Native Community believes there is a road we travel throughout our life- time. We call it the "Good Red Road." It started at the beginning of time. We walk it daily in the "Here and Now, the Present." It continues on into eternity, into the future, more than 7 Generations ahead. I would ask you all to travel that road forward, no matter what color it is for you. You will know it because it will be the road with "Heart." Our Elders tell us that our first teacher IS our own heart. Don't stray far off your road even though you will find the road to success is always under construction. How you choose to travel it will determine how far you get.

Make your life meaningful and live with integrity. Enjoy life, start your adventures early and continue them to the fullest. Fill each day with passion and gratitude. Meet your challenges head on and find the answers from within.