



Artist makes a connection to late father with new mural in Calgary school of medicine

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"It was really nice getting feedback and that direction from the (Blackfoot) Elders. It was good that it was done in the right way, the traditional way of the territory..." —Jared Tailfeathers

By Shari Narine
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Windspeaker.com

For Jared Tailfeathers, the opportunity to mentor three Indigenous artists in painting a mural for the University of Calgary's Cumming School of Medicine was both personal and professional.

"I'm not a doctor. I'm not really anything medical like that, but (medicine) exploded around my family since before I was born. My dad left a large shadow on my life in particular since he died so young while I was so young; and he was poised to do so many great, wonderful things after school for my Nation, the Blood Tribe, back home. That inspired many people to go back to school and become doctors, including my Aunt Esther (Tailfeathers), who's now a big deal doctor on the Blood reserve," said Jared.

Darcy Tailfeathers, Jared's father, died in a car accident in northern Alberta in November 1987, two days after his 25th birthday. He was the University of Alberta's first First Nations medical student and in his third year. In recognition, UAlberta named a scholarship after him, awarding \$1,750 to two Indigenous medical students each year.

"I wanted to really connect to my dad through the medical field and somehow bring my talent to that and make that sort of connection," said Jared, whose Blackfoot name is Sikomh Kokomii (Calling Crane).

But Jared went beyond that intimate connection to research his wider First Nations heritage.

"What guided the idea in this process for me was making sure that I connect back in time a little bit, back in time to my dad, back in time to our heritage together," he said.

Jared Tailfeathers' work, along with that of his mentee students Mackenzie Brown, from the Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation, Suwatāga-Mu, from the Stoney Nakoda Nation, and Kayla Bellerose, Cree and Métis, from Bigstone and Sawridge Cree Nations, was installed last week above the Feasby Student Lounge in the Health Sciences Centre on the Foothills campus.

The location of the mural "in the heart of the school" is perfect, said Tailfeathers, as it will "make the connection there physically and spiritually."

Not only is the mural a work of art, but it is also a piece of knowledge.

While western medicine tends to embrace the treatment of physical ailments with pills and syrups, "traditional Indigenous medicine is far more encompassing than that," said Tailfeathers, as it's also "the things that we can learn from people around us, the beings that live on the earth, over the earth and in the stars and things like that."

That spiritual aspect is highlighted in the mural by renderings of ceremony, smoking pipe, making treaty and sweatlodges.



Photo of artist Jared Tailfeathers with a portion of the mural painted by him and three other Indigenous artists that has been installed at University of Calgary's Cumming School of Medicine.

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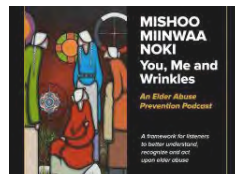
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In his role as mentor, Jared guided the process through community outreach, meeting with Treaty 7 Nations (as that is the territory in which UCalgary is located), community leaders, Elders and knowledge keepers.

He wanted to ensure that protocol was followed and that the knowledge depicted was accurate. Artists had their ideas of what medicine was, Tailfeathers said, based on their own experiences and interactions with their own communities.

"It was really nice getting feedback and that direction from the (Blackfoot) Elders. It was good that it was done in the right way, the traditional way of the territory, which was important to me personally as well as the artists," he said.

Each artist worked their individual magic on six four-foot-by-eight-foot pieces of high-quality plywood. The mural totals 24 pieces of plywood.

"Our story together was based around the common idea of the medicine wheel, which had four segments and it usually lines up with lots of different teachings from a lot of different Nations that are very common throughout the Nations here," Jared said.

His own section shows the research he did on the lands that held significance for the Treaty 7 Nations. His work includes the hill overlooking the Bow River, where the Cumming School of Medicine is, as well as Edworthy Park and Paskapoo Slopes across from the UCalgary campus.

"For me that history is really important, so I wanted to highlight a pre-settlement back in time view of the landscape," he said.

The mural is a "commitment to walk the path toward reconciliation," according to the university and the medical school.

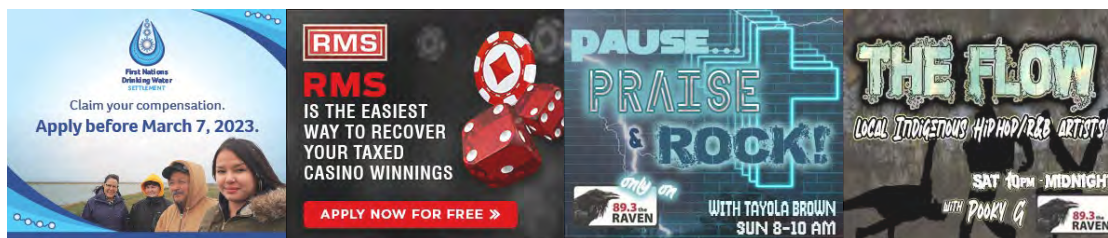
Tailfeathers says anywhere Indigenous people are celebrated is a "good step forward and I think art is a really good way to tie that in."

"Growing up I didn't see my identity in any of the places I was going to," Tailfeathers said. "Art is a good way to bridge that gap and make sure that we're seen in these important spaces and that our traditions aren't just hokum and mythological like it has been portrayed as in the last couple hundred years."

As for what his father would think about his involvement in a mural so proudly and prominently displayed in a school of medicine, Jared said, "I hope he would think it was beautiful aesthetically, but also that it showed that I cared about where we came from and where we're going as a Nation and as Indigenous people. I think he would appreciate it. He was a kind man. Even if he doesn't think it's as pretty as I think it is ... I think he would have liked it."

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