

'INCLUSION OF VISION'

FLATHEAD INDIAN RESERVATION

For the past 20 years, a photography program on the Flathead Indian Reservation has taught students to document their lives and communities from their own perspective.

David Spear, the photographer who started the program based on a model he learned in New York, said "the bigger idea of inclusion of culture, inclusion of vision, in the context of everyone being able to photograph who they are and what they're about, is what drives me."

The nonprofit, called A VOICE, stands for "Art Vision and Outreach in Community Education," has grown its network and shares its students' pictures far and wide, including photography festivals in New York City. This week, a selection of alums will show their pictures during First Friday with the Torrents art program in the Confluence Center. "Indian Country In A Glimpse," features six photographers' work and their connections to the land.

Katie Medicine Bull, who began taking classes at Two Eagle River School in Pablo and now at Salish Kootenai College, said the classes helped her develop her voice as a photographer.

"I really aim to capture the everyday culture of the life around me. I'm really interested in street photography, I love capturing people in the moment," said Medicine Bull, a 19-year-old enrolled member of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe.

In 2022, when she was a sophomore at Two Eagle, she entered a competition called "Reconnecting With," held by the Getty Museum's Unshuttered and Amplifier Arts, a nonprofit art and activism organization. Among the 1,700 entries, her portrait of her sister in regalia was selected.

"It was amazing. It just kickstarted my passion for photography. I really gained confidence through that and opened my eyes about pursuing photography full time," she said.

Jason Songers, a 51-year-old U.S. Army veteran who took a course at SKC, said the class unearthed a passion that he didn't know he had: taking pictures of the places in the landscape that are important to him personally as well as his family and people.

"It just brought out so much — not only passion within me about photography — but about our family and our culture, and our land that we want to protect, and our water. It brought out a lot," he said.

In Spear's classes, he'll raise the issue of visual stereotypes and talk with students about how they see Native American people represented in large media platforms.

Then he asks them what they don't see.

"I ultimately come back around and say, 'well, guess who has to take those pictures?'" he said. Then they discuss what they want to take pictures of, what they want to share and the message it conveys.

This selection of photos is on tour and will reach a lot of viewers in many places: It opened at the Bigfork, SKC and Flathead Valley Community College libraries. After Missoula, it heads to La Sala de Pepe y Foto Espacio in New York and then Espacio MUY De Arte in Chiapas, Mexico.

There's been growing interest in the national photography field in programs like this over its two-decade history.

"Editors and curators are starting to understand that there's an importance in terms of pictures someone here might make as compared or different than pictures that somewhere, someone in another culture might make," Spear said.

If you go An exhibition of photos from A VOICE titled, "Indian Country in a Glimpse," is on view in April at the Torrents art program in the Confluence Center as part of a group show, "A Handful of Earth." The center is located at 119 W. Main St. Opening reception is April 3, 5-8 p.m. After that, it's open by appointment only until the April 24 closing reception from 6-8 p.m.

Building a program

When Spear was studying photography on the East Coast, he realized that the perspectives you see in major collections were skewed in part because of the history of the medium, one invented in Europe and then available to people who could afford the new technology. Then there was also the "parachute" effect, where communities were photographed by visitors rather than people who lived there.

Spear took classes and then worked at the International Center for Photography in New York, including its community outreach program with students in East Harlem for more than a decade. The kids were interested in shooting tourist attractions like the ones that they associate with photography, but Spear pushed them to document their communities and their families.

His wife, Jill Erickson, is from Polson, and the two eventually decided to relocate to Montana. She suggested there was a need for a program in the area, and he pitched Two Eagle River School on the idea, starting in 2002 and then in 2006 it became a standalone nonprofit, with Erickson handling the administrative side.

Over time, the Two Eagle program, called Our Community Record, has kept negatives and digital files of the students' work, slowly building a multi-decade archive of young people's pictures.

"This particular archive is important because it really is about the community," he said.

They'll make prints for former students, or anybody who wants one, at no cost. Some might

inquire about a particular site at a particular time of year, for instance, or a portrait of an elder who's passed. In the future, he'd like to turn it over to the tribes.

Spear also teaches at SKC, some of his school students might continue taking his classes as undergraduates.

"What A VOICE has done is we've placed ourselves in a position to be able to reach people at different levels and different ages," he said.

While the first 10 years or so were dedicated to film, they're now primarily using digital equipment. Today, students come into the class familiar with shooting lots of pictures, so one of his tasks is to remind them to slow down: study photographs, consider them carefully and why they work the way they do. At the end of each term, they select and edit pictures for an exhibition.

Early on, he realized many students were more interested in photographing the landscape rather than portraits, so he came up with the idea of merging the two: Shooting a self-portrait in a landscape.

"I really wanted them to have pictures of themselves, but we wanted them to be comfortable where they were photographing," he said.

While they gradually shifted toward digital cameras, there's been a renewed interest in film photography, including the physical processes that go on in the darkroom.

They've been thinking more in terms of projects in recent years, a way that Spear said photographers can form a marching band of sorts. The website, a-voice-outreach.org, documents series they've participated in, such as "The Pink Dress Project," which was designed by the Lower Eastside Girls Club of New York City. Students from the Flathead, along with ones from three other cities, took pictures of young people wearing prom dresses. Another long-term project is a book with images from all 20 years of the program. He hopes to raise enough money to print 10,000 copies — a free copy for every resident on the reservation in addition to each public or tribal school in the state.

Learning photo

When Medicine Bull started in the class at Two Eagle River, she wanted to shoot portraits and people. She said Spear gave her small assignments and tips. If you see kids playing outside, that could be a good picture of community life.

Winning a spot in the Getty competition helped light the spark for her. Two years later, the students had an exhibition at Photoville, a festival in New York City. They were set up underneath the Brooklyn Bridge along with other photography groups in mid-summer, with thousands of people walking through, another eye-opening experience for her.

She's now studying fine art and SKC and hopes to transfer to UM to study photojournalism. She's freelanced for the Char-Koosta tribal newspaper and shoots projects on her own, like the images in the Missoula traveling exhibition. Through the classes, she's learning "you really just have to go for it. He really pushes you out there, and you have to get yourself out there."

Songers, an enrolled member of CSKT, bought his first real camera when he was serving in the U.S. Army, taking pictures of people and places he served, including South Korea. After his eight-year enlistment ended, he settled in Texas where there was work in the refineries that was a natural extension of his skills from the military. He later returned to the reservation to be closer to his father. There, he enrolled at SKC studying digital design. He signed up for an introductory class in black-and white photography with Spear that unlocked an interest.

One of his images in the exhibition is a sunset shot of Chief Mountain after a storm, where he set up his tripod for several hours, shooting the unmoving silhouette situated below massive cloudbanks.

He said that when he was young, his father and other men visited a particular site for prayers that "have not only helped me, but our family and our people."

He wanted a picture in particular to show his father, who he hopes to take there someday with a guide.

"It's important for people to slow down and enjoy life and look at these different images — whether it be culture, the land, our water, our different ecosystems, and all those different things that we as people need to protect," he said.

Cory Walsh is the arts and entertainment reporter for the Missoulian.