

## Longhouse Media connects native communities through digital media

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Any film made outside of glitzy, glamorous Hollywood is already in for an uphill battle. So for a few teenagers growing up on a Native American reservation, getting any attention on their first video project should be even more preposterous.



Three students work on a film at the SuperFly youth filmmaking camp held by Longhouse Media

Courtesy of Longhouse Media

The non-profit organization Longhouse Media, however, is amplifying a new voice in the industry, working with indigenous communities to use film as a tool for self-expression, cultural preservation and social change.

“Often when we do a workshop one of the first questions we’ll ask is, ‘How many of you can name a native-produced or -made film?’ And there’s often silence in the room,” said Tracy Rector, co-founder and Executive Director of Longhouse Media.

Rector and Annie Silverstein, filmmakers themselves, started Longhouse Media in January 2005 with the Swinomish tribal community, whose reservation is near the San Juan Islands.

In just five years, Longhouse Media has worked with over 29 tribal communities and over 1100 young people through film production, educational programming and other community work, building the organization’s profile among both the Native community and the independent filmmaking world.

“Having an organization like Longhouse Media with a well-respected role nationally in filmmaking and documentary work represents native people stepping forward to exercise their voice in an effort to define ourselves, for ourselves,” said Louie Gong, local Native American activist and artist who will be profiled in an upcoming Longhouse Media film.

In fact, the organization recently received a National Media Literacy Award, whose past awardee include the likes of Jon Stewart and Bill Moyer, and last year’s documentary “March Point” was the first film in the northwest to be shown on PBS’ national program “Independent Lens.”

Still, these feats have been largely overlooked in the Seattle arts scene, and Rector attributes some of this to a cultural value of humility.

“How do we do the work effectively to get the indigenous voice out there from our community while ultimately being humble in the native communities,” Rector said. “It’s definitely a value that we hold and appreciate and do not want to lose, but it’s opposite of good business sense.”

Rector said they have benefited from the advocacy and support of other organizations. For instance, the upcoming Indigenous Showcase is a monthly Native cinema series presented at Northwest Film Forum by Longhouse Media and the National Geographic All Roads Film Project.

“Native people have a very dynamic presence in the contemporary world, and I think these real-time documentaries celebrate that,” Gong said.

Clarita Lefthand, a volunteer for Longhouse Media, agrees that the organization helps Native

people to bring truth into mainstream perceptions of who Native Americans are or should be.

“The Native community is intensely underrepresented,” Lefthand says. “Our story gets out there, but it hasn't been via our voice, our hands.”

Lefthand first got involved with Longhouse Media when her nephew participated in the organization's SuperFly filmmaking boot camp, provided by scholarship to 50 youth around the nation.

SuperFly is one of many youth-oriented programs by Longhouse Media, including the NativeLens local access TV program developed by youth on the Swinomish Reservation.

Rector, who studied at Antioch University for a Masters in Education, said this is important not only to foster media literacy for future generations, but also as a way to engage Native youth more with education.

“My focus was always on alternative forms of education ... group learning, collaborative projects, perspective, vision, storytelling as important tools for approaching education with our Native youth, especially at-risk youth,” she said. “Storytelling through film accomplishes all that.”

Part role-modeling for Native youth and part education for the non-native community, next month Longhouse Media will premiere a series of films profiling contemporary Native American artists, exploring themes of the urban Native American experience.

Gong, who will be the first artist profiled in this series, is confident in what this series and the organization can accomplish.

“I think Longhouse Media's work is telling the deeper story,” he said.

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