

Transcript – Conversation with 2024 RBC Emerging Indigenous Filmmaker Award recipient Dolly Kruger and mentor Sonya Ballantyne

[Abiola] My first question, besides saying congratulations, Dolly, on being this year's RBC Emerging Indigenous Filmmaker Award recipient! That's big news and exciting news and we're really happy to be celebrating you. What was your initial response to learning that you were selected as this year's recipient?

[Dolly] I was definitely, totally taken by surprise, for sure. I didn't realize that it was across Canada. I thought it was only in British Columbia. To learn that it was across Canada and the applications came in from across Canada. And then I was like, one of the top five. I was like, Oh my God, what? I'm totally surprised, definitely.

[Abiola] Sonya, you have some insight into what the selection process was like. What was it about Dolly's application that let you and the committee know that this is the winner? This is who you're choosing.

[Sonya] Well, it's always hard because when they get to the five, that's when we come in, the three final judges. With the five, it's always really, really hard because there are so many great people, and I say that sincerely. I always find when people on TV are always like, let's thank all the great candidates. But in this case, there were so many, and it was a hard choice. Ultimately, what drew me to Dolly was her vision.

She knew exactly what sort of story she wanted to tell. I find that's a very muddled process with certain people because people will have an idea, but they have no pathway to get to that point where they complete it. They have the vision, but they don't have either the resources or the drive to get to the end.

What really overwhelmed me with Dolly's application was that everything was there in terms of how she was going to reach her goal and that's what I really liked. At least for me personally, I can't speak for the other judges that were in the room, but it was very cool to me to see that.

Plus, despite how I look, I'm actually almost 40, but I started filmmaking a lot later compared to some of my contemporaries at film school. I always feel that people who have more life experience have a more laser pointed idea of the kind of stories they want to tell. I've always really loved seeing people who may not have had a background in film start to go into it. I know a lot of people who started later and so it's very cool to me to find out that there are others like me. I really was enthralled by Dolly's application. I love the idea for the film, and I

just love the idea of art as historical documentation and that was what really drew me to the project.

[Abiola] How does it feel to hear that, Dolly?

[Dolly] Well, that's amazing, it's totally amazing. It's been a passion of mine and it's definitely been in the back of my mind to get into filmmaking but just never had the, I don't know. I've always wanted to do it, but I had just never done it. So then in the last couple years, some acquaintances that I've met, and now are friends, we just said, OK, well, then just do it. So, then I just did it.

[Abiola] Sometimes, it really is that easy, right? Where you just have to get out of your own way. Well, I was going to ask you both how you got started on your filmmaking journey. Dolly, you mentioned it a little bit. You said you've had it in the back of your mind, and you'd been thinking about it for a while. Are the ideas that you're executing now along the same vision that you had in mind when you were contemplating this?

[Dolly] As I mentioned in the short clip that I had sent [as part of the application], I was wanting to somehow get into acting. I wanted to be an actress for all of my life. In the later years, as years went by, I thought, well, maybe that's not gonna happen, so maybe I'll do filming instead. There's an Elder in our community. He's gonna be 92 this year and he's a fluent speaker. He writes so many stories, real life stories, that he remembers as he was growing up.

I mentioned it in my application that I created a short film called *Chief Thunderbird* and that's coming soon to TELUS STORYHIVE. So, it was with him and another Elder from a Nation just south of us, about half an hour. The film is about them growing up working in orchards and stuff, and so then I read his stories and I'm like, "Oh my God, this would be so cool to make this into a film."

The Elder asked how I would do it. I told him to just leave it to me. Will you agree for me to create one of your written stories into a short film and he was like, sure let's do it. I did it and oh my God, it turned out so wicked.

[Sonya] Oh, I love when those work out. Yeah, it's just really cool. I love that.

[Dolly] When we saw the RBC Emerging Indigenous Filmmaker opportunity, I told my friend, maybe I should apply for this and see if we can get it and see if I can continue doing the work that we've been already doing for the S'tayena stick games already. She said, "Yeah, sure. Just go ahead, do it." So, we did it, and here we are.

[Abiola] I think it's interesting that you were saying you heard these stories and then you were like, this would make a cool film. I wonder if your mind works the same way, Sonya, because I feel like that's something specific to filmmakers where you can hear a story and almost visualize it on the screen and figure out how you would create it is as a movie. How does that work for you?

[Sonya] The only time I wanted to be a filmmaker was when I was a kid and I saw the Batman movie with Michael Keaton when I was a little girl. I was like, I want to make a movie as good or better than that one, but I was ultimately a writer first. I've been writing since I was, like, 2 years old when I found out when I was a little kid that Stephen King got paid to write a huge book. I was like, Oh my God, that's my sort of scam.

I got into filmmaking largely because of when I was in film school and wanted to be a screenwriter, people would change my writing all the time and I really hated that. So, I was like, if I want to make this the way I want to, I have to do it myself. That's where I think me and Dolly kind of match in that. Well, just do it, Sonya, stop complaining about what's going on.

So that was something I was realizing throughout the first bits of my film career, how often you have to fight for your vision in terms of how you wanted to maintain it. There are often people coming around saying, oh, there's no money in that idea. I'm a big proponent of Indigenous people telling Indigenous stories, so I was always fighting for that. I usually get my story ideas mostly from just seeing things in the community.

An idea that recently came to me when I was dropping off my parents at a concert for John Fogerty of CCR, and I noticed that everybody going into the concert was my parents' age and all of them had probably gone to residential school. So, I realized that when they were young, they probably were all listening to Creedence Clearwater Revival at the same time while they were attending school. This gave me this idea about how music really helps people in their darkest times. I always swore I'd never tell a residential school story, but then I started writing two.

So yeah, it's like I just see, I call them seeds. When I see them out in the community, the idea is there and then we'll just expand on it and let it grow.

I'm not really a good plant person though, in real life. I'm trying to make some plants right now, but I don't know if they'll last.

[Abiola] The important part is that you're planting the seeds.

[Dolly] One thing that I also wanted to do is, talking about stories and dreams. So, and I don't know if, Sonya, if you live on a reserve or not, and if you guys have quails. Every time I drive up and down my road, those little buggers, they just run right in front of you. Some of them will run halfway in then turn around and go back. I used to tell my kids when they were little, I'm gonna make a story about those little birds one of these days, of crossing the road and just giving them voices, you know. I'm gonna give them voices and then make a movie.

[Sonya] I did grow up on a reserve. I grew up in this community in northern Manitoba. Well, like central, northern Manitoba, and my grandma was my first real storyteller because she would tell me about when my grandpa would go hunting and she'd be by herself. She'd invite all these animals to come and have parties at their houses. I always hated when she'd tell this part of the story 'cause she'd say that the fox would go to the outhouse and suddenly he'd find chocolate there. And I'm like, that's not chocolate!

So, I always think about that too 'cause we call them chickens here, the quails. I actually wrote about encountering them when I was a kid.

[Abiola] Sonya, you just mentioned how your grandmother was your first storyteller. How do you think filmmaking serves as an extension of the storytelling that you grew up with?

[Sonya] One of the big reasons I still film make is because a lot of what I wanted when I was a little kid, like Native girls doing cool things. Native women and roles I always wanted to see them as, and it's still something that is not happening. Like, there's no Native people on Star Trek. There are no Native people in DC movies or Marvel movies, except for *Echo*. But it is part of the reason I wanted to do it, because I feel like it's the next step in terms of our storytelling development, to just continue the natural evolution of storytelling in our communities.

I really like that there is in Dolly's case, the content of stuff from the past, stuff that we've traditionally done. I'm glad that there's not so much of a taboo around recording our ceremonies and recording our events. I know there's still some hesitation about certain things, but I like that we're allowed to document things now for the sake of historical longevity. And so, I like that film has become such an art form for our communities.

[Abiola] I like the way you had put it earlier, art as documenting history.

[Sonya] I did a documentary about my grandmother. It was about how I was trying to find this drawing of her that was done by the artist Daphne Odjig. I learned so much about my grandma, but I was also able to teach the National Gallery, well, the Gallery of Canada where it's the Indigenous Affairs art gallery. They have a historical wing of their art gallery that is just devoted to Indigenous artworks. My film and the drawing I ended up finding, ended up becoming a bigger thing because of that film.

So, it was really cool that my grandma who thought there wasn't anything important about her or her life, now has two pieces of art that are going to be historically kept forever. My grandma gets to be a bit of an immortal that way.

[Abiola] Yes, that's the thing that I think is interesting about art. Everyone chases being young and being around forever, but art is how we stay immortal. That's the imprint that we leave when we're gone.

So, you just told us about your grandma's documentary. Dolly, you're going to be continuing to develop your documentary on S'taeyna. Can you tell us a little bit more about where the idea came from and where you're at in the process?

[Dolly] Well, the idea came right in the midst of COVID, so it was right at the height of COVID. The world was shut down, and all we had was social media. The only connection people had was through social media. That went throughout the world as we all saw, we all lived through that.

In and around our Nation, Sn'pintktn, there was like, let's talk about how people were getting sick from not being able to connect to people, in person. So, me and my cousin, my brother, we talked about it and stickgame has been a part of our life, since I was a kid, and the same with him.

And so, we talked about it, and nobody was hosting game tournaments anywhere because the world was shut down.

I talked to my cousin, and I told him we should just do something. We see all the Nations around our community up and down the valley here in British Columbia that are just getting sick. People need to meet; this is who we are. We're still here and we want to continue being here, so let's do something.

We ended up making a decision to host a tournament at my property and I live way out in the mountains. So, we said, OK, well, we're gonna host the tournament, so we put it out on Facebook, we put it out onto all our chats, on our social media and the response we got was so overwhelming that this is definitely what our people need.

So, we hosted our first tournament five years ago and we had three-on-three. So, normally it's two to five players, but we thought, OK, well a lot of times people travel in groups of 3/4 and so we decided to have a 3 on 3.

And still when we hosted, we did talk about COVID. We did talk about if anyone is sick, stay home. We put that out on our social media and all that stuff.

That's where it came to life. We hosted five years ago, and we had on the Saturday, the first time we had it, we had 17 teams, and it just grew from there. It totally just grew from there and it's been growing every year.

We've been successfully hosting for five years now and I'm looking forward to the next five when we can have our 10th anniversary.

Because not only stick games happen, it happens not only to connect people, but it also happens to celebrate life in another way. We found people felt better, if we're going through loss and grief in their families, or if they were celebrating 60-year anniversaries, or if they were, you know, celebrating new birth in their families or, you know, whatever. So it was a time and opportunity for people to come together and share those stories and share their their situations at hand of what was going on in their life.

People, when we, and I wish we would have documented this right from from year one, but when people came together at that tournament that first year. All we heard was how thankful they were that we were hosting this tournament, that we were hosting an opportunity for people to connect again in person and not over social media and not just waving from your car. It was a really just an amazing first year.

I was telling my friend, now my film crew, that I wished we would have documented right from the first year, because we would have got those first-year stories when people were when we were going through COVID the world was shut down.

But yeah, here we are five years later, and it's been amazing.

[Abiola] At what point did you decide that this would make a good documentary?

[Dolly] We've been documenting it now for two years, now, on our third year. So, two years ago we thought, well, if anything like COVID ever happens again, we wanted to have it documented and we wanted to be able to talk about how we went through COVID and how we lived through COVID and how we are still here, and this is who we are. We are people of connection and regardless of what anybody else says, this is who we are as Indian people across this Turtle Island.

Two years ago, we decided to start documenting it because not only that, when you go on YouTube or you go on any, I have not been able to find anything that really explains to you

what stickgame is or how it's played or what the purpose of it is. All you see and all I've ever saw is people playing the game with no explanation of what they're doing or how they're getting sticks or what's going on. So that was also part of the reason why we wanted to do the documentary.

[Abiola] And so now that you have your prize money and a plan ahead of you and an amazing mentor here in Sonya, how do you see the rest of this year or this project playing out.

[Dolly] So we've I've talked to [audio cut out]

[Abiola] And it cut out for a second. Can you repeat who you're working on this documentary with?

[Dolly] Me and my cousin Ace Kruger are the ones who founded S'tayena and the Little Pine Productions is the is the film company that we've been using and they've been filming for us.

[Abiola] And you had mentioned your brother?

[Dolly] Yeah, he's like my brother. He's my cousin, but like my brother. Yeah, that's Ace Kruger.

[Abiola] Perfect. Just wanted to make sure we got that. OK.

[Dolly] So, we talked about it, and we want our film crew to follow us to a big open games down in Wellpinit, Washington, which is the stickgame capital of the United States. It's a small, tiny like a small, tiny community. But when you get there, there's thousands of people there. They come not only for the powwow, but they come for the stickgame playing as well. It's gonna be so cool, and there's gonna be hundreds of people playing stickgame and a big open game. And the biggest pot, the biggest game that I played in when I was there, there was \$15,000 wrapped up in a handkerchief in the middle of these two big teams playing. Very cool.

But we want to take the film crew and have them follow us down there and just showcase some of what happens down there in in the United States as far as the game goes, because it's all over Canada and the United States. This hand game, bone game, stickgame, lahal depending on what territory or Nation you're in, they call it different things.

The other thing we talked about them doing is following us to Kamloops, British Columbia. There's a big powwow and first time ever first annual stickgame tournament there this year with big prize money. We want them to follow us to a tournament as well.

So, they're gonna follow us to Kamloopa Powwow and to the stickgame there and we're gonna get people from that area, because you're gonna get two different perspectives of people from all over Canada. When we go to Wellpinit, Washington, there's gonna be people there from all over United States and down, right. So, all the way down to Montana, Idaho, California, there's gonna be people from all over the place there, right. And the one in Kamloops, there'll be a lot of people there from Canada, like from all the way Alberta, Saskatchewan, Frog Lake, whatever. Right from wherever all the players come from.

But we want them to just get a feel for what it is being in the United States playing stickgames in a big open games and what it is for us travelling to another territory to play the games. Because as I mentioned in my application, and in my little film there, we travel all over. We go tons of places to travel to these stick games, yeah.