

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

[Abiola] Sonya, I want to move to asking you, how did you become the mentor for this program?

[Sonya] Well, I was asked by National Screen Institute because I have done two programs for them, [CBC] New [Indigenous] Voices and, well, at the time it was called Aboriginal Documentary. It's Indigenous Documentary [NSI IndigiDocs] now, and I guess I was their poster girl for New Voices for a while, one year, and stuff like that.

I guess I'm a very trickster mentor. I think I base it around who I'm speaking with. With Dolly for example, I know, she has so much drive and stuff, and so it's really easy to mentor to that. I'm just here probably to talk about film festivals and stuff to watch out for because one of my biggest pieces of advice for people is to always work with people you can trust because you're gonna be spending so long with people, you might as well like them.

I run Code Breaker Films with my two good friends, Sage Daniels and Luther Alexander and Luther is as close to me as a brother. Every film we make, we have to take two weeks off from each other when we finish because we don't like each other anymore. We like each other still, but that's one of my biggest pieces of advice.

You're gonna be spending so long together and such long hours and problems inevitably rise. And so, it's something that I always advise, work with people you like. That's why it's so obvious when other filmmakers who are more well off, like the Tarantinos and stuff, that's why they always work with the same people, because it makes it easier, and it makes it a lot more fun. As a mentor, I just like being there for people in terms of how I can break down doors for people if I can, or at least have a cool name on a letter of reference.

I'm not even sure exactly how they got me into mentoring, but I just thought it was fun just because there's still so few Indigenous women who are filmmakers that I felt it was totally my honour to be able to come on to encourage more filmmaking, not just for women, but for Indigenous people in general.

And so yeah, it's been really fun to be the mentor.

[Abiola] So, Sonya, what role has mentorship played in your career?

[Sonya] It has been very helpful. I would not be here if it were not for mentors. My biggest one was probably Shereen Jerrett, who was one of my professors when I was at film school at the University of Winnipeg. She has always made me aware that things are gonna be difficult, but things are also going to be worth it once you get through it, because sometimes you can get very exhausted in terms of doing this work.

I get a few emails every so often with people asking me to produce their content, produce their work and I can't really feasibly take that on because I'm trying to produce my own stuff too. You find out very quickly that even if it is your dream job, it's still a job and you gotta do things and you have to make sacrifices in terms of things, and so having mentorship to help me navigate [was helpful].

I think Dolly spoke to this as well, like, I didn't have any clue how to get into film or acting and such 'cause I grew up on a rez and I was told constantly that Cree women couldn't be artists because only white folks could do it because they had enough money to mess around and mess up if they needed to. And so, mentorship, especially in the film community, has helped me immensely just for how much easier it is to navigate spaces. If I have a negative situation with somebody, having people I could tell that to and just being sure that the same pitfalls I had would not be something that'll impact the people I mentor.

And so yeah, it's kind of like paying it forward. I got a bunch of good people saying my name in important places. So, I try to do the same for other people who are coming up.

[Abiola] Love it. So, Dolly, what do you want to learn from Sonya? What are you hoping to get out of your mentorship from her?

[Dolly] I think just a little bit more about how she got into it and if there was any tips or tricks as to where I could apply and go to search for funding opportunities. And just some more backstory of, what brought you to where you are today? What worked for you? What hasn't?

[Sonya] I think the biggest one probably would be, well, you probably already know this, but a lot of younger kids often fall for it. If it seems too good to be true, it often is.

When I was first starting, I was offered a lot of money to do a project for somebody, but it meant abandoning one of my business partners. And so ultimately, I said, no, I need to do this with them. It's like, if the project is viable, we'll do it another way.

It's kind of like Game of Thrones in that way, you always have to play a certain game in terms of, making sure you're not [taken advantage of] because I think, especially when you're an Indigenous woman, people will always come at you as well. And then if you react, they're like, "Oh, look, there she is, acting like one of those rez girls."

It's the idea of making sure you are set in your values and what you want out of your projects. Because the way I look at it, it sounds terrible to say it 'cause I grew up poor, but money is so common. There's so much of it out there. There's so much of it available. They're printing more of it every day, but your ideas are so important.

If you don't feel right about what's being offered, don't take it. That's something that is a big thing. And in regard to money, check out arts grants, especially if you're more rural. Artist grants from... I guess B.C. probably has an arts council, Canada Council for the Arts is really good.

But always have money. So, say you're making a project, like this project for example, Canada Council and BC Arts Councils are more willing to look at your project if there's already been stuff done and money invested. Because it's way easier to finish a film than it is to get the money to start it. And one of my biggest pieces of advice is deciding what success means for you, because success for some people means film festivals and going to TIFF or going to Māoriland, which is the big festival in New Zealand for Indigenous people.

But I realized, what was success for me was being able to buy fruit every single day if I wanted to and have a place to live. And never badmouthing people, even if you don't like them. That's a big one because the community is so tiny and stuff.

You often find that, especially with Indigenous women, filmmakers, but if you are a good person, and you don't screw anybody over or steal any ideas or whatever. I don't think there it is possible to steal ideas, but like some people do. But always acting within your own values of what you value as a person, as an artist, as whatever, is always more important than the money, but again, going off of that, know what you'd sell out for.

My example would be if I were offered a chance to direct Superman, and knowing what I

know about DC and stuff like that, where you're basically just a name on the poster, they do all the work. I would do that, or I would like [to] because I really think people belittle settling, selling out.

I have all this advice and sort of thing. Always stick next to the table at film festivals, 'cause the food is great. One thing I do too, always approach people as a fan of their work. I was always very scared to do networking at festivals, like BANFF [World Media Festival] is a really big one.

I would suggest you apply because they have a pitch competition for Indigenous filmmakers. The BANFF [World] Media Festival. I did it once, but it's a good space to get in front of, get your name in front of producers, people from Netflix and Prime, whatever.

Because not that it'll lead to projects, but it'll lead to more people knowing your name and more people being like, "Well, I need somebody who can document this event." or something, and they think of you.

But again, going back to being a fan of people's work. Don't ever, well, don't ever... If you feel uncomfortable approaching somebody with going like, "Okay, here's my project, Netflix. I want you to you to, I want you to produce it." I never feel comfortable doing that because I hated feeling like I was selling myself, and if I didn't do well with the guy from Netflix, nothing would ever happen. What I did instead is, I'd start researching people and finding out like, say for example BANFF. If there were writers from TV shows I really wanted to meet, I would reach out to them and say, "Hey, I'm a huge fan of your work and I really wanted to talk to you about your creative process. How did you get to writing on Star Trek?" That sort of thing.

And so, people are always more willing to, I don't want to say be your friend, but a lot of people are more willing to talk to people who are a fan of their work and not trying to sell them something. Yeah, so always be sincere.

I think you will be great, because you have a lot of experience already. The budgeting is always the hardest part. Like, people will fall apart at the budgeting. Always make sure you have a little bit of a nest egg at the end of your budget just in case something comes up. They call it the contingency with Telefilm.

Always make sure to be flexible. Sometimes a story will have to change, either because the actress can't do it, or you don't have the props or whatever. Always be willing to compromise in terms of like, is this better? That's always the hardest thing. Is this better for the story or is it better for me because it makes me uncomfortable? Because ultimately the story's what's important. When people forget that, that's when they start to fall apart.

If you have trouble deciding on what your rate should be like, people will often ask you, what's your hourly rate? How I decided to do that was I will pick my favourite restaurant, either The Keg or something, and I'm like, okay, imagine a dream date at The Keg. I would want an appetizer, possibly a cocktail, an entree and dessert. So how much would that be with the tip? And that's my rate.

[Abiola] I love that.

[Sonya] What is an hour of your time worth? Never be afraid to ask for more money, because that is one thing I wish I knew when I was younger, or first starting, rather. I would always undercut myself because I was just happy to get the work. I would be like, "Yeah, I just want to get the work!" but then people start to take advantage of that. So yeah, being aware, this is what it's gonna cost. This is what I need to live. Remembering that yes, it's art, and yes, you'd do it anyway, but also, rent needs to be paid. 'Cause I would be doing a lot of projects for free, if they really wanted me to, but I'm like, okay, you're also gonna pay through the nose for certain things.

So never be afraid to... I don't know if you guys have that in your community, but act good, like acting good is something I was constantly afraid of, 'cause I didn't wanna appear that I wasn't humble. But the kids wanna see you. The kids wanna see somebody who's in a job they wanna be in. So always remember to conduct yourself like somebody's watching 'cause somebody always is.

[Abiola] Thank you for that. My final question for both of you since as we know, National Screen Institute runs a lot of mentorship and training programs and facilitates different awards like the RBC Award. So, there are different programs focused on trying to get more Indigenous creators into filmmaking and the TV industry and digital media. Do you have any advice for anybody who's on the fence about whether [or not] to put in an application for an award or for a program?

[Sonya] Well, I think I go by Dolly's advice and just do it. That was a funny story that you

told, because that was the same thing that happened to me when I was in New Voices. They had at Gimli [International] Film Festival, they had a pitch competition for emerging filmmakers, and even though I didn't feel ready, I had an idea. So, I was like, well, if they say no, they say no. So, I put my name through and then I was freaking out when they said yes. The worst thing that can happen is that people say no.

[Dolly] Totally. That's exactly right. My sons, growing up, whenever they wanted to ask me something or ask anybody anything, like their grandma for money or for lunch money or for whatever, I'm like, "Well, what's the worst thing that can happen?"

"Well, that they'll say no" and I'm like, "Exactly."

So now just going back to that, just doing it. I am, currently, I'm working on, just when you talk about pitch, I'm gonna go and pitch my business idea to the Kamloopa Powwow Pitch at the end of this month.

[Sonya] Oh, good luck. Yes.

[Dolly] Again, I went to a couple of different women in business networking events and they're like, "Oh, my God, you've got such a cool idea, why don't you go and do the powwow pitch at Kamloopa this year?" And it's an opportunity to win a \$25,000 grant for your business.

So I'm gonna just do it.

[Sonya] Oh yes, best thing to do. Good luck to you. One question I would always be prepared for, no matter what the pitch is, if it's for film, it's for powwow pitch, always be able to answer, why is this idea important to you? Like, why do you want to tell this story? Sincerity will always get you further than trying to be the flashiest person ever.

I think that's something that with Indigenous people we're more aware of the why. Like, why are we doing this? Because it's important to the youth. Why are we doing this? Because the Elder stories aren't being told. Being able to answer that why before you even go in, there's inevitably somebody's gonna be like, "Well, why are you, Dolly? Why do you want to do this?" Being able to answer with a legitimate heartfelt, "This is why, 'cause I didn't see it when I was young. This is why. Because it was important to my grandmother, stuff like that.

Always remember, being able to answer the why will get you a lot further than the how. The how, you will get there eventually. The how is not as important as the why.

[Dolly] Oh, totally for sure. I totally, definitely can empathize with that, and I already got the why.

[Sonya] You are 80% there. The other 20% is just making it to the event.

[Abiola] Make sure you fill up the car.

[Sonya] Yeah. Dress nice.

[Dolly] Yeah, for sure.

[Abiola] Well, thank you both.