

Minnesota Now

'Bring Her Home' filmmaker elevates stories of Native women lost but not forgotten

Cathy Wurzer, Britt Aamodt and Sam Stroozas November 16, 2022 12:00 PM



Thousands fill Cedar Street in Minneapolis during the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples March in February 2019.

Christine T. Nguyen | MPR News

In Minnesota, officials estimate that 54 Native women are missing statewide at any given time. Although they make up less than 1 percent of the state's population, homicide rates for Native women were seven times higher than for white women between 1990 and 2016.

It's a perilous story, one that filmmaker Leya Hale found a way to tell in "Bring Her Home," an award winning documentary focused on three Indigenous women: an artist, an activist and a politician.



'Bring Her Home' is being rereleased in November. The filmmaker Leya Hale talked about her work with MPR News host Cathy Wurzer. Courtesy photo

The film originally aired in the spring. Twin Cities Public Television is [streaming the film this month on its website](#).

In the film each woman speaks to the pain of seeing relatives, friends and community members go missing. They work to vindicate and honor them while unraveling the oppressive system around them.

“I really did my best to try to highlight voices of the community, really powerful women within our community to just do what I could to help raise awareness,” Hale, who comes from the Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota and Diné Nations, told MPR News host Cathy Wurzer Wednesday.

Local activists have been vocal about the lack of coverage and concern from news outlets, politicians and the general public over missing Native women.

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More than [2,000 people marched in Minnesota](#) in 2020 to protest violence against Native women. Shortly after, [a task force was formed](#) to gather stories of Native women to highlight the concerns.

Hale said it was important that the women she worked with felt protected, and that in speaking out they showed power and resiliency.

Hale is currently working on a short documentary with Pioneer Public



Filmmaker Leya Hale's award winning documentary is being rereleased on Twin Cities Public Television. Courtesy photo

Television about the history and evolution of Dakota women's dress.

*Use the audio player above to listen to the full conversation. **Subscribe to the Minnesota Now podcast on [Apple Podcasts](#), [Google Podcasts](#), [Spotify](#) or wherever you get your podcasts.***

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Audio transcript

CATHY WURZER: Native women have been beating the drum literally to draw attention to the shocking number of Native women who go missing or are murdered every year. Native women make up less than 1% of the US population yet face murder rates that are more than 10 times the national average. That's the stark statistic behind an award winning documentary film that's being streamed on the PBS app this month.

The filmmaker is Leya Hale. She's a member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota and

Dine Nations. She's a producer at Twin Cities Public Television and an Indigenous storyteller whose film *Bring Her Home* examines the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls crisis through the stories of three women-- and artist, an activist, and a politician. Leya Hale, welcome to Minnesota Now. How are you?

LEYA HALE: Hello, Cathy. Thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.

CATHY WURZER: I am so glad you're here. Would you like to introduce yourself however you'd like?

LEYA HALE: Sure.

[NON-ENGLISH SPEECH]

And in my Dakota language, I just said, hello. I greet you all with a warm handshake.

CATHY WURZER: Thank you. I appreciate hearing that. What is the story behind the creation of *Bring Her Home*? It's such a powerful film.

LEYA HALE: Yes. I believe I started development on the film about three years ago. I opportunity to look around in the community at the time and was really paying attention to the rising movement of the MMIW movement itself. I had an opportunity to highlight this epidemic through media, so I did my best to gather the funding.

Bring Her Home is funded by Vision Maker Media. I really did my best to try and highlight voices of the community, really powerful women within our community, to just do what I can to give them help to raise this awareness and the grassroots organizing that's been happening in and around our community here in the Twin Cities.

CATHY WURZER: That opening scene for me was really powerful. It starts with the sound of a cigarette lighter and then a shot of one of the women, Angela Two Stars, burning sage. Why did you choose that shot to open up the doc?

LEYA HALE: I felt that it was important to really focus on the healing aspect when it comes to dealing with such a sensitive topic, so I did my best to incorporate a lot of our traditional medicines like [NON-ENGLISH] tobacco, sage, cedar, sweetgrass-- to do my best to make sure that the women that were telling these stories-- that they felt protected and they felt the importance of their story and their voice and what that would carry and how that would impact other women in our community.

There was so much of this traditional medicine that was interwoven into the production of the making of this film that, in a way, it started becoming a reoccurring visual motif that was seen throughout the film. So that's kind of why I chose to use that opening shot to really remind us what the story is going to be about and to ultimately bring that hope and that resiliency to our people.

CATHY WURZER: I mentioned Angela Two Stars. She's an artist-- one of the subjects-- and I believe she had a grandma who went missing. Is that right?

LEYA HALE: Yes. This took place back on our reservation, the [NON-ENGLISH] reservation, which is on the Lake Traverse Reservation in Northeast South Dakota. And I really related and connected to Angela Two Stars' story being from the same reservation.

I did not grow up there myself. I grew up in the urban area of Los Angeles' American Indian community. But I really wanted to focus on somebody that I could relate to, which is why I chose Angela Two Stars, and I connected to her personal story of her grandmother going missing and murdered when she was nine years old.

One story that she shared with me was her experience of her and her family-- not casually, but searching for their grandmother. They would be driving on their reservation, and there would be times where-- she said, as a young girl-- her father would just stop on the side of the road and get out and start searching in the woods.

And just the feeling that comes with that, knowing that it's our family members that have to do that job of searching for lost ones. And that story alone is what she told when she was a curator for the very first art exhibition that was produced by All My Relations gallery, and that was the very first Bring Her Home art exhibition.

And she told that story to the people-- the other artists-- that were creating content at the time. And I heard that story, and I really connected with it because I really wanted people to understand that these stories don't just happen to young individuals.

They can happen to any of us, even in our elderly age. So I really wanted to highlight that, to make it a point that this is something that we all have to be aware of, no matter what age we are.

CATHY WURZER: I'm glad you brought up that you grew up in LA. I remember you telling me about that, and I know you wanted to be a filmmaker. Of course in LA, you took classes. Didn't you go to Cal State, Fullerton? I believe you said that you did, right?

LEYA HALE: Yes, I did. That's where I received my undergraduate degree in communications.

CATHY WURZER: That's right. That's right. And you got your master's at the University of South Dakota. Why did you want to be a filmmaker?

LEYA HALE: I felt like I had an early exposure to it. My mother was an inspiring Native actress in the LA area. And growing up, I remember going to auditions and just being, in a way-- seeing how non-Native producers and directors wanted us to try out for different scenes, whether it be like-- I guess you could say like background characters.

Whatever it was, I always noticed the scene or the setup was always depicted from like pre-1800s, and it was always Western themed. And just that experience of being on a set when I was younger and seeing just everything that goes behind the scenes when it comes to production really blew my mind.

So I definitely-- I guess you can say-- was really inspired from just those earlier memories of going to auditions and trying out to be a Native person.

CATHY WURZER: And you have done-- you are an amazing filmmaker. I mean, my gosh. And I know you have another film coming up with Pioneer Public Television that's airing, I think, next week on TPT if I'm not mistaken. That sounds fantastic, too. In about 20 seconds, what's that all about?

LEYA HALE: So basically, the film is a short documentary, and it's about the art

history and evolution of Dakota woman's dress. The film is called Saksanica, and that refers to our traditional dress, so it's fascinating history to learn about it, just the knowledge that we kept in regards to that is embedded with our traditional attire.

CATHY WURZER: Leya, I wish I had more time. Thank you so much for joining us and best of luck, OK?

LEYA HALE: Yes. Thank you so much.

CATHY WURZER: We've been talking to Leya Hale. She is an Indigenous filmmaker, producer at Twin Cities Public Television. Her documentary Bring Her Home is streaming on the PBS app or you can go to tpt.org find a broadcast in your area.

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