



Of healing and celebrating a community

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Of healing and celebrating a community



Kaya Littleturtle sings with his drum group, WarPaint Singers.
Photo by John Whittemore

As the community programs coordinator at the North Carolina Museum of History in Raleigh, Kaya Littleturtle organizes the American Indian Heritage Celebration each November. He remembers helping his father, grandfather and great-grandfather, all members of the [Tuscarora Indians of Kahtenuaka Territories](#), with cultural demonstrations at this same festival when he was a child.

Littleturtle grew up in Back Swamp, North Carolina, a rural township two hours southeast of Raleigh, and heading to the state capital to sing and dance made an impression on him.

"I've been to almost every single one of them," says Littleturtle, a resident of Lumberton, North Carolina. "Now my four children attend; five generations of my family have been involved in the celebration."

Eight state and federally recognized tribes and four urban Indian organizations in North Carolina will attend the [31st American Indian Heritage Celebration](#) on Nov. 21 at the North Carolina Museum of Art. The free festival features powwow-

style events including singing and dancing, demonstrations, panel discussions and storytelling.

As part of his work with the museum, Littleturtle also plans the African American Cultural Celebration each year in Raleigh. The event on Jan. 29, 2027 will highlight culture, art, community, music and contributions made by the Black community.

Supporting roles

As a historian and member of Tuscarora, Littleturtle shares his expertise and talents in activities across North America. He travels with [WarPaint](#), an award-winning intertribal drum group with 12 members, to perform at powwows throughout the United States and Canada. He's the lead singer and drum keeper. WarPaint reached a major milestone in 2025, placing among the top 10 drum groups at the Black Hills Powwow in Rapid City, South Dakota.

Littleturtle is also the program manager for the [Good Mind Initiative](#), a Native-based nonprofit for tribal communities in the Carolinas and Virginia.

"We hold culture classes, talking circles, community socials and more," Littleturtle says. "This helps people to overcome historical and intergenerational trauma through cultural reconnection."

Since 2020, he's served as the cultural adviser for "[The Lost Colony](#)" in Manteo, North Carolina, the nation's longest-running outdoor drama since 1937. Littleturtle helped restructure the play to be more culturally and historically accurate.

"The play details the first meetings between the coastal Algonquin Indigenous people and the Europeans, the colonists who were coming to our lands," he explains. "Even though we're portraying situations from hundreds of years ago, these situations still have a relevant nature to our people and our communities today."

More than 15 years ago, Littleturtle was one of the first Natives to perform in "The Lost Colony." Now he oversees the American Indian components of the production, recruiting and casting tribal members from all over Indian country, as far as Washington state, to perform during the summer.

"I love the visibility it gives our people," Littleturtle says. "Thousands and thousands of people get to see Indigenous people on a stage."

"The Lost Colony" and the [Native Pre-Show](#) feature his grandmother, Kat Littleturtle, as the storyteller. The Native Pre-Show production incorporates broader tribal elements through demonstrations, dance and song.

"It's great for our people's self-esteem," he says. "It's been a healing aspect for our elders who come and see the show; they get to see their people in a place where they would not have historically been in."

Sanctuary for the bald eagle



American Eagle Foundation staffer presents Challenger the bald eagle at Dollywood in Tennessee. Photo by American Eagle Foundation

Guests flock to Dollywood's outdoor theater to learn about birds of prey at Wings of America. Since 1991, the American Eagle Foundation has hosted the educational open-air show featuring bald eagles and other birds of prey at the theme park in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

"It's impactful to get close and personal with wildlife," says Lori Moore, CEO of AEF. "It gives us the opportunity to share tips people can do every day to keep birds of prey safe."

In 1985, AEF launched in Nashville, to teach conservation and protection and inspire "the global community to guard and protect the bald eagle and all birds of prey." In its early days, AEF worked with local authorities to breed and rehabilitate eagles, releasing 180 bald eagles in the 1990s and early 2000s.

For decades, bald eagles were on the federal endangered and threatened species list due to the pesticide DDT and the killing, selling and owning of eagles. The Environmental Protection Agency banned the use of DDT and related pesticides in 1972. Although the bald eagle population recovered in the United States, the birds are still protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.

Taking flight

In 2023, AEF's headquarters moved to Kodak, Tennessee, on 49-acres near the Great Smoky Mountains. The sanctuary offers aviary exhibits, a Birds of Prey Museum, an interactive playground and walking trails. Fifteen staff and about 20 volunteers operate the Dollywood and Kodak locations. Funding is provided through fundraising, brand partnerships and individual donations.

With 66 bald eagles in its care, the AEF has the largest collection in the country. All have been



Lincoln, an ambassador for the AEF, flew in a Super Bowl commercial in 2026. Photo by American Eagle Foundation

designated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, a federal agency within the Department of the Interior, as non-releasable due to an injury, human imprinting (fed by humans) or another issue that prevents the eagles from hunting and living independently in the wild.

In the aviary, bald eagles are fed a diet of mice, quail, rabbit, rat, salmon and trout. They're provided with enrichment, such as perches with different textures, a tub of water and paper to shred, to mimic natural behaviors.

Soaring high

AEF has celebrities among its congress of eagles. Challenger flew over an 80,000-seat stadium for the opening ceremonies of the 1996 Paralympic Opening Ceremony in Atlanta, Georgia. His name is a nod to the Challenger Space Shuttle mission. At age 39, Challenger is often the educational ambassador at the Wings of America show.

Lincoln, a 28-year-old bald eagle, was featured in a Super Bowl 2026 commercial. He was part of the 1990s breeding program, but his hunting instinct never kicked in. Lincoln was found in the wild twice, emaciated. AEF decided to keep him after performing a live prey test: They sheltered him in an enclosure with a live rabbit, and after 48 hours, the rabbit was still alive.

AEF defers to the bird and its behavior to determine if it can be an education ambassador. They are not on display or part of the show, if they're not interested.

"Avian specialists truly build relationships with the birds under our care," Moore says. "As they interact with the birds, they may notice which ones respond well to training, enjoy being around people or seem comfortable flying during appearances. But the choice is always up to the bird."

Embodiment of heritage and healing

When artist Laura Walkingstick traveled to southwest Arizona with her parents as a teenager, she saw Native American dolls for the first time.

"It was my first time that I'd ever seen little Native American dolls that were dressed traditionally in their culture," says Walkingstick, a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. "It made me excited because now I could see something I could relate to. That's when I started collecting. My first was a pair of Navajo dolls."

While growing up in Norcross, Georgia, Walkingstick played with Eurocentric Barbie dolls. Those dolls provided a needed escape from family pressures and personal trauma, but Walkingstick couldn't relate to their blonde hair and the accessories designed by the Barbie manufacturer. Walkingstick would use scrap material from her mother's sewing projects to give her Barbie a makeover.

Although Walkingstick created art throughout her childhood and received awards and recognition in high school, she didn't pursue it professionally until she was in her 30s. She attended the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where she earned an associate degree in 2005 and a Bachelor of Fine Art in 2014. She continued her education at Southwestern College in Santa Fe and graduated in 2018 with a master's in art therapy.



"Then and Now: Wrapped in Survival." Courtesy of the Museum of the Cherokee People



Laura Walkingstick. Photo courtesy of Laura Walkingstick

Walkingstick enjoys mixing mediums and using textures because they remind her of an art kit her father gave her when she was a child. In Cherokee, North Carolina, where Walkingstick lives full time, she makes art and teaches healing workshops through corn husk doll making and purposeful storytelling – combining her creative skills as an artist and her need to help people through trauma.

"I am trying to teach our Cherokee stories and our connection to our corn mother," she explains. "I relate that back to our healing. Dolls were made for healing and ceremonies; they weren't playthings."

Walkingstick's "Then and Now: Wrapped in Survival" is on display through Dec. 30 at the Museum of the Cherokee People in Cherokee, as part of the [Unrelenting: Cherokee People and the American Revolution](#) exhibit.

"Then and Now" comprises materials including corn husks, cloth, wool, glass beads, leather, ribbon and moss. She's wrapped in her own blanket, and the American flag is at her feet, representing the broken promises and treaties.

Another one of Walkingstick's works, "Miss Cherokee," was judged in the Red Cloud Indian Art Show in South Dakota. Each year, a woman ages 18 to 22 is given the cultural leadership title of Miss Cherokee.

"Miss Cherokees are ambassadors of the tribe," she says. "I made this one because they have an important role with our community and our people. When they go and represent us in other places, there's a lot she has to carry."



"Miss Cherokee"

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Humble beginning, stellar career



Thompson Hospitality Regional Executive Chef Mike Rivera travels extensively to conduct cooking demonstrations. Photo by Gabriela

When Mike Rivera graduated in 1990 with an art degree from the Art Institute of Houston in his hometown in Texas, he struggled to find a job. He reached out to his brother, Robert, for help. Robert connected Mike to Uncle Julio's, a restaurant group with locations all over the country. Mike moved his wife and new baby to Arlington, Virginia, to start as a server.

Over the next four years, Mike Rivera worked for Uncle Julio's in various roles, from bartending to

training staff. He returned to Texas for an in-depth education at the Uncle Julio's in Fort Worth.

"I fell into the food industry," says Rivera, a regional executive chef with Thompson Hospitality. "This is fun. I thought, 'I actually get paid to do this.'"

Over the next two decades, Rivera gained more knowledge about building a flavor profile with the right ingredients from Pappas Restaurants, Copeland's of New Orleans and Compass Group. He joined Thompson Hospitality in 2016. Based in Houston, he travels to Arizona, California, Florida and wherever he's needed to conduct cooking demonstrations.

Family dish

Before Rivera begins making a dish for his family, he considers the season, and whether they want a light dish, bold flavors or something heavy.

His go-to is Asado de Puerco, a Mexican pork stew, which may be served hot with warm tortillas, Mexican rice and beans. The red, deeply flavorful sauce awakens aromatic, citrusy, earthy and savory notes on the palate.

"Asado de Puerco is a traditional Mexican pork stew with tender pieces of pork simmered in a vibrant red chili sauce," he says. "It's hearty, smoky and mildly spicy, all in one pot. It's a deeply loved dish from Northern Mexico."

Asado de Puerco (Mexican Pork Stew) 6 servings

Ingredients

- 3 dried guajillo chilies, stemmed and seeded
- 3 dried pasilla chilies, stemmed and seeded
- 3 ancho chilies
- 3 chiles de arbol, optional for spicy
- 1 medium yellow onion, chopped
- 5 cloves garlic, chopped
- 2 tablespoons roasted pumpkin seeds
- 1 teaspoon dried Mexican oregano
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
- 2 cups chicken broth or use water with 1 Knorr chicken bouillon cube
- 2 bay leaves

Directions

Make the chili sauce first by toasting the dried chilies in a pan for a minute or two. Soak them in hot water for 20 minutes to soften.

Process the rehydrated chilies with the onion, garlic, pumpkin seeds, spices and 1 cup of chicken broth until smooth. Strain for a smoother sauce, then set it aside.

The pork marinade adds extra flavor. Mash together the garlic, salt and black pepper, and rub it into the pork. Use a blender or molcajete (mortar and pestle). Cover and marinate in the fridge for at least 5 hours, or overnight for more flavor penetration.

When you're ready to cook the pork, brown the pieces in lard or oil over medium-high heat in a large pot or Dutch oven.

Add the remaining 1 cup of broth and orange juice, then cover and simmer until the pork is tender, 1 to 1 1/2 hours. You can simmer longer, if you prefer, to reduce the sauce for more flavor.

Pork marinade, optional

- 10 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1 teaspoon ground black pepper

Pork

- 2 1/2 pounds pork shoulder cut into bite-sized cubes (1 to 2 inches)
- 2 tablespoons lard or vegetable oil
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 1/4 cup orange juice

Culinary success, foreshadowed in childhood

Decades before Sherry Pocknett was named the 2023 Best Chef in the Northeast from the James Beard Foundation, she was cooking on a Suzy Homemaker, a working toy appliance.

"I was putting all kinds of stuff in there, including deer meat, eels, scallops, rabbit," Pocknett says. "Whatever my dad brought home is what I put in that oven."

Pocknett lives in her hometown of Mashpee, Massachusetts, and is a member of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, People of the First Light. She's the first Indigenous woman to receive an honor through the James Beard Foundation.

In late 2026 or early 2027, Pocknett will publish her first cookbook. The book will feature stories about how she became an award-winning chef and about 100 recipes based on the 13 moons.

"It's really going to be a fun and exciting book with lots of good pictures," she says. "It tells you all about Cape Cod and where I'm from."

Pocknett created a stuffed pumpkin recipe for the Mashantucket Pequot Museum in Mashantucket,



Chef Sherry Pocknett is the first Indigenous woman to receive an honor through the James Beard Foundation. Photo by Scott Foster Photography

Connecticut, where she was the café manager and served an Indigenous feast in November.

"This pumpkin is supposed to be a gorgeous showstopper, so you want a nice presentation," Pocknett says. "Try to find a pumpkin that's nice and round and perfect. You can use the same technique with pie pumpkins, acorn squash or another squash – just make sure the squash can hold up in the oven."



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Culinary success, foreshadowed in childhood

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Whole Pumpkin Stuffed with Venison and Three Sisters Rice

Courtesy of Chef Sherry Pocknett

Serving: 8 to 12

Ingredients

Venison

- 1 to 2 pounds venison, preferably rump roast, diced small
- Sunflower oil
- 1 teaspoon sea salt, divided
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly cracked black pepper, divided
- 1 teaspoon granulated garlic, divided
- 4 tablespoons salted butter, divided

Pumpkin

- 1 basketball-size pumpkin, for serving
- 1/2 cup sunflower oil
- 1 tablespoon sea salt
- 2 teaspoons freshly cracked black pepper

Filling

- 4 to 6 cups prepared Three Sisters Rice
- 1 ripe pear or apple, diced small
- 1 1/2 cups sweetened dried cranberries
- 1 cup roughly chopped walnuts
- 1 cup roasted, salted pumpkin seeds
- 6 green onions, sliced into rounds
- 1 cup maple syrup, divided

Directions

Prepare the venison: Use paper towels to pat the diced venison dry. Set a large skillet over medium-high heat; don't add any oil yet. Get the pan hot – it should be almost smoking.

Once the pan is very hot, add half the venison to the dry hot pan. Brown the meat in 2 batches.

Do not stir the venison. Add 1 tablespoon of sunflower oil to the pan and let the meat cook undisturbed in the pan for 3 or 4 minutes.

Season the venison with half the salt, pepper and granulated garlic and give it a quick stir. Add 2 tablespoons of butter, stir it in until melted and let the venison cook in it for another 2 minutes.

Transfer the venison to a bowl to drain excess fat. Then repeat with the second batch of meat and set aside. (Leave out the venison for a vegetarian dish.)

Prepare the pumpkin: Heat the oven to 400 F. Adjust the oven racks to make vertical space to fit the pumpkin.

Cut a wide hole in the top of your pumpkin with a knife and remove it. Using a large metal spoon or ice cream scoop, scrape the seeds and guts out of the pumpkin.

Using a steak knife or fork, stab holes on the inside of the pumpkin, being careful not to puncture all the way to the outside. With a pastry brush, brush the whole pumpkin with oil on the inside and outside. The amount of oil you need may vary depending on how absorbent the pumpkin is. Salt and pepper the inside of the pumpkin.

Set the pumpkin on a baking sheet, uncovered, with the pumpkin top next to it, stem-side down. Roast for 20 minutes. The outside should get nice and shiny; the inside should be softened slightly. Set your pumpkin aside, and turn your oven down to 350 F.

Prepare the rice filling and bake: Add the following ingredients to the Three Sisters Rice: apple or pear, dried cranberries, walnuts, toasted pumpkin seeds and green onions, making sure to reserve a sprinkle of the latter 3 for garnish. Mix well, then add 1/2 cup maple syrup and toss again. Finally, add the cooked venison and mix again. Taste and adjust seasoning as needed.

Fill the cavity of the pumpkin with the rice mixture.

Cover the pumpkin with its "lid" and return it to the oven for 15 to 25 minutes at 350 F, or until warmed all the way through. Cover the stem with aluminum foil to prevent it from burning.