

DAUGHTER OF A LOST BIRD

A DOCUMENTARY

Order

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2021

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2021



Official Selection
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FILM FESTIVAL
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Logline

Kendra, an adult Native adoptee, reconnects with her birth family, discovers her Lummi heritage, and confronts issues of her own identity. Her singular story represents many affected by the Indian Child Welfare Act and the Indian Adoption Project.

Synopsis

DAUGHTER OF A LOST BIRD explores the ethics surrounding Native American adoption, via a singular story as an entry point into a more complicated national issue. In many ways, Kendra Potter is a perfect example of cultural assimilation, a modern representation of the painful phrase, "Kill the Indian, save the man." She is a thriving woman who grew up in a loving, upper middle-class white family, and feels no significant loss with the absence of Native American culture or family in her life. And yet, as a Blackfeet/Salish woman, director Brooke Swaney could not imagine that Kendra could be content or complete without understanding her heritage. So together they embark on a 7 year journey.

After 34 years apart, Kendra finds her biological mother April and they meet face-to-face in Portland, Oregon. The film, both instigator and follower, documents Kendra on her journey to reconnect with her birth mother April, also a Native adoptee, and returns to her Native homelands. April Newcomb is a woman who has done a lot of work to heal. Her childhood was marked by physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her

adopted father, causing her to leave home at 15. After years spent lost in addiction, on and off the streets of Portland, OR and three years trapped in sex trafficking, she found the strength to escape and seek a better life. We watch both women navigate what it means to be Native, and to belong to a tribe from the outside looking in.

Through Kendra and April's unique experiences of growing up without knowledge of their heritage or tribal affiliation, we learn with and from them as they explore elements of their biological ties. The viewer learns, along with the women, of their inherited cultural trauma as well as some of the beauty of the Lummi ways neither knew while growing up. It's a turning point for them both. A year after the reunion in Oregon, Kendra ventures for her first time to Lummi to experience the Stommish canoe races with April, see Lummi Island and hear from a tribe she never knew. They are both saddled with a new identity, unsure of how the story unfolds.





Context

The history of Indigenous adoption in the US is a relatively untold story.

Before the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), large numbers of Native children were being separated from their parents, **1 in every 3 or 4 Native children (25%–35%) were being removed**; of these, **85% were placed outside of their families and communities**—even when fit and willing relatives were available. In foster care today, Native children in states with higher Native populations are overrepresented in the system. It seems like almost every Native family has been touched by adoption and/or foster care in some way or another.

After the trauma of boarding schools, the Indian Adoption Project of the 50s and 60s and now the present trauma of foster care, Native individuals are still trying to recover from removal from their families. Breaking up families leads to a plethora of social problems from drug and alcohol addiction, to higher rates of incarceration, and most tragically, suicide. All of this falls under the umbrella of Historical Trauma.

Most Americans think of Indigenous people as an ethnic or racial minority, they are not. As members of federally recognized tribes and communities, Indigenous people have dual citizenship. And thus are

embroiled in questions of belonging. Native people, one of the only pedigreed people in the world, experience this acutely.

When a person is recognized as a member of a tribe in this nation, they have tribal citizenship accorded to them in addition to their American citizenship.

The ICWA, despite being the law of the land, faces many opponents. Most recently in *Brackeen v. Bernhardt*, the plaintiffs alleged that the law was unconstitutional on the basis of race. Fortunately, a district court upheld the law on the basis of tribal sovereignty.

The ICWA protects children's

retention of their tribal citizenship and all the according privileges: participating in tribal government and offices, tribal land ownership, cultural customs and traditions, and other inherited rights.

We are at another historical juncture regarding tribal sovereignty, especially with the current societal reckoning following the massive Black Lives Matter demonstrations across the country in 2020, the rejection of Affirmative Action, and the questioning of critical race theory.

How do Indigenous adoptees fit into this larger historical narrative? And how can we continue to protect the ICWA and their rights?





Impact Campaign

There are decisions being made today that will continue to impact Indigenous people in the future – for instance the recent decision in Texas District Court in September 2018 striking down ICWA on the basis of race. We want this film to educate policy makers as the battle continues through the courts.

The work will accomplish the following:

- Bring cross-cultural awareness for those families that adopt across cultural lines and examine the cultural assimilation and implications;
- Educate non-Indigenous Americans on the importance of this history as it pertains to ‘settler privileges’ in our existing patriarchy;
- Grow the audience of this important story and work by providing outlets - both in person and online - and with it a greater awareness; and
- Build out an online social presence and website site that can be used long after the broadcast and outreach to educate and support indigenous communities and adoptees; and
- Develop curricula.

Brooke Pepion Swaney.

DIRECTOR
&
PRODUCER



In 2012, when Kendra and I first started talking about her experiences as a Native adoptee, I was intrigued, and like a detective, I wanted to find out the truth. How was it that she didn't know what tribe she was from, especially being born the same year that the Indian Child Welfare Act came into effect? Why wouldn't her birth mother, or her birth mother's mother for that matter, put down this information on her birth certificate that is so important to Native people? As her "Native" friend, or one of them anyway, I wanted her to find out where she was from so that some of these questions would finally have answers. But mostly, that she wouldn't feel shame from claiming such an unknown identity.

Another part of me wanted to educate Kendra so that she could not only have a deeper understanding about what it means to be Indigenous in the United States, but also join the ranks, so to speak, of the millions of Indigenous people in this country fighting to preserve their identity and by extension their tribal sovereignty. This also became a huge motivation behind the film.

The idea to make the film came slowly for both of us as we became entangled in uncovering the mystery. As we became serious about documenting it, I did some digging around about adoption films. There are a lot of them out there now, but in 2012, there weren't any notable films about Native adoptees – let alone a film

about the experience of being immersed in a journey to not only reconnect with biological relatives, but also a biological group subjected to trauma and stereotype. Inspired by *Daughter from Danang*, I wanted to tell a new story about an Indigenous daughter.

The intention of the film has always been to educate audiences about issues affecting contemporary Native people and the effects that policy and society continue to have on Indigenous people. We dedicate this film to all the Native people that have been fostered or adopted out of their communities.

Bio

This film is Brooke's first feature documentary. Most recently and notably she made the Blacklist's Inaugural Indigenous List with TINDER ON THE REZ along with her co-writer Angela Tucker. She also produced BELLA VISTA (Rotterdam), SIXTY FOUR FLOOD (PBS & PBS Digital) and the podcast ALL MY RELATIONS with Matika Wilbur and Dr. Adrienne Keene. In 2019, she was selected to participate as a NATIVE Fellow at the European Film Market/Berlinale. She holds an MFA in Film from NYU. Brooke is an enrolled member of the Blackfeet Nation and a descendent of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. She is represented by Corrine Aquino and Haley Jones at Artists First: 9465 Wilshire Blvd, Beverly Hills, CA 90212. (310) 274-4474.

Kendra Mylnechuk Potter

PROTAGONIST
&
PRODUCER



Growing up, I always knew I was adopted. It was a bedtime story my parents told me the day they brought me home and shared almost nightly for the duration of my childhood. They spoke of the generosity of my birth mother often, and their gratitude to her and love for me was never in question. Consequently, I didn't feel much identity confusion as a kid or young adult. I grew up white identifying, embraced by the dominant culture and my adoptive family, and I thrived in that environment.

It wasn't until my mid 20s, working as an actor, that I began to sense inner conflict around my identity as a Native adoptee. What spaces am I taking up? Whose voice is speaking through me? Do I have a right to play these roles, with no knowledge of my culture? Where did I come from, and what are the implications of my knowing or not knowing the answers to those questions?

When I got pregnant, the need to know where I came from became a powerful desire to provide some answers for my children, so they would never grapple with identity the way I did.

Within weeks of conceiving my daughter, I won an award for my performance in a short film directed by Brooke called OK Breathe Auralee, where I played an adult Native adoptee who wants a baby and begins to contemplate her disconnect from her Native family.

We decided to let art imitate life imitating art, and we followed those crumbs much further by documenting my journey back to my own Native origins.

I learned over the next several years that I am from the Lummi Nation, the Salmon People, and like the salmon, I was finding my way back, called by something deep inside. Meeting my birth mother April was a healing I didn't know I needed, and had never allowed myself to hope for. Her catch phrase throughout this process was, "Who gets to do this?!?" And I couldn't agree more. Her story was much more fraught than my own. Learning was painful, but it was pain with a purpose, as is often the case with growth. It was also so deeply enriching.

I walked into Lummi hoping to answer some questions I had. I came away realizing that my personal experiences of identity confusion are one particularly sturdy strand in a skillfully woven net of cultural genocide.

Although my upbringing was stable and loving, the Lummi people, as all indigenous communities within this country, have suffered incredible loss at the hands of the US government's removal of their children. I arrived and quickly realized that I am part of their story as much as they are part of my own. It has taken years to understand that, in fact, it is our shared story because I am Lummi. I still struggle with this often, even



after the support and acceptance offered by my own relatives.

This film and the work to make it was an important aspect of reuniting with my birth family and tribe. I sometimes clung to the project like a lifeboat to bring me home, and other times, I felt like I was lugging the film behind me as I carried the weight of discovering the inherited trauma that comes with claiming and being claimed as April's daughter and a Lummi woman. It is a gift to have this relationship with my story, to get to see it from inside AND the outside.

I am grateful to share my journey with the world. My sincere hope is that it educates people who, like me, didn't know about the Indian Child Welfare Act, the Indian Adoption Project, the forced sterilizations of Indigenous women, and the generational ramifications these acts and policies have had on communities, Native and non-Native. I hope this film helps others like me, adoptees or

those related to adoptees, feel empowered to step into their own origin story and understand more about where they come from.

Bio

Kendra is an actor whose performances can be seen in CHRISTMAS UNDER WRAPS (Hallmark), 2 DAYS IN NEW YORK, NATIVES (SXSW), and OK BREATHE AURALEE (Sundance, Best Actor NBC/Universal Short Cuts), THE BLACKLIST (NBC), WINTER IN THE BLOOD, WE BURN LIKE THIS, and COPPER CITY. In addition to her work on film, Kendra is a theatre artist and educator. She is co-founder of MT+NYC Collaborative, a cross country theatre company based in Missoula, MT. The Buffalo Play, which she co-wrote, premiered at The Tank in NYC in 2019. She supports people's search for identity and storytelling in workshops, retreats, and classes. This is her first time stepping behind the camera.

Jeri Rafter



PRODUCER

For over six years I have made call sheets, tracked budgets, written grant applications, ordered take-out, sat in meetings, and driven hundreds of miles to follow our subjects, but what keeps me resilient in producing this film is bearing witness to the emotional work of the women who carry the momentum behind the story of DAUGHTER OF A LOST BIRD - my director Brooke Swaney and subject/producer Kendra Potter.

I also produce this film because of my family history. A fifth-generation Montanan, I recognize that my settler ancestors were part of the systematic detriment that displaced Native people on the Flathead Reservation, the place I call home. They did not directly take part in government land grabs or murder, but they did buy land that was taken from Native people in a dishonest and malevolent manner. They turned the ground and a blind eye to what was happening to the original inhabitants of the place my family calls home. They were quiet when Native children were sent to boarding schools, they thought nothing of Native families being broken apart while ours stayed together. In working on this film I am able to transfer the benefits of my privilege into a project that is led by Native voices and be a helper to their efforts.

In this story about Kendra's adoption and her struggle between what it is to be Indigenous and white, I am on the white side, the same

side racially as the adoptive parents and the system that created generations of tribal pain. Sometimes it has been awkward to be that person on a mostly Native crew and mainly shooting on the Lummi reservation. I have said the wrong thing, I have made mistakes. In this, my own personal microcosm of producing the film also lies the magnetic reason why I believe in this film - because WE have made mistakes and I stand up for a future where aberrations are acknowledged and our audience are able to fully feel why they should support the people represented in our film in the most genuine and useful way possible.

Bio

JERI RAFTER is a Montana based producer dedicated to telling stories about the people and place she calls home. She most recently produced CREATURES a period piece film told entirely in the Blackfoot and Shoshone languages. She has also produced the critically-acclaimed MICKEY AND THE BEAR (Annabelle Attanasio, SXSW 2019 & L'ACID CANNES). Her other production credits include TED K (Tony Stone), THE BALLAD OF LEFTY BROWN (Jared Moshe). Her first feature length film project, BELLA VISTA (Vera Brunner-Sung), premiered at the International Rotterdam Film Festival in January 2014. In 2015 she was invited to be part of the Sundance Producers Lab and participated in the Sundance + Women in Film Female Filmmakers Initiative. Jeri is a fifth generation Montanan and has a MFA in Media Arts from the University of Montana.

Gita Saedi

Kiely

EXECUTIVE
PRODUCER

Though DAUGHTER OF A LOST BIRD is heart-breakingly personal, Kendra's circuitous route to finding identity strikes many universal chords. For me, as a child of immigrants who grew up the 'other', the idea of identity and homeland weigh heavy on my soul. It is what motivates me to tell and share stories. To voyeur into one's truth allows us to really SEE another. And maybe with enough stories of 'others' we will understand enough not to fear it, or judge it, or censor it. Every story gets us closer to that Utopia, and I'm so grateful to have been a part of telling this one.

Gita spent many years with Kartemquin Films, where she was series producer and story editor for the acclaimed series The New Americans, and produced a number of feature films with the Kartemquin team and Director Steve James. She has served on producing teams for Channel 4/UK, CBS, PBS and RTE/Ireland. Aside from production, Gita was Executive Director of the Big Sky Film Institute and the Big Sky Documentary Film Festival, and adjunct lecturer at the University of Montana. She currently serves on the board of ITVS and is a Program Consultant for The Redford Center.



Laura Ortman

COMPOSER

Laura brought not only her talents, but also her heart to scoring the film. Further underscoring the brilliance of her work as a composer and collaborator, the story deeply resonated with her as Laura is also a Native adoptee. She happily reconnected with her birth family a month before 9/11.

While Laura is White Mountain Apache, she was also raised outside of her community by a family of musicians. She took up the violin at a young age to be closer to her grandmother. In the years since, she has performed at The Whitney Museum of American Art and The Museum of Modern Art in New York,

The Toronto Biennial in Ontario, the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal, and the Centre Pompidou, Paris, among countless established and DIY venues in the US, Canada, and Europe. An inquisitive and exquisite violinist, Ortman is versed in Apache violin, piano, electric guitar, keyboards, and pedal steel guitar, often sings through a megaphone, and is a producer of capacious field recordings – her most recent pandemic recordings reviewed in WIRE magazine. This is Laura's second collaboration with Brooke, the first being OK BREATHE AURALEE (Sundance 2012). She works out of her New York studio in Greenpoint and her apartment affectionately named the Dust Dive.



Colleen Thurston

IMPACT
PRODUCER

Colleen is an award-winning media producer and documentary filmmaker from Tulsa, Oklahoma. As an indigenous non-fiction storyteller, her films tend to explore the relationships between humans and the natural world and focus on Native stories and perspectives. She holds an MFA from Montana State University's Science and Natural History Filmmaking program, where she also earned a graduate certificate in American Indian Studies. Her BA in Media Arts and

Anthropology is from the University of Arizona. Colleen has worked for the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian and the Smithsonian Channel and has produced and crewed non-fiction projects for museums, public television stations and federal agencies. She also produced and directed short documentaries for four seasons of the Cherokee Nation's series, "Osiyo, Voices of the Cherokee People," earning two Emmy awards for her work as a producer and writer. Her work has been supported by ITVS, Vision Maker Media, Firelight Media, Southern Foodways Alliance, Nia Tero Foundation and the Redford Center. Currently the Co-Director of the Fayetteville Film Festival, Colleen also curates film and storytelling events independently and in conjunction with partnering organizations, with an emphasis on indigenous programming. Colleen is a 2019-2021 Firelight Media Documentary Lab Fellow, a citizen of the Choctaw Nation and a seventh generation Oklahoman.



Select Credits

FULL CREDIT LIST AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST

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EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Gita Saedi Kiely

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Larry Mylnechuk

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Sukha Potter

Lucian Potter

Scott Mylnechuk

Chadaskadum Witchtalum

Cheyenne Cooper

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Adele Kinley

Lawerence Soloman

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Rita Jefferson

Terry Cross

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Press Coverage

[Great Falls Tribune](#)

tktktk as we get it

[KNKX - NPR](#) :

"They're known as "the lost birds" – Native children who were adopted out of their tribal communities and placed with white families. Nearly 400 of these adoptions took place from 1958 to 1967 through a federal program called the Indian Adoption Project.

The ripple effects of that history is told in a new documentary about a mother and daughter with ties to the Lummi Nation, as they seek to connect with their Native identity."

Partnerships

NICWA

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