

Poet turned life around by connecting to Indigenous culture

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Growing up in Saskatoon, Sask. poet Zoey 'Pricelys' Roy, 26, says she didn't have access to her Indigenous culture. Despite this, she is no less Indigenous.

"My parents taught me a lot of things, they taught me that I was beautiful, and that I was perfectly okay as Zoey, but they wanted to raise me as Canadian," said Roy.

"They thought it would be an easier life for me to live as Canadian, rather than First Nation in Canada."

For Roy, being disconnected from her culture backfired - she didn't know who she was, and she started to act out. At 15 years old, she was incarcerated at Kilburn Hall Youth Centre in Saskatoon, which was a turning point for her.

"I recognized that all of the kids in Kilburn Hall were Indigenous, and all the people that worked in Kilburn, or worked at the courthouse, or worked at the police station, they were not Indigenous and they clearly had decision making power over how my life was going to go," said Roy.

'Not Indian enough'

"If I was going to be a true rebel - as I always prided myself on being - then I needed to be successful, and I needed to rebel against the system that was built to facilitate my failure."

While at the youth centre, Roy became worried that she was living up to stereotypes attributed to Indigenous youth, and decided the best way to break from this destructive path was to connect to a culture she never knew.

"I felt that because my skin was light, that my hair was curly, that I didn't know my language, that I didn't have grandparents that I called kokum and mushum, that somehow I wasn't Indian enough," said Roy.

"I had to take the first step in my journey to reclaiming my culture, and what I did was I walked into a high school one day and I asked to talk to their elder, and she told me I'm perfect just the way I am... and the Zoey today is Indigenous enough."

As a writer, Roy applies the life lessons she has learned to her poetry, but says that as an Indigenous writer she takes on the additional responsibility of "speaking the truth, and speaking knowledge whenever I can."

"I like to bring up Indigenous narrative to empower all Canadians to understand the specifics of First Nations and Métis culture, so that we can somehow bridge the gap of knowing."

'People are scared of different'

For Roy, writing poetry is a way of connecting - and learning - about her Cree heritage. Despite not speaking Cree fluently, she incorporates Cree words to her poetry - making her poems just as much a language lesson for her as it is for her audience.

"[Cree] is not less, it's not more, it's different. And so many people are scared of different."

In addition to writing and performing, Roy works with youth in Saskatoon to inspire them to write. She is the co-founder of Write Out Loud, a spoken word collective for youth, and she previously worked for Saskatoon's National Youth Arts Week.

Because of the work she does with youth in Saskatoon, Roy received one of this year's youth Indspire awards.

Roy is one of the panelists presenting at [The Walrus Talks The Indigenous City](#) Wednesday, May 11, at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, 300 Memorial Blvd. Other guests include actor Tom Jackson, essayist John Ralston Saul, and CBC host Rosanna Deerchild. The presenters will talk about Indigenous life in Canadian cities, including conversations on culture, politics and business.