Meet the team behind Riders of the Dawn

We had the pleasure of sitting down with Prairie Rose Seminole and Katrina Lillian Sorrentino, directors of Riders of the Dawn, one of the projects selected for the 2024/25 Huku/Kartemquin Accelerator. From stand-up comedy and the challenge of putting senior horses on birth control to unpacking the nuances of trauma-informed storytelling, duo shared insights into their filmmaking journeys, creative processes, and the unique perspectives they bring to their craft.

Prairie Rose Seminole

Katrina Lillian Sorrentino

Riders of the Dawn follows four Indigenous women from the Medicine Wheel Ride as they unite to confront the heartbreaking realities of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Relatives (MMIW/R) crisis. The film interweaves their personal losses, collective traumas, and the challenges of organizing their annual ride through the iconic Sturgis motorcycle rally. As the women prepare for the 2025 ride, they draw strength from one another, navigating a landscape fraught with pain and resilience. With laughter and tears, these warriors invite audiences to witness their powerful triumph over adversity in a compelling tale of sisterhood.

Kartemquin: We're thrilled to introduce you to the Kartemquin community! What's something surprising about you that you'd like our readers to know?

Prairie Rose: I've got 10 horses and 15 dogs. I have two senior horses, and one was accidentally bred last year because my new stallion jumped the fences. So I was like, I should make a short film about putting horses on birth control! I am going to put two senior mares on birth control. My new stud knew he was there for a job and he's like, 'I'm going to go do my job', and found my senior broodmares and bred one of 'em, and I was like, 'all right, so I got a beautiful oopsie baby'!

Now motivated to educate others, that you can indeed put your mares on birth control. My retired mares deserve their reproductive freedom.

Katrina: Perhaps it's been a compliment to my social justice work and the fact that I've worked specifically in the anti-human trafficking industry for over a decade, but I have been doing so much comedy! I'm a performer, and I'm actually on the conservatory track at Second City right now, which is a lot of improv and sketch. I just did my first standup show about three weeks ago, and it went amazingly! I talk a lot about deconstructing from Christianity and the patriarchy, but making it fun and light. I'm definitely in my standup era. I just find comedy to be a very powerful and exacting tool to say that things that need to be said in a format that we've decided is socially acceptable.

KTQ: Kartemquin is based in Chicago, on the unceded lands of the Potawatomi, Odawa, and Ojibwe nations. Can you share a bit about where you each call home and how your backgrounds have shaped your perspectives as filmmakers?

PR: We spent summers in Western North Dakota, either at my grandma's farm or on the reservation with our dad but it wasn't until about 2014 when I moved back west. I took a national job where I was an educator travelling 40 weeks out of the year. My job was storytelling and faith-based mobilization, and I worked largely with about 40 different American Indian and Alaska Native communities and faith-based organizational groups. So coming in as a storyteller and really living that life of putting your faith into action, what does that mean, and how do you show up in community, especially in the times of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement?

Unfortunately, it became too close to home when my brother was killed by law enforcement in western North Dakota. He was the horseman, a big six-foot brown guy who served time and struggled with addiction, and we lost him in the custody of law enforcement. And so I ended up moving back home to actually manage his horses, and they became mine in 2021, never really getting any comfort with the justice system because in western North Dakota, it's still the wild West, where some of the territories here are later coming into statehood.

When I was approached on this project, I thought, am I too close to my own grief at this time to share my own story? Can we do this in a way that doesn't extract and exploit the trauma of a family or an individual like many other documentaries in many series or news programming have done?

And that alignment with not wanting to be extractive, not wanting to be exploitative. We're going to talk about trauma because we can't avoid that, but can we do it in a way that doesn't allow people to completely disassociate from what they're watching?

K: I'm from the suburbs outside of Chicago and was here until high school and then went to NYU for film school, and I was in New York until about 2019, did my master's over there in photography. Then I went to France for a year-long artist photo residency, but because of COVID, I had to come back to the states I chose to come home. Then I was in Chicago, then LA for the last three years, and now I'm officially back where I grew up!

I've had a critical relationship with the documentary medium since I was about 24. At 21 I was studying abroad in Cuba for my junior year of college at NYU, and I was training to be a commercial cinematographer. In Cuba I was overcome by the people and the stories and then, in my senior year of NYU, I switched to documentary, and I took as many classes as I could.

I started using my camera skills to just go out and make stories. And then I'm sent all of a sudden all over the world, witnessing all of these stories and people with my camera. But after about three years of doing that, I didn't have the language for it at the time, but I felt the inherent weight of my privilege of being able to parachute down in all of these places and the also inherent role of my authority by having this camera.

I wanted to pause and reflect and interrupt that. I didn't know so much about the inherent colonialism in the medium. I was sort of figuring that all out as I was going along, but my inherent solution for that was doing my master's in photography. I had the goal of turning the camera on myself because I didn't think that I had anything to share. And that just opened up Pandora's box of so many other questions and ethics.

KTQ: You both first worked together on the short film We Ride For Her, in partnership with The Red Sand Project—about the Medicine Wheel Rider organization—which was the precursor to *Riders of the Dawn*. Can you tell us about the journey to finding each other and working together?

PR: Oh, it's been a long journey! I used to be a part of the Fargo Film Festival in my hometown, and I would curate the Native American voices part of our festival. That lasted for about eight years before one of the new directors of the film festival came in and said, we don't want to have Native American voices anymore because it's the only ethnic-specific category versus all of the other film categories. We didn't even have a chance to put up a fight.

It was hurtful and took our voice away. I felt through curating those films and amplifying the voices of Indigenous filmmakers, I was a part of that whole movement. Fast forward to having friends who are filmmakers and being part of their storytelling journey.

What happened with the Red Sand Project and my jumping on board, I was talking to Katrina about the missing murdered Indigenous relatives in 2018 and she had asked me, 'do you want to do this [We Ride For Her]?' And I was like, 'how? I manage a herd of horses; I work full time!' So it was really this mutual friend that put us in touch.

K: Red Sand Project had reached out to me to make a short documentary about anti-human trafficking, and they wanted to make a documentary with one of their nonprofit organizations in the Dakotas. We reached out to that nonprofit organization, and we asked, what is the most pressing issue in your community right now? This was about three and a half years ago, and they said the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Relatives (MMIWGR). We said, okay, great, that's the story we should tell. We knew that while I might be creatively producing and leading the project, we wanted a native voice to hold a main role.

PR: Katrina and Becca [Kahn Bloch, executive producer with the Red Sand Project] had a conversation about trauma and not wanting to exploit trauma, being really intentional to honor the stories and the relationships that we're having within our community. I live in this community. We are touched by this crisis of violence and missing religious relatives quite frequently. In my community alone, just this year alone, we've had 31 deaths, and the majority of those are either drug-related or violence-related. So this isn't something that I can just walk away from. And in our first conversations, Katrina and Becca really honored the need to make a trauma-informed practice of filmmaking. Let's take care of each other in this, because we know how extractive and exploitive documentary filmmaking can be. We didn't want to be those people.

K: [*We Ride For Her*] is one of the few shorts I felt like I wanted to develop into something deeper because of the support we had. We really were supported through funding to go slow, to develop authentic relationships, and to find our native team so that I'm really coming in as the filmmaking person that's supporting the filmmaking while Prairie Rose and Lorna (Cuny, chairwoman and co-founder of the Medicine Wheel Ride) are telling the stories. As a white filmmaker, I can continue supporting this feature because we've laid the groundwork of these relationships.

PR: Katrina is so capable in the art of documentary filmmaking and short

Medicine Wheel Ride

documentary filmmaking that it allowed me to learn a new practice of telling an impactful story in this other style. I just found that opportunity in a way that I couldn't necessarily mess it up, right? I'm being mentored. I'm being guided in a way that allows me to share this story. We Ride for Her was my first official film where I'm credited as not just a co-director but also a producer. It allowed me to share my [storytelling] practice in another way. It was a beautiful practice and gave me a lot more in my skill set, but also allowed me to be a part of an amazing piece of art.

KTQ: This year's Hulu/Accelerator prioritized Indigenous and Native American filmmakers. Prairie Rose, as a Native storyteller and filmmaker, are you seeing a shift in representation and in the stories being told about Native communities in dominant popular culture?

PR: I feel like there is a shift happening, and it's happening at different layers. I think a lot of the spotlight on filmmaking is becoming more from an Indigenous lens and perspective, but we still have blockbuster films like *Killers of the Flower Moon* with that white lens, that white savior lens that contributes to this dominant culture perspective versus an Indigenous lens of, hey, these systemic barriers still exist.

So there's more Indigenous voices being amplified and put into those spaces still through a white lens, but also through unrealistic expectations that law enforcement actually serves our people. We were just on a search this weekend, and the family was so frustrated. The individual had been missing since July. Law enforcement has done very little. They helped us get permission from the private landowner so that we could conduct some searches in these areas that he could have been, and that was it.

> *I want people to walk away feeling like this is their story too* - Prairie Rose Seminole

They were very hands-off. But the family was projecting their frustrations on us as a group, an organization coming in and asking why haven't you been here sooner? We're like, 'we didn't know!'

The complexity of these issues is that there's just so many unknowns and so much frustration, and the families feel completely helpless, and we don't have any comfort for that. So you have the reality of a person missing for months and months and months and months and no comfort in the justice system, but then you have on TV cold case files, or you have a motivated detective who's opening up cases and solving everything. That doesn't happen.

We have over 5,500 missing people, missing Indigenous relatives, but only less than 800 are listed in the database at the federal level. Who's opening up those cold cases? We have three cold cases in my family alone. My aunt was murdered, never investigated. My uncle was murdered, never investigated. My nephew was murdered, never investigated. Our brother was killed in the custody of law enforcement, but we can't pursue any type of justice with that.

So it's like these realities are completely removed from those on-screen versions right now, and I'm not sure we can really bring that [reality] without getting really dark too. How do you continue to hope? I mean, we have love, laughter, and hope, but it's not in the same way or projected in the same way that dominant culture expects.

KTQ: Katrina, many filmmakers face unseen challenges, even in moments of public success. Can you share how you've navigated the balance between the recent success of We Ride For Her and the realities, especially in the current creative landscape?

K: This year has been interesting because simultaneously, we were at Sundance presenting this film as a Sundance event and we were at SXSW, and while all my friends on Instagram are seeing highlights in my career behind the scenes, no one knows that it was the year that, besides Covid, I made the least amount of money. And I think this is important to talk about. I had the least amount of work. It was definitely a factor in coming back home to Chicago because LA was just financially not sustainable after a certain point. I think it's important to be transparent about that.

As an artist, it is a time of scarcity. There's just not as many resources due to so many factors. And at the same time, I feel like I've experienced enough peaks and valleys in my career that I trust in the fact that everyone's journey is individual and it is always changing. So I just have to continue finding a way to prioritize the things that I think are important and trust that somebody will see the value in that. And so I'm so grateful that Prairie Rose and I followed that 'ping' of we should apply to the Hulu Accelerator, that we should just apply and see what happens!

I do think the silver lining in all of this is that we're seeing bloating from certain outdated systems—they're just not sustainable anymore, and they're going to pop. Now, I don't know what that popping will look like if all of the resources will continue going into the hands of the wealthy or if there really will be an authentic moment for democratization of a lot of these industries. I don't know. There's a grounded skepticism, even though I always orient towards hope.

> *I had the goal of turning the camera on myself because I didn't think that I had anything to share. And that just opened up Pandora's box of so many other questions and ethics.* - Katrina Lillian Sorrentino

KTQ: What are you both most looking forward to being part of the Hulu/Kartemquin Accelerator program?

K: I'm looking forward to new collaborators and getting the opportunity to dialogue with at Kartemquin and to be in the creative process with all of you. I'm super excited to have that mentorship. I feel like it's going to take my practice as a filmmaker to a different level, and it's going to lead to so much growth in me as a storyteller. I'm really looking forward to that. And I love that there's another team too, getting to meet them and be in process with them.

I love that this opportunity is a year long, because that support is just really rare for artists. That's why artists, I think, love going to art school and having critique groups and doing programs together because we need that feedback in order to continue carving a way forward to be able to find our own voice through the support of other voices.

PR: What I'm really looking forward to is that mentorship piece. I feel like I've gained so much being around people that are not only asking good questions but are teaching me how to ask those questions in the filmmaking world and taking care of each other. The key to our success is how we're taking care of each other. What is it that we need to learn? What are we learning together?

Being in a community, for me being so isolated [geographically], is one of the most rewarding experiences, even if it is virtual. I just appreciate those spaces in which I get to be in a community, virtual or otherwise, that not only allow me to enhance my own skill set but also help guide this process more efficiently. And I don't say 'efficiently' in a way of time management and budget pieces. That's [also] helpful, but 'efficiently' in impactful storytelling and in the art of how we're doing these things. I have my way of doing things, but that might not be the best way. What are the points of the stories that people are really drawn to that I can really move forward with the art of storytelling and filmmaking that leads people to feel better connected? I want people to walk away feeling like this is their story too.

Learn more about Prairie Rose, Kartina and Riders of the Dawn HERE