

Celebrating 15 Years of 'The Gift'?



Story By Clara Matthews

Note: Please visit our [gallery page](#) for a photo celebration of The Gift Plaza

When Senora Lynch first received the call to install a large Native American art piece on UNC's campus in the early 2000s, she was immediately excited and inspired to begin her work. It was lucky that she was; the UNC employees who commissioned her gave her almost absolute creative control over what would eventually become known as 'The Gift.'

Today, most students at UNC know 'The Gift' as the ornately bricked walkway that spans the length of the two Union buildings. However, when Lynch first set foot on the space, it was very different.

'They asked me what I could do, what could I create for this space,' said Lynch, who is an award-winning artist and member of the Haliwa-Saponi Indian Tribe. 'It was really interesting, because when I got there the whole space was rubble and I looked at it and immediately, the spirit sent me this idea for a walkway.'

In creating 'The Gift,' which officially opened in a dedication ceremony in April of 2004, Lynch was forced out of her comfort zone, most notably in that she had never worked with bricks.

'I'm already a potter and artist and I already do beadwork,' she said. 'I took my concept of beadwork and started putting it in, brick by brick.'

Lynch eventually settled on a turtle as the main element of the piece, a decision that she says she is even more confident in 15 years later.

'Based on native culture, the turtle itself represents a lot within many many tribes,' she said. 'As I studied further, I realized that it's important in China, and in Africa - in many countries, the turtle has meaning for them as well.'

This symbolism continues throughout the piece, which also contains imagery of corn, dogwood flowers, hills, eagle feathers, and a depiction of the four directions; earth, wind, fire,

and water. Each element is significant not only to native people throughout the United States, but most specifically to the indigenous people of the southeast.

“As a Native American, it’s a special place, and something I consider ‘ours’ and not ‘mine.’” Lynch said. “I represent my Indian people, I’m representing all other Indian people, in North Carolina and elsewhere.”

Blake Hite, a junior from Pembroke, NC and the secretary of Carolina Indian Circle, echoed similar sentiments. “I think it’s very important for Native visibility because it’s in the center of campus, right between the two Union buildings,” he said. “It’s not some small display that’s in a corner somewhere. It’s very visible, everyone sees it when they walk by.”

“The Gift” has had a central role in Hite’s time at Carolina. The piece is not only a popular staging area for a number of events that Carolina Indian Circle hosts annually, such as Indigenous People’s Day, but is also the final stop on the UNC American Indian Center’s narrative tour. Hite said that it has opened up a number of discussions surrounding what it means to be native on campus.

“It’s one of the spots on the tour where participants ask me the most questions,” Hite said. “They see the walkway, see the designs, and ask ‘What does this mean for Native communities in North Carolina, in the southeast?’” He added that one of the most interesting conversations he’s had around “The Gift” was due to the depiction of the medicine wheel towards the end of the piece.

Hite is a member of the Lumbee Tribe and Cherokee Nation; the medicine wheel is a central element of the Lumbee tribal seal, and is printed on their tribal enrollment cards.

“One participant asked us, ‘You have tribal enrollment cards?’ and we were like, ‘Yeah,’ and showed them what they were,” he said. “They found that so fascinating, that a group of people in the United States have their own separate citizenship cards, essentially.”

Hite also said he believes that displaying more historical markers and artwork on campus could further strengthen UNC’s relationship with the native population in North Carolina.

“The Occoneechee and Haliwa-Saponi Nation are tribes in North Carolina and this is their traditional land,” he said. “To have a noticeable monument that acknowledges that this is Native land, these are indigenous people, and these are their descendants, whose land still exists today? I think that would make all the difference.”

“The Gift” has had an impact on campus, there’s no doubting that. It provides a space for events, is central to conversations about what it means to be an American Indian, and is a beautiful piece of art for all UNC students, faculty, staff, and visitors to appreciate.

“After Indian removal, people tried to say that we were gone, but Senora Lynch and the University united to make a strong statement,” said Hite. “In putting ‘The Gift’ right in the heart of campus, that says we are still here and we are still relevant.”

“The Gift” is meant to be experienced in a very specific way, from one end to the other; for more information about “The Gift” itself, please visit UNC’s [American Indian Center](#).

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