

Soon to be CMR grad uses lens to learn about himself

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Tony Vielle never felt connected to his Blackfeet heritage and was headed nowhere fast until he realized the camera placed in his hands during his freshman year of high school was a gift ? his gift.

Born in Browning and raised in poverty in Great Falls, Vielle already had a criminal record at age 15, including minor in possession of alcohol as well as theft. He was on probation and was barely holding onto a 2.0 GPA.

"I kept on messing up and messing up," Vielle said.

But that camera, an encouraging journalism teacher, a supportive grandfather and a reconnection with his heritage will carry him across the stage at C.M. Russell High School on Monday night to receive his high school diploma.

He is one of 60 graduating Native American students in Great Falls Public Schools who will receive an eagle feather at a ceremony honoring their academic success tonight.

"There are a lot of students that have risen to incredible challenges," said Sandra Boham, director of Indian Education for the school district. "They've seen the value in (a high school diploma)."

In the fall, Vielle will head to Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green to study photography.

"It allowed me to tell stories, and that's all I've ever wanted to do," Vielle said of his camera.

But what he didn't realize until this year was that his camera would tell his story. And what a story it is.

Born in Browning, Vielle and his family spent a lot of time in Great Falls in his younger years because one of his two older brothers was sick with pneumonia. His family moved into low income housing and then when he was about 6, his older brother DJ died.

When Vielle was 10, his mother died suddenly from unknown health-related problems.

"Our family just started to fall apart," Vielle said.

By the time he was 12, his dad had been in and out of jail, and Vielle and his remaining older brother Will were living on the streets of Great Falls for a few months. Then his maternal grandfather Joe Raya took them in.

Vielle was enrolled as a seventh-grader at North Middle School, but he could have cared less about where he was and what he was studying.

"I was lost and in and out of trouble," he said. "I didn't really try for anything. Our grandpa was just trying to show us the way. We were just so upset with the world."

He continued to fight, even as he entered high school at CMR. As a freshman, he took Beth Britton's journalism class and started taking some photos. He liked it, but he didn't really give it much thought.

"He was really lost and he didn't know what he wanted to do," Britton said. "From the minute he had that camera in his hands he was just a different kid."

Toward the end of his sophomore year, Vielle realized ? through the help of his probation and parole officer ? that if he didn't start to make changes, he would end up in the juvenile detention center in Miles City, and probably jail later on.

"It gave me no choice," he said.

At the beginning of his junior year, Vielle said he didn't quite have a 2.0 GPA and counselors told him it was likely he wouldn't graduate on time. Going to college wasn't even in the realm of possibility. But he was ready to try. He started listening to his family and close relatives as they tried to reconnect him with his Blackfeet heritage.

He kept shooting photos for the yearbook and newspaper and Britton said she never gave up on Vielle, even though he continued to struggle academically. She knew his family and some of their story, she said, because Vielle's older brother Will had been in her class once.

"I was a little concerned. I was a little worried," Britton said. "I feel so protective of him because of his less-than-stellar upbringing. He's had to jump through a lot of hoops."

She was the only teacher over the years that Vielle said he never wanted to disappoint

"I decided I was part of something bigger. I realized I had a chance," he said. "(My family) made me understand I was pushing everyone away and pushing my culture away."

Britton knew photography was Vielle's gift and she'd heard about a Nikon-sponsored camp for minority high school photographers in Bowling Green, Ky. At the end of the last school year, she submitted his name for the all-expenses paid trip. Vielle doubted her, she said. Days before school was out, Britton said she found out Vielle had been selected.

He was one of only 10 high school photographers from across the country to attend the camp. He got to meet with Pulitzer-prize winning photographers, shoot photos with cutting-edge new Nikon camera equipment, and meet with senior photography students at Western Kentucky working on unique projects.

"When he got back we met for lunch and he was so excited he talked for three hours," Britton said.

He also came home with an idea.

"I wasn't blinded anymore. I wanted to do something with my life," Vielle said. "It was life-changing. Nothing else opened up my eyes more."

Vielle decided he would participate in English teacher Jamie McGraw's senior research project and he would make a photo documentary of the Blackfeet tribe.

"I wanted to use my photography as something bigger," he said.

He wanted people to see the culture and traditions of Native Americans and not the stereotypes. He made his first trip to Browning last summer for North American Indian Days. It was his first trip to Browning since the fifth grade.

"I was introducing myself to my family, which was odd," he said.

But as he started shooting images of fancy headdresses, drummers and ornate bead work, Vielle realized he was uncovering more of his story.

"I am Native American," he said. "There was a whole other history and culture behind me."

Since starting on his senior research project, Vielle has made several trips to Browning. He now tries to visit once a month.

Not only did he meet family and take pictures, Vielle started taking part in cultural events. He learned his Blackfeet name and as part of his senior research project he spent time volunteering there by picking up trash along the streets in Browning.

He also joined the Indian Club at CMR and was quickly elected president of the club.

Throughout the year they've held fundraisers and held showcases on drumming, dancing, beading and other aspects of his heritage. They cut teepee poles and sold them to other organizations.

"I didn't want to be known for being a Native American," he said.

Now, he's proud of it. His camera helped him see that.

"I saw the beauty of it," Vielle said. "I neglected it for so long, and that was who I was."

Britton is still concerned about Vielle. She hopes that the people and things that once influenced her prize student in a negative way continue to stay at bay.

"My hope for him now is he truly takes what he's learned and runs with it," she said. "I'm glad he wandered into this room three years ago."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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