

Native American artist and musician Jefferson Greene works with students to connect art to history and heritage. Confluence in the Classroom is an educational experience that offers students "relaxed immersion" into the arts.

Photos courtesy of Amber Anderson



## A Confluence of People and Place

*Educational program brings generations together in art and culture*

By Drew Myron

What does it mean to live near one of the largest rivers in the nation?

For 12-year-old Oscar Thomas of Warm Springs, the Columbia River is an integral part of his heritage, and he now sees it in a new way.

Amber Anderson, a 4-H Club educator and afterschool program coordinator, recalls the moment of change. She and a group of students were on a field trip to Sherars Falls, a tribal site where Native Americans have fished for thousands of years. Among the cliffs, rushing river and rugged terrain, Oscar took pictures, exploring his surroundings frame by frame.

"Oscar really connected, not just with his culture but with the whole group," Amber says. "He really clicked with photography."

Not long after the field trip, he started his own business, creating postcards and calendars from his photographs.

"That day was a real full-circle moment," Amber says.

The seeds for that moment were planted by Confluence, a nonprofit organization that connects people to place through art and education. Working in collaboration with Northwest communities, tribes and artists, the organization aims to create awareness and appreciation of the Columbia River system. This is achieved through public art installations, community events and educational programs.

"Our mission is in itself a confluence of history, cultures and the environment," explains Colin Fogarty, executive director of Confluence.

Confluence in the Classroom, the organization's educational arm, connects

a native artist or "tradition-keeper" with a classroom to conduct a meaningful project about the Columbia River. To encourage a deeper understanding of place and identity, students learn and take part in storytelling, mural painting, mask making, weaving, dance and music activities.

In 2016, thousands of students from 11 schools on both sides of the Columbia River worked with native artists and elders through Confluence in the Classroom.

Now in its second year, the program at South Wasco School has brought students together with Warm Springs artists to learn traditional and contemporary Native American culture.

Confluence classrooms are typically located in underserved communities, where creative opportunities have diminished, and inspired, diverse

educational experiences are limited.

Warm Springs has one of the highest poverty levels in the state. About 4,000 people live on the 43-square-mile reservation.

"We're very rural," says Amber, who lives in Maupin and works with South Wasco County schools to offer the Confluence in the Classroom program. "Our kids come from a 90-mile radius and ride the bus to school."

With just two schools, Maupin Grade School and South Wasco County Junior/Senior High School, South Wasco County School District encompasses the entire southern region of Wasco County, an area of about 600,000 acres.

Students come from a smattering of small communities, including Wamic, Tygh Valley, Simnasho, Shaniko, Pine Hollow, Sportsman's Park, Wapinitia and Pine Grove.

Here, the Confluence program is an educational experience that offers a "relaxed immersion" into the arts. Students ages 9 to 14 meet after school twice a week for eight weeks.

Visiting artists include Jefferson Greene and Brigette McConville, both of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs.

Jefferson, who grew up on Warm Springs, graduated from Portland State University with a degree in business and marketing, and returned to the reservation in 2008. He immediately saw a need to reach and engage young people.

"I see so many youths fall victim to oppression," he said in a story that appeared in Bend's "The Source Weekly." "They're told by their parents and grandparents, 'You're not going to be anybody.' It's sad."

Jefferson hopes to offer a new message by connecting art to history and hope. As part of the Confluence program, he led students in making and painting their own drums, and encouraged them to tell their stories through music. As part of the experience, each child received their



**Left, Katie Veek puts her personal touch on her drum. Students in the Confluence program are encouraged to tell their stories through music and art.**

**Below, Brigette McConville, visiting artist and member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, teaches students to weave baskets.**



own hand-carved flute.

"They loved it," says Amber. "Playing the flute was a big deal."

It was a new experience for the children in large part because the school does not offer art or music classes.

Brigette taught the students to weave baskets, and they created storytelling collages through photography.

The culminating event was a dance and music presentation, combined

with the school-wide powwow that was performed for the community.

"The artists really got engaged and became mentors to the kids, and the kids got really connected and attached," says Amber. "This program shows how art can impact people's lives in different ways, through different mediums." ■

*Learn more about Confluence at [www.confluenceproject.org](http://www.confluenceproject.org).*