

“She Was Not Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf”

Darnella Frazier, the teenager who filmed George Floyd’s murder, reimagined as Red Riding Hood.

The first (almost) year of the covid pandemic, I stayed home a lot with my then 7 year old child and my husband. My whole world had recently been flipped upside down by the death of my teenage son and so I didn’t fear the uncertainty of what the actual covid disease was going to do to me or my family, but rather I was afraid of not having enough time to myself to grieve while I shared space with my family nearly 100% of the time, especially in those first months. Being in uncertainty, with unanswered questions, having to adapt to a different lifestyle, and having no idea when things would be “back to normal” was already my lived experience for two whole years at that point.

What I ended up turning to, what I’ve always turned to in time of stress, was art. Since childhood, I have created stories, used writing, dance, sewing and visual art to process trauma and pain. I would describe it as a natural turning towards creativity, not a forced plan of action. I think it is human nature, it’s in our very DNA to do what our ancestors have always done. Being creative is Being Alive. Not all of us have the opportunity or the privilege to set aside time to practice art, yet it somehow comes out anyway. Humans grow food and plants, sing as they commute to an office job, generate ideas to make life easier and more enjoyable, make people laugh, and add color and texture to the world every day. Creativity can be useful, healing, and inspiring. Sometimes we don’t even know what our human drive to create inspires in another human.

So, I took out all my art supplies, sat down on the floor and created. My son and I painted, made collages, mixed things together and made a mess. Often his work would inspire me and vice versa. I spent much of my young adulthood teaching preschool and raising children, an act of extreme creativity itself, but I didn’t see myself as an artist. As I was able to practice art during those many months at home, I posted photos of it online and was surprised by the positive response. I eventually started exploring with cutting shapes out of cardboard boxes. Did anyone else have a surplus of cardboard boxes from ordering things online after the stimulus money came in? I did! I found that I loved cutting out the shapes and hand painting each one, arranging the small pieces to create a layered look. Over the pandemic, I began to identify as an Artist. It isn’t my profession or how I make money, it’s just part of who I am.

When I saw the photo of Darnella Frazier filming Georg Floyd’s murder with the camera on her phone, I was struck by how young and brave she is. I was in a middle of a series of Goddess paintings made from cardboard. I was commissioned to do a few, but mostly created the goddesses after women who inspired me and gave them away to their rightful homes. As soon as I saw the first photos and articles about Darnella, I was inspired to create her with cardboard. I had been wanting to do a Red Riding Hood piece because I was also doing art at the time that re-imagined the princesses and female characters of my youth as who they truly could be: powerful women. I immediately saw Darnella as Red Riding Hood. Imagine, a 17 year old girl of color, a child still, planting her feet in the ground as a black man was murdered by a police officer in front of her. Please read some articles about her! Her video footage was a large part of how justice for George Floyd’s murder came to be.

I believe that it is the responsibility of white people to take action to make this world a more equitable place for everyone. The first step is learning more about what white privilege is and what small actions we can take to repair the damage that has been done in this nation to people of color. Even the smallest steps counts. There is no shame in being white, in the knowing of the damage that has been done. Leaning in towards the truth can put us on the path to a more equitable future.

My hope is to sell my Darnella Frazier piece and donate the proceeds to Title Track, a local organization that is doing the work of creating this equitable future.

--Tracy Smedes-Hepler



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