

A DEER IN THE SPOTLIGHT

By Katherine Brodsky

Mohawk Girls, APTN's critically-acclaimed series about four young Mohawk women trying to navigate life and love, was a long journey for Tracey Deer.

She came up with the idea for the show nearly a decade ago, as a 26-year-old documentary filmmaker. A Mohawk girl herself, at the time she was going through the same experiences that the characters on the show were – as were her cousins, friends and sister. In fact, Deer was witness to so much chaos going on around her that one day it led to a dangerous thought: “Oh my God, this is a television show.”

So Deer began taking notes and scribbling observations. During that time, she made several docs including 2005's *Mohawk Girls*, and 2008's *Club Native*, an emotional experience.

“When it was done, I could not fathom taking on another three-year documentary journey,” she recalls, “I had hit a wall.”

And there it was, Deer's original dream staring straight at her. As a 12-year-old girl she would often fantasize about creating drama one day. Documentary was a detour she fell in love with, and the films she made served as inspiration for the TV series she was thirsty to make since they, too, dealt with themes of identity, belonging, and the female perspective within Deer's community. These were themes Deer was eager to tackle through a different lens. She found herself at a crossroads – with journals full of notes and observations in hand.

Club Native won two Gemini Awards, but Deer was seen as solely a documentary filmmaker. With no track record in drama, she had a big hurdle to overcome. So, she decided to do it on her own by launching a production company, Mohawk Princess Pictures, applying for a Canada Council for the Arts grant and producing a short 15-minute film that she was then able to take back to companies and say: “Here is this idea that I think would rock as a television show. What do you think?”

Deer brought the project to Resolution Pictures with whom she had previously collaborated and they loved the project. Timing is everything and, at that time, Aboriginal People's Television Network (APTN) had a request for proposals due in just a few weeks – the rush

was on to package, pitch and write the pilot.

Cynthia Knight, who had previously collaborated with Deer on an NFB short, was brought on board to help write the pilot.

“It was such a great, fun experience working with Cynthia,” recalls Deer. “When we were under this big tight deadline, I called (her), told her what was up – the concept ... she was always very, very encouraging and interested in the concept – and [she] jumped right on board.”

Once the series was given a green light, Knight was to become head writer/showrunner and co-executive producer alongside Deer, who would also direct. Together, the duo formed the creative backbone of the show.

“By the time we started working together on *Mohawk Girls*, it was fantastic because we already had sort of a language together,” recounts Knight.

Together, they were able to come up with a pilot pitch package, written in just two weeks. They submitted it along with Deer's short film to give the broadcaster a taste of what was to come.

Their pitch strategy? *Sex and the City* on the rez. It was the ‘instant identifier’ that gave an immediate sense of tone, while situating it in a very different world from Carrie Bradshaw's Manhattan. “For APTN, they're really, really interested in grabbing a bigger audience,” explains Deer. “So, for them, I thought it was a very clear way to sell the project to them and then to the bigger audience.”

Too often, Canadian audiences are weary of aboriginal shows, associating them with being negative, dark or guilt-inflicting, she says. “So, the whole *Sex and the City* pitch on our part is again to relax people and let them know they're in for a good time.”

There are many complicated issues surrounding native people, but there's more to them than just newspaper headlines. “That's [only] one part of their existence,” says Knight. “It's like taking any group



Cynthia Knight (left) and Tracey Deer (right).

of people. There's so many layers and complexities and different points of view.” To be able to show that to people in a light, fun and entertaining way was an exciting opportunity and a chance to reach out to a wider audience, she says.

Monika Ille, executive director of programming at APTN, was excited about the prospects for *Mohawk Girls* and the subjects the series was poised to tackle through humour and diverse female characters. This was also a show that targeted an audience of young women, something Ille felt was valuable for the network. So she said, “You know what? Let's do a pilot.”

The network invested \$250,000 in a half-hour broadcast pilot. Deer and Knight were determined to make the limited budget work, pulling in numerous favours. It worked – the pilot received a very positive response.

Mohawk Girls, however, sat in queue for about two years. APTN already had a few successful shows on the air and didn't have the resources to add another. “We couldn't just dump a show to pick up another one,” says Ille. “So, you kind of had to wait.” Ille asked Deer and Knight to stay patient: “I told them ‘Trust me. It's going to happen; it's just going to take some time.’”

“Cynthia and I – we were just like, oh my God, it might happen or it might not. It might take 10 years,” recalls Deer. They lived in what felt like perpetual limbo.

APTN also needed to secure a broadcasting

partner to get the production budget to where it needed to be. That broadcaster was OMNI.

“They understood that it's not just for native people because it's [about native people],” says Knight. “I mean look at *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*; it resonates for everyone because it's universal ideas and certainly universal to any minority. Their journeys can resonate with us all.”

Deer agrees. “There still is this perception that we're very different from one another, that there is this big divide, but, really, we're not that different at all.”

“You know, other broadcasters out there don't seem to have an appetite for strong aboriginal content,” says Ille, who added OMNI saw beyond that and understood the universality of the series.

And then it happened. “Then it was like OK ... let's make the show,” says Deer. “It's been a ride ever since.”

In spring 2013, they made the first seven episodes. The network loved them and decided to do six more, to release them as a series of 13. “We are now writing another six,” says Deer.

Deer considers the show to be a “dramedy.” Although it has its share of dramatic moments, the series is also very funny, grounding its comedic chops in character-derived humour rather than superficial set-ups.

“We always wanted things to feel true to the character and have the comedy and the drama really