PS: Pam Sari
TL: Tetia Lee

PS:
Hi, everyone! This is Pam Sari from the Asian American and Asian Resource and Cultural Center. I hope you’re doing well today. I am here with Tetia Lee, the CEO of the Tippecanoe Arts Federation, so we’re going to talk about her work. So hi, Tetia, how are you?

TL:
I am really well, how are you?

PS:
Doing good! So let’s start with an introduction about your life. I actually watched a presentation where you expressed your gratitude for the public arts program when you were little, and that got me - I really wanted to know you, and that’s why I contacted you. So can we start with an introduction about your life, your childhood, and how you got interested in the arts?

TL:
Sure, so I give a lot of credit to obviously, my grandparents, specifically my maternal grandparents. They came over and opened up the first Chinese restaurant in Northwest Indiana. So that was called Cam-Lan. Some folks are still somewhat familiar with it because it was also referenced in the movie A Christmas Story. So at the end, when the dogs eat the turkey and they have to go somewhere for Christmas, they end up going to a Chinese restaurant. So that was kind of modeled after my grandfather’s restaurant because the author of A Christmas Story, the short story - Jean Shepherd, also grew up in Hammond, Indiana. And so that’s where the basis of our family in the midwest really started. All of my family is artistic, so my grandfather, my grandmother - culinary geniuses. My father’s a chef, my mother was very artistic and actually the first drawings that I saw were her’s, from her sketchbook growing up. And living so close to Chicago, the Art Institute of Chicago was my second home and provided a lot of education, a lot of influence into my life. And really, my parents have always been supportive of pursuing the
arts, despite my best efforts to just be that bad kid and be like “I’m gonna go to art school” but they were fully supportive of it. So I felt at that time, because they supported my decision to go to art school, that I really needed to be successful with it. I had some wonderful professors that helped me to perfect my craft so I’m a classically trained painter, and really with the style of the academy is my background. When I’m not doing Arts Administration, I’m painting and I’m also doing sculpture. So right now I’m basically a collector of art, this piece right here. I came here 12 years ago to work for the Tippecanoe Arts Federation. Essentially, it’s an organization that’s part of the state’s regional arts partnership program, and that’s something that I’ve been involved with for the last 23 years. My influence really for pursuing the arts, was making that transformative difference. So I was definitely in a position in my life where, with two parents out of the house because they were trying to provide food and shelter for us, and also provide my brother and I with a life that was less difficult than the life that they and their parents had to deal with as first generation. Or as immigrants over to the country. So one of the things that helped me refocus my life was the arts, because it was something that again my family had been supportive of. My teachers had been very complimentary of, and it gave me a path in the life that I could have easily gone to jail or ended up dead somewhere from making really bad decisions, but the arts showed me the right path. And they gave me something I was very passionate about and a way to express myself when words failed me. So that expressive nature was the biggest draw for me and being able to share my sort of visual vocabulary with other people and for them to understand the point of view is just something that got me really excited about the arts in general and obviously being very active in the community for the last several years has helped me just continue to remain educated on current trends and also those individuals that the artists of the past that have influenced where we are right now. Especially during this time of COVID where artists are working and a lot of the most incredible, thought provoking work comes out of instances like this. Just snapshots in history that really cause us to think deeply about who we are as a society and as a people.

PS:
I really like that story and if I may backtrack a little bit - when did you realize, I mean, you were always surrounded by people who were very supportive and early on taught you the love of the arts - how did you decide to make it your own pursuit after that, what did you do - maybe through your schooling, your education. . . How did you make it your own?

TL:
Yeah so -

PS:
Did that happen?
TL:
Yeah, and again, it’s the best story but it’s my story. So K through 12 was very active in taking the arts as an elective. Part of the honors society and all of those things, right, and then it came to making the decision about college and I didn’t have a college fund. My parents weren’t able to set up a college fund for me or anything, I am the only person from my immediate family to have gone and to have graduated from college. And again, I was again, not a great story - I was really just trying to see if my parents would get a rise out of me saying I wanted to go to art school. I was shocked, genuinely, when they were like “Yes, we support you.” At that point, I said, “You know what? If they’re being supportive of me going to art school, I have to make a success out of this.” And that’s really the turning point. During my undergraduate, it was still kind of seeking out which specific discipline, which avenue of the arts I wanted to pursue. And again, that’s evolved over time. When I graduated with my Master’s, I thought I would teach at the Universities, and I did that for 5 years. But I was also working perhaps three or four other jobs, and one of them was with a not-for-profit arts council, which I had done as an intern my senior year of high school, for an arts council. That work felt more fulfilling because the work that we were doing was filling the gaps of young people like me who weren’t brought up with privilege or with means. For all intents and purposes, I grew up very poor. But my parents worked very hard, so that’s still in me - a really strong work ethic. But I wanted to really provide those opportunities to other young people so they would also have an alternative path to getting into trouble, which was where I found myself. As a teenager, really angsty and being a minority in a predominantly white community, but having the great fortune of living so close to a major city where I saw that those things and those amenities existed, but it wasn’t on an everyday basis that I was interacting with individuals of color.

PS:
That’s wonderful, and that made me think - did you also realize at that point, that connection between your racial identity and maybe ethnic identity and the arts as you do it, as you get more involved? How did that look like to you?

TL:
Well I think as I’ve gotten older, I’ve gotten more aware of my cultural background, if that makes any sense, because for a long time, I think it was just wanting to fit in. When I was young, I think like most kids, I was just really trying to fit in. Most of the people around me were all white, and I was very fortunate to not be bullied at school. I can probably count the instances where I was aware of being discriminated against on my hand, fortunately. It was a different situation for my brother, who was bullied a lot in school. As I’ve gotten older, I recognize - and maybe more so in this community - how much I was missing out by really not embracing my cultural heritage. Anything that made me different I was super self-conscious of. My mom would send me to school occasionally with a bao, and I remember one time a friend of mine bit into it
thinking it was just like a dinner roll, and she made this terrible face, and I felt embarrassed and I started just eating school lunch instead of bringing my own, because of that hyperawareness. But I find that I’m rooted now in my culture and that I’m very proud to have the upbringing that I had, and that I am an advocate and I will call people out when they are discriminating against folks of color. Because I recognize that educating myself about this institutional racism that is in our community, how much harder we as women have had to work, we as minority women have had to work - or I came into this town, I was 12 years younger, and just that discrimination with being younger and having to prove myself 300 times more than a white male. And the roots of that are in the fact that my family immigrated here and they wished for something better for this next generation and I feel like in order to honor their sacrifice and their struggle, I absolutely have to be loud and proud about all the great things that they have made me.

PS:
That’s beautiful, Tetia. And as you talked about the food, the school and food that you bring from home, we actually yesterday for our social media, our AAARCC staff decided to do a challenge among ourselves to make something that’s rooted in Asian and Asian American food. So we bake, we cooked, and then we asked people to vote which dish that they want us to create over on our YouTube channel. So that was really nice and when we were talking, we actually discussed - okay, we are not doing this just for fun, but what are some of the experiences that we had around food and being mocked, bullied around what food we brought from home, that came up quite a bit. So ultimately what you just said - yes - that’s really true. So everyone of you watching this, and you have not followed us, we are @Purdueaaarcc and you can see some of the stories we talked about. So Tetia, and after that, how did you become involved with the Tippecanoe Arts Federation? What’s that story?

TL:
So I’ve been working in the not-for-profit sector for over 20 years and just working for different regional arts partners. Each one of us is responsible for a geographic location in the state of Indiana. So we have 92 counties, the Tippecanoe Arts Federation is responsible for 14 counties, including Tippecanoe. Prior to me being here, I have worked with three other partners. One in Northwest Indiana, then one in Terre Haute by Indiana State University, not the other school, and then in Portland, Indiana, which in on the Indiana-Ohio border. And the language that the state uses is unique. So when my previous boss got a call from the search committee from the Tippecanoe Arts Federation, they said “We need help here. We need a director. We need someone who is familiar with the state rules, guidelines, regulations and vocabulary.” So they called him three times and then finally said “You need to send her over.” So he actually kicked me out of the nest to come over to Lafayette and I didn’t know I was going to be here that long, but I do really like the community and I’m very close to family and also my in-laws. But just far enough from each so they don’t just drive by the house, so it’s perfect.
PS:
Perfect! So glad you’re here!

TL:
Yeah, me too.

PS:
I want to know about the Tippecanoe Arts Federation itself. Can you tell us more about the work that you do?

TL:
Sure! Well probably the thing that most folks know about is the Taste of Tippecanoe. Most folks don’t know that it is 1) a fundraiser for the arts and cultural sector, not only just in Tippecanoe County but our entire service area and is the single largest fundraising event for the arts in the entire state of Indiana. So it’s raised millions of dollars over the years. It would have been 39 this year, if we had held it in regular outdoor festival environment. We’re really promoting the culinary arts, which are probably some of my favorites because I love to eat and also performing arts. Whether it’s a musician, an actor, or folks that are visually putting artwork together, we have all of those featured there at the Taste. In addition to that, we do a craft beer festival on top of the parking garage and that’s Tap for TAF, really a partnership with our craft brewers around the state. Our gallery walk series which happens three times a year, in May, July, and September, and that’s where we’re opening up Downtown Lafayette and partnering businesses with artists so they can either perform in front of their venue or hang artwork in their establishment. We also have an exhibition series that goes on in our building, so every month we’re flipping the exhibit so we feature three or more artists in our galleries at the Wells building. And then our arts education programming is really intended to meet the needs of our at-risk and underserved populations. We have the after school arts program, which we call ASAP and so those are free classes to young people that are just really interested in learning more about drawing, painting. We have two turntables so they can learn how to DJ and like scratch records and stuff like that. They can learn to play the guitar, the ukulele, the violin - all of these things which are again very accessible for some but if cost becomes an issue, then obviously our benefit is - I’m sorry, I think I lost you.

PS;
Oh no, I’m here.

TL:
Okay, sorry, someone’s calling. I’m sorry!
PS:
You’re fine!

TL:
But then we have our outreach lending library, instrument lending library. So for any young person is in school and is enrolled in band or orchestra, they can borrow an instrument from our lending library for up to seven years or until they graduate high school. And you know, instruments can be really expensive, young people can be very fickle about which instrument to play. I know - I played the flute, percussion, and the piano and just ended up painting instead, but that was probably a nightmare for my parents. And we have the mural program which, again, you mentioned my affinity for public art and that’s something that’s probably my favorite program, if I had to pick. And that’s just because it provides the arts and accessibility that level of equality to everyone. So it’s not making you feel uncomfortable by having to go into a specific location, you can really be anywhere and see it. Enjoy it, take a selfie with it - and I think it’s a really strong indicator of the quality of life that a particular community has in the investment from it’s leadership into its citizens’ quality of life. Because it really beautifies areas but demonstrates that it’s welcoming. So very important there. And then our visiting artist program which we have. We’re connecting with community centers, schools, and libraries to provide a professional artist in any discipline to their community because for instance, a majority of our communities that we serve are rural, so they don’t have organizations that are there with the capacity to teach how to throw on a ceramic wheel or do a raku firing so we’ll hire one of our artists and we’ll send them over there so they can share with that community and again, for us, it’s really about equality and making sure that we are really leveling the playing field for any community. So despite their isolated geography or socioeconomic status, we’re making sure that they do have access to the art and the ability to engage at a level that they’re comfortable with.

PS:
Those are amazing programs. And if later you would like to, maybe I can ask you to send some of these info on your website, links, resources that you would like us to include on our website, I would be happy to do so.

TL:
Thank you.

PS:
Yeah. Now with COVID-19 situation right now, how has this been impacting the work that you do? And if there is something you would like to announce also to our campus community, please do so.
Okay, wonderful. So unfortunately, yeah, we’ve had to cancel a number of events. The first that we had to cancel was our craft beer tasting. And we have subsequently had to cancel quite a few of our gallery openings and our building is currently closed to the public and to our membership. So we have over 200 organizations and individual artists that are members of the Tippecanoe Arts Federation that utilize our building as their hub, as their meeting place. So since March 16th, we’ve been closed, and as the Governor’s orders have been updated, we’ve also followed suit with that. We are looking forward to our July 17th gallery walk, which will be the first one that we’ll be able to offer and the first time we’ll actually be able to welcome quite a few individuals back into our Wells building. And then of course, June 20th, because we are unfortunately unable to hold the physical festival, the Taste Festival, we’re moving it online. So we want everyone to just tune in, it’ll be streamed live on Facebook, and it is free. If folks want to donate, that’s great, but we’ll be featuring six of our outstanding performers, local performers, that I know a lot of folks are missing because they’re not able to see them performing at any venue. We’ll be doing that, and we’re also going to be hopefully spotlighting a couple restaurants, demonstrating how they put together one of their signature Taste dishes. So yeah, tune in and learn a little bit more about the great resources we have in the community, the great talent that we have, and remind yourselves that the community misses you and wishes we could be right back with you.

Yes, so June 20th everyone! Do you know the time yet?

Yeah! It’s from 4 ‘til 10.

4 ‘til 10, Eastern Time, right?

Yes.

On the Tippecanoe Arts Federation Facebook account, is that correct?
Yes, and then we also have the Taste of Tippecanoe event page - it will be streaming from there, we’ll also be embedding it into our website, so if you don’t have social media, you can click on there and see us as well.

PS:
Wow, wonderful! Look forward to that - it will be on my calendar as well. So how can we as a campus entity, Tetia, be involved with the Tippecanoe Arts Federation, or how have you been working together and how can we continue to grow in our collaborations?

TL:
Well, I have found, and I think this is probably the same for you, that really, things that bring us together is finding that level of comfort. So I love to share in experiences where food, there was a point in time where food was something that would embarrass me very quickly, because it showed off my upbringing, but now it’s where I want to sit down and get to know people and really share in the fact that this is about my culture and this is what it tells you about me. And we have, because we do live in a diverse community, within the next five years of the Tippecanoe Arts Federation, one of our things that we really want to do is have wonderful representation from all of our community members. So in addition to me, we want to be reflective of the community that we serve. So I would encourage folks, that if you want to get involved with the TAF, with Tippecanoe Arts Federation, if you want to be on a committee, if you’d be interested in a deep dive in learning about our board of directors, we want to hear from you. I want to sit across from you, I want to learn more about the culture of all Asian countries. And for that sort of show and tell, that sharing - I think that builds a genuine relationship that I am really personally craving, and I think that more than ever, having that reflected in our community, especially with our organizations, is vitally important. We are very fortunate to have you and the Center here, and we need to take advantage of the fact that not every community has that resource. And so I want to be able to provide that platform for you and collaborate on as many efforts as possible so that we can share that and to show the rest of the state that we’re a model for the community that works together to be better.

PS:
Completely, I agree with you. How do you think the arts have impacted - what is unique about Indiana, our two cities, Greater Lafayette in general - how do you think art has impacted our cultural landscape? And actually, I need to mention that some of these questions come from our students. We have undergraduate student ambassadors who work at the AAARCC, and this particular one comes from Gwyn Condino. So Gwyn, thank you so much for the question.

TL:
Yeah, thank you for that, that’s a great question. So let’s just talk about the region of Indiana that we’re in. So Tippecanoe County, though many of you, especially if you’re from a different country, think that Lafayette is really a small city, but for Indiana and for this region specifically, it’s the big city. So essentially, we are surrounded by rural, very small populations of individuals that don’t have the resources that we do, so 1) by means of putting public art out, a lot of our communities are experiencing that for the very first time. How that changes the community landscape is they’re never thinking about artwork or having that sort of artwork and accessibility in their community or having those conversations that really trigger commerce. But again, when we’re looking to be a competitive workplace, recruiting and retaining folks, they’re looking at the arts to really elevate that. You could go down the side of most midwest cities and see that there are a lot of farms and corn and wheat and soybeans that are being grown. And then in our communities, you’re seeing a silo painted with a unique piece of artwork and that has really defined or made people take a look at what we’re doing specifically in this region. The fact that we’re able to partner two entirely different sectors, agriculture and the arts, to spotlight both of them, is really a unique collaboration that because of our strengths in this community, we’re able to celebrate in a greater capacity. I also think, for instance, some of the artwork that we put on Wabash Avenue, which hopefully everyone will go out and see those 52 murals that are up and down that street in Lafayette, so traditionally that community has been one that has a really storied past. It was founded really by Irish immigrants that immigrated here to work on the Wabash and Erie Canal, and they stayed. After that, there was an elevation in crime, for instance gangsters, like the gangs of New York, and it became a very unwelcoming neighborhood. And it had that reputation of being really crime ridden and unwelcoming that if it was past this time or you weren’t from there, you shouldn’t be there. So if you talk to individuals that have lived in the community for a really long time, they’re like “ugh, Wabash Avenue.” But we worked with the city and Habitat for Humanity and the Wabash Avenue Neighborhood Association 2 years ago to put these murals out there. And what really has happened is they have drawn on the fact that they can celebrate their history but also the artwork has made it safer. In our whole conversation about rolling this out for them, I asked the neighborhood association - “Are you okay with people who don’t live here being in the neighborhood?” and they had to come to some sort of positivity about having people into the neighborhood and since then, just in terms of numbers, we’ve seen property values rise from $80,000 - like medium property in that neighborhood - from 80,000 to now 120,000 in just the two years that we’ve done those murals. Many of the artists wanted to not only say “Yeah, this was built on the Irish Heritage, but also there is a rich history of Native Americans and this neighborhood, into the future, will be one that’s very diverse.” So you’ll see individuals that are painted that are people of color, and that’s really important because it changes the dialogue of that and makes it a more welcoming community for all of us to enjoy and it’s one of the hottest points for public art in our state.

PS:
Wow, the interconnectivity between the economy and diversity. You just said it beautifully.

TL:
It touches everything, and I think oftentimes folks don’t see the arts as doing that. But we do - we can be a great unifier.

PS:
Great, wonderful! Last question for you - I’m wondering if you can send some words of encouragement for our Purdue community who are watching who are currently having to be maybe away from each other because of COVID-19. What are some of the words of encouragement you would like to say to us?

TL:
I’ll be really honest - I think your 30s are going to be the best. Because you’ll be out of school, because you’re going to Purdue, you won’t have a lot of student debt because they’ve been able to keep the tuition at a level that is I think accessible for a lot of us, and that when you’re grounded and you’re getting this terrific education, you’re going to be employed at a job that’s going to afford you the opportunity to have the home of your choice, to be able to experience the rest of the world. So please travel and taste things that you never have before, and just really look forward to the bright, bright future that you will have and all the opportunities that you experience at Purdue and this community will afford.

PS:
Tetia, thank you so much for your generous time. I loved getting to know you, and we’ll talk after about how the AAARCC and Tippecanoe Arts Federation can collaborate more and more but just thank you. Thank you so much for your time.

TL:
Thank you, I appreciate it.