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Tyrown Waigana

NAIDOC Week 2020 poster competition winner

The man behind 2020's stunning NAIDOC Week art work, Tyrown Waigana, may have been headed for a career in plumbing if it wasn't for the keen eye of his high school design and technology teacher.

"My high school metalwork teacher, Mr Leach, saw some of my drawings and said: 'You know you're going to get bored with plumbing'," the Perth Indigenous artist, who attended Coolbellup Primary School, Coolbellup Community School and the now-closed Hamilton Senior High School, said.

"That was a turning point in high school because I was doing a traineeship in plumbing."

Mr Waigana, 23, chose to pursue his childhood passion for art and now is a professional multi-disciplinary artist and graphic designer who runs his own business.

Having produced works for the Aboriginal Health Council of WA, Australian National University and First Nations Justice Campaign, Mr Waigana's biggest accolade arrived several months ago when he was named the winner of the 2020 NAIDOC Week poster competition.

His piece, named Shape of Land, depicts the story of the Rainbow Serpent and how it came out of the dreamtime to shape Australia, creating all the features on the landscape.

"The figure in the middle is representative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people," Mr Waigana said.

"The brightly coloured lines on the outside is the dreamtime. The colours that reflect from the dreamtime on to the serpent and the person show connection between these elements."

Shape of Land was adjudged by the National NAIDOC Committee to have best illustrated the theme for 2020 NAIDOC Week: Always Was, Always Will Be.

"This country – since the dawn of time – always was, and always will be Aboriginal land," Mr Waigana said.

Mr Waigana said he did the artwork in one sitting and it took about a day.

The winner's title comes with a $10,000 cash prize and the invaluable honour of having the artist's work distributed and displayed in schools, universities, government departments, organisations and shopping centres across Australia.

"It feels really good to win," Mr Waigana said.

"It's given me so much exposure in a short space of time.

"I became a nationally recognised artist overnight and opportunities seem to be getting bigger and bigger."

The success has been a reward for a lifetime of hard work for Mr Waigana, who was born in East Fremantle and grew up in the surrounding suburbs of Coolbellup, Willagee and White Gum Valley.

"My parents instilled a lot of values in me that I carry to this day like (hard) work and resilience," he said.

"I grew up pretty broke in terms of money but I never felt poor because I grew up with plenty of love.

“My parents tried their best to give me and my sister everything we needed – we were definitely their number one priority.”

Art has been in the family’s blood and so it was natural for Mr Waigana to gravitate towards that.

“I’ve always enjoyed drawing and tried other forms of art like painting and sculpting,” he said.

“I think because a lot of my family members are creative people and I have been exposed to creativity being a necessity from an early age, it comes naturally to me.

“A lot of my family members paint and do other craft for cultural reasons but also because it was relief from everyday life.”

Along the way, that love and talent for art was identified and nurtured by state school teachers, with a primary school art teacher encouraging Mr Waigana to pursue art scholarships at the secondary level.

He was ultimately unsuccessful but says going through the public schooling system helped shaped his future attitudes and success.

“During high school I learnt that you have to be an optimist and make the most of what you got,” he said.

“Especially going to a school that was underfunded and on its last legs. You couldn’t look at the private school, newer public schools, or ones that had heaps of students with more funding than ours and think ‘We would be just as good if we had the same stuff’.

“I just had to think I’m going to be the best I can be.”

Mr Waigana regarded his overall school experience as pretty good.

“As an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person I felt very supported through my schooling and I think some of it was a privilege,” he said.

“There were teachers and support workers that put extra effort into the Indigenous student learning.”

Mr Waigana said he was looking forward to working on bigger and better projects as his art career progressed, including the publishing of his first comic book, a comedy loosely based upon his high school experience and life.

Authorised by Sally Dennis, General Secretary, The State School Teachers' Union of W.A.
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