

Greg Archuleta and  
Lifeways: Cultivating resilience  
through education

— *Steph Littlebird*



Tucked away just south of the Ross Island Bridge in a nondescript building off Barbur Boulevard is the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde (CTGR) satellite office, which serves Portland-area members. The Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community includes over 30 Tribes and bands from western Oregon, northern California, and southwest Washington. Some of these tribes include the Kalapuya, Molalla, Chasta, Umpqua, Rogue River, Chinook, and Tillamook. It's here where contemporary artist and CTGR member Greg Archuleta works, where everything he does is centered on protecting and restoring the history of Western Oregon's Indigenous people.

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde were formed when the United States government forced the aforementioned Tribes to surrender their lands and move to a remote Reservation in Oregon's coastal range. In February of 1857, Federal troops marched Indigenous people on a 260-plus mile trek from Table Rock, near present-day Medford, to the new Grand Ronde Reservation.

The original Grand Ronde Reservation was formally established by treaty and Executive Order in the Summer of 1857. Over the course of the next one hundred years, the Grand Ronde Reservation would be reduced from 60,000 acres to less than ten. This massive land theft occurred through various means, including treaty violations and land-grabs disguised as legislation, such as the Dawes Act of 1887.

In 1954, the U.S. government decided to abdicate its former agreements with Oregon Tribes, and Congress passed the Western Oregon Indian Termination Act. This era in Native history is known simply as "termination" because it severed the relationship between Tribes and the federal government in a visceral way, while also delivering yet another blow to these fragile communities.

As Grand Ronde Tribal scholar and Oregon State University professor Dr. David G. Lewis elaborates in his essay on the Termination era:<sup>1</sup>

During the post-termination period of western Oregon, native people appeared to cease to exist, and for twenty-nine years the Grand Ronde descendants suffered disenfranchisement, and a multitude of social problems. In this era, the loss of a tribal center caused a loss of tribal culture, languages, and caused fractures in the community fabric. Most tribal members lost their land and had to move to the cities to find work. Poverty and substance abuse was normal among the terminated natives, as they did not inherit land or resources sufficient to start over anew without federal support.

In the 1970s, many Tribal members became activists and began working to reverse termination. In late 1983, CTGR won federal recognition, and their rights as a sovereign nation were restored. In 1988, over 9,000 acres of the original reservation were reclaimed when the Grand Ronde Reservation Act became finalized. Following the reestablishment of the Reservation, CTGR focused on rebuilding its institutions and developing programs to meet the unique needs of their members.

What does it mean to reclaim traditions when traditional life was disrupted so violently by colonization? How does a community overcome intergenerational traumas while also restoring what was lost?

Greg Archuleta, the  
Confederated Tribes of  
Grand Ronde



Greg Archuleta,  
*Chinookan Figural Box Rattle.*  
Yellow cedar

Conditions

It takes many hands, many generations, the resilience of elders and their descendants.

After the restoration of the tribes, many Native activists came to work for these restored Nations in the administration of education and governance programs. Many people were involved in the reestablishment of the Grand Ronde community specifically, including artist Archuleta, who contributed specifically to traditional education and the tribe's cultural reemergence.

Archuleta is a descendant of the Clackamas Chinook, Santiam Kalapuya, and Chasta people. He was born and raised in the Portland area, spending part of his youth in a section of East Portland that was not yet incorporated, when it was still rural land. He went on to attend the University of Oregon, where he earned bachelor degrees in Journalism and Political Science.

In 1987, Archuleta moved to the Grand Ronde Reservation to work for the Tribe as a newsletter writer and hunting and fishing coordinator. Later he became an administrative officer for the tribe and worked in policy and planning before relocating back to Portland twelve years later. When Archuleta returned to the city, he realized that there were not the same cultural resources available to Tribal members who lived off-Reservation. As he explained in a recent interview, "We didn't really have any programs, we had social service support and things like that, but we didn't have any cultural programs, so that's when I decided to create the Lifeways classes."

In 2005, the Lifeways classes were born. As an instructor, Archuleta wanted to “emphasize and focus on giving Tribal members the opportunity to learn more about the culture and way of life (of the Tribes of western Oregon) ...and to emphasize those areas because a lot of the existing cultural programs were more general.” The guiding purpose of a Lifeways class would be to share traditional knowledge about ancestral foods, the cultural arts, crafts, and ecology while fostering a sense of community for all who attended.

Archuleta envisioned Lifeways classes to be different: informal, or “experiential,” as he describes. His approach to teaching enables students to explore various forms of traditional knowledge without the pressure of deadlines or assigned homework. Lifeways is an opportunity for students to follow their interests without a rigid curriculum. Students are allowed to explore and choose their own adventure: they determine the structure of their experience and what subjects or disciplines they explore. Along with these classes, Archuleta has taken students into the field to gather materials for projects like basketry, showing them how to properly acquire, process, and store natural sources like cedar bark and spruce root.

Through Lifeways classes, Archuleta also sought to develop more awareness around the unique art style of the Columbia River Tribes: “There was little recognition of the art form of the Columbia River Region, which is unique from the Salish and Northwest Coast, which kind of overshadows our area ... that includes working with basketry, carving, art design, and integration of the Chinuk Wawa, our language.”

Members of many Indigenous communities must grapple with the inheritance of intergenerational trauma. Often we are tasked with navigating multiple generations of oppression, along with unraveling our own. One of the ways Native people find the path toward healing is through the reclamation of culture and tradition. The Lifeways framework that Archuleta created goes beyond the confine of a “class,” and creates a tangible and lasting impact in the lives of Oregon’s Indigenous people.

In progress cedar hat,  
an example of a project from  
a Lifeways class

Greg Archuleta, *Daughter  
of Sun Returns to the Sky  
World*. Red Cedar, abalone, and  
acrylic paint



Conditions





Greg A. Robinson, *We Have Always Lived Here*, 2015. Basalt carving at the end of the Tilikum Crossing Bridge, Bridge of the People. Gift of the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde. TriMet Public Art Collection. (Photo courtesy TriMet)

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Art and design is an important aspect of traditional knowledge that is shared in Lifeways classes. Early in the program's infancy, Archuleta recruited his friend and fellow Chinookan carver, Greg A. Robinson. Robinson, a former Chinook Nation Tribal Council member, teaches the carving style of the Columbia River people. His masterful works are permanently on view at the Multnomah Falls National Scenic Park in Oregon and the Parkersville Historic Park in Camas, Washington. Visitors can also see Robinson's 7,000-pound basalt statue, representing a Chinookan chief with his people, adorning each side of the Tilikum Crossing bridge that connects Southwest and Southeast Portland.

"The Gregs," as the co-instructors are fondly referred to by their students, were friends first. They met while learning the Tribe's language, Chinuk Wawa, together at the first CTGR Portland office. Together, these two men have fostered a real sense of community and belonging for many of Grand Ronde's urban members. They've created a space for cultural learning and personal growth to occur simultaneously. The Lifeways class is also a place of connection for other people outside of the Grand Ronde community. Many artists from other Tribal nations and places like Hawaii have visited the class to share and learn over the last fifteen years of Lifeways's legacy.

Archuleta is a humble man; his modesty is disarming. But he's among the most respected and knowledgeable Indigenous artists of western Oregon. His work is featured in the Portland Art Museum's Center for Contemporary Native Art. In 2019, Archuleta was selected as a contributing artist for the Exquisite Gorge Project, a massive 66-foot steamrolled relief print project orchestrated by the Maryhill Museum of Art in Washington state. Additionally, Archuleta is part of the Confluence Project, "a community-supported nonprofit that works through six art landscapes, educational programs, and public gatherings in collaboration with Northwest tribes, communities, and the celebrated artist Maya Lin."

While contemporary Indigenous life has changed greatly since first contact, our culture continues to remain dynamic and resilient. The Grand Ronde Lifeways class moves beyond the constraints of Western formalities to give students a sense of belonging and purpose outside of a life prescribed by the dominant culture.

1 Lewis, PhD, D., 2018. Lewis 2008, *Termination of The Grand Ronde Tribe*, Chapter 1. [online] QUARTUX. Available at: <<https://www.ndnhistoryresearch.com/2018/08/08/lewis-2008-termination-of-the-grand-ronde-tribe-chapter-1/>>

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