

# THE STAR

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## CANADA

# Indigenous dancers are sharing videos made in self-isolation to help people get through the pandemic

By **Omar Mosleh** Edmonton Bureau

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Laryn Oakes was nervous at first. The 23-year-old champion powwow dancer has performed at and won competitions across the continent but never on the middle of a bridge in the dark of night.

“We literally waited until about 1 a.m.,” Oakes said, explaining she and her friend had hoped by that time there would be no vehicle traffic on downtown Saskatoon’s Traffic Bridge.

“I thought, what if the cops come, what if I get in trouble? And my friend reassured me. He was like, “This is our land. You’re dancing ... you’re doing something positive.”

As she started to perform the women’s fancy shawl dance a week ago, her arm outstretched, her regalia swirling, her thoughts turned to her culture, her ancestors and her mother.

Least of all, a global pandemic that has changed everything for everyone.

“That didn’t even bother me,” Oakes said. “I was just happy to be in my outfit again.”

Laryn Oakes performing the woman’s fancy shawl, a traditional Indigenou...



Oakes was performing the dance and recording the video for the [Quarantine Dance Specials 2020 Facebook group](#), where Indigenous people from across North America have been posting videos of themselves performing traditional dance while in isolation.

Oakes's video has proven particularly popular, gaining more than 5,000 likes as of Sunday.

Oakes, a seasoned powwow dancer who hails from the Nekanee First Nation in southern Saskatchewan, is of Plains Cree, Meskwaki, Navajo and Nakota ancestry. Like many people, she says the COVID-19 pandemic has caused her a lot of anxiety, but she said being able to dress in her regalia and dance has been therapeutic for her.

"It kind of takes people's minds off what's going on in the world. It definitely did that for me," Oakes said. "That short period of time of getting ready, getting my hair braided to do this video, I was at ease. I kind of forgot about the whole virus thing."

She said powwows are a way to gather with friends and family, honour ancestors and celebrate life. Even though her performance was just her and her friend recording the video, it was still uplifting.

The Facebook group was created March 24 and now has roughly 40,000 members.

"I was thinking maybe three or four hundred people would join. I wasn't expecting 30,000 plus," said Tiny Rosales, an Ojibwe woman who started the group. She lives in Milpitas, Calif.

Rosales said she finds powwow dancing therapeutic for her and offers an avenue for prayer. So when she saw powwows and gatherings being cancelled, she thought encouraging people to record videos of themselves dancing in quarantine could help others through this difficult time.

"I've watched some of these videos, and I've cried. And that's healing within itself. But if that person can make me cry, imagine that beautiful feeling he's feeling while dancing," Rosales said.

It's not just about the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional benefits of powwow dancing, Rosales said. Like at traditional powwows, there are cash prizes for best dancer in various categories.



“One of the reasons I started with the money as well, was not only when we do specials (at powwows) we do monetary gifts ... but there’s people who are home with no jobs right now,” Rosales said. “People still need to eat.”

The prize money for the specials comes from donations from families, contributions from the American Indian Cultural Center in San Francisco and Rosales’s own family. The prizes typically range from \$100 to \$500 for first place.

Oakes says she’s been dancing since she knew how to walk and learned from her mother, who was a seasoned champion powwow dancer. Oakes said she dances because it makes her feel beautiful, confident and strong, but also to honour her mother and grandparents.

She said she remembers her grandfather, Gordan Oakes, watching her dance as a child. Her grandfather was a chief of Nekaneet First Nation and has a building named after him at the University of Saskatchewan, where Oakes graduated.

It’s a source of deep pride for Oakes, and she says she continues to dance to honour her late grandpa. She says her grandmother still enjoys seeing her perform at powwows.

“Knowing that my dancing makes her happy and brings her good feelings, that’s what motivates me to keep on going.”

Oakes’s video had two components – one on the bridge and one in front of a monument to missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in front of the RCMP building in Saskatoon.

“I thought it was important to also pay recognition to this other major pandemic we also face on a daily basis,” she said in her Facebook post.

As a young Indigenous woman who has had friends murdered, she says it's an issue she thinks about a lot. The monument was inspired by a woman named Amber Redman, who was murdered in 2005. Redman was also a powwow dancer, and her mother reached out to Oakes after she came across the video.

"She sent me a message and said I'm glad you did what you did, for honouring my daughter," she said. "That made me feel really good."

Other Indigenous Canadians who posted videos to the group told the Star about the healing effect dancing and sharing the video provided them.

Pamela Demas, from Winnipeg, explained that Indigenous peoples harvest their medicine from the ground and that dancing is a way to connect with Mother Earth.

Demas, a jingle dress dancer of Dakota ancestry, posted a video of her children dancing in regalia.

"I miss powwows now because the energy of other dancers and knowing everyone is there with a good heart to heal. Seeing my kids dance makes me proud of who we are," she said.

Derek Silver, a member of Sumas First Nation who lives in Abbotsford, B.C., said he grew up immersed in Indigenous spiritual beliefs but didn't really start attending powwows until about three years ago. He was surprised to see the video he posted of him dancing garner about 900 likes.

"I was really happy with how everybody took it, and that it was just all positive feedback," Silver said. "Everybody was telling me how great a blessing it was and how I spread healing to our world."

Silver, who served as a pallbearer at a funeral this week, said he also posted a video to give strength to his friend who lost a loved one.

Oakes acknowledged there are many reasons Indigenous people partake in traditional dance. She's grateful for the Facebook group for spreading positivity during such a difficult time.

"It's definitely bringing a lot of good feelings around Indian country."

**Correction - April 15, 2020:** This article was edited from a previous version that misstated the name of University of Saskatchewan.



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