

# WSBANAKI

Phil Lavoie

I've always had a passion for skateboarding. When I was younger I wanted to make skateboarding videos; I've always liked filming my friends and me skateboarding. Over time our videos got more popular, and we started using our website name as kind of an impromptu brand name and selling T-shirts and baseball caps online, with our basements as mini-warehouses. Over the past ten years, that handful of T-shirts has grown into hundreds, and a clothing company was born. Today, we sell our products at our shop in Montreal and in over forty countries. In the meantime, I've discovered new passions, such as design and marketing.

When it comes to celebrating Indigenous artists or entrepreneurs, it's important to celebrate the work of those who promote Indigenous cultures that are millennia old, which should be preserved as much as possible. However, and I say this in all humility, I believe it's also good to celebrate the art and work of Indigenous people that doesn't necessarily look like what our ancestors created. Making skateboarding movies, creating

urban clothing... It's not very traditional, but it's just as authentic.

In other words, the more we know about our culture, the easier it is to integrate it into our art. For many reasons, including historical reasons, not everyone draws inspiration solely from traditional Indigenous culture. It's important to remember that those people are just as Indigenous as anyone else, no matter what style of art they practise.

If we never mention our origins, we forget them, we lose contact, we speak less to each other... And we speak even less in Abenaki or in other Indigenous languages.

I'd never spoken publicly about my Abenaki heritage until recently, largely because I did not consider my art to be Indigenous enough. I realized that by talking about it, no matter how much our art or entrepreneurship is linked to traditional culture, more people can identify with it, we come together, we exchange and teach each other our own culture. That's part of being a leader too. It's about community.

It's never too late to learn about your culture. I grew up in the city, I had never spoken the language, and I started working on my company by making skateboard movies. It doesn't necessarily sound like an Indigenous story, but you know what? It is.

For a few months now, I've been taking an Abenaki language course, and I'm really proud of that. I encourage everyone who reads this to sign up for language courses too. There aren't a lot of us at the moment who are taking Abenaki classes, so each person has a big impact in preserving our language and culture.

There are so many different challenges for Indigenous leaders and artists. For me, the issue of language survival is crucial. I'd really like to contribute as much as possible to the preservation of the Abenaki language, which is literally on the verge of extinction. The number of people who speak it in Quebec can be counted on the fingers of one hand, so there's a lot of work to be done. And for me, well, it's like skateboarding: it's more than a passion, it's a mission.