

# The Art of Work/ The Work of Art: Interview with Brad Bonaparte

by 4th Grade Students at PS 78, Long Island City, New York

*In 2007, Brad Bonaparte, a Mohawk artist and high steel worker, visited two 4th grade classes at PS 78 in Queens. Working with City Lore teaching artists Lu Yu, Louis Mofsie, and Michael Taylor and classroom teachers Rose Zelwinder and Soula Kammas, the students created a play based on the history of the Iroquois people in New York State. This is an excerpt from the interview.*

**B**rad: My name is Brad Bonaparte, and I am from Akwesasne, a Mohawk reservation on the Canada/US border - where Ontario, New York and Quebec all come together - that's where I live. A lot of the men in my community are ironworkers. I am Onandoga, and my clan is the Snipe clan. Your clan goes through the mother's line. About 200 years ago, during the wars, like the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, there were a lot of refugees. A refugee is somebody who leaves their homeland because of war. There were a lot of refugees who went up to Akwesasne.

## Cultural Education

When I was in school we didn't do anything at all with our culture. Even though the class was all Mohawks, it wasn't something that was promoted. We never did Indian dances and we didn't have any language until we got into about 6th or 7th grade. In fact, in Grade 7 we studied New York State history and in our history books there was a little paragraph about the Indians in New York State, and that was about it. It said that when the American Revolution happened, the Mohawks fought for the British, and when the British lost, all the Mohawks moved to Canada. And I remember asking the teacher, "Well, if they all moved to Canada, how come we're all living in New York State?" Of course Canada is only about a mile away, but we're all living in New York State. I said, "We're all here in New York, how come the book says that?" And the teacher had no clue. He



Brad Bonaparte talking with students at PS 29

Photo by Makalé Faber

said, "Oh, I don't know, you'll have to ask somebody else." That was about our exposure for our culture in school. Now we have schools on the Rez that have Mohawk immersion from Pre-K up. They speak Mohawk all day. The teachers are good Mohawk speakers. My kids just had a Christmas concert, and they sang all their songs in Mohawk. So, it was kind of cool.

If you're told all your life, like my parents, my grandparents: "forget about being Indian, forget about your culture, you be as white as you can, forget about all your ancestors, forget about your language, forget about the clans, forget about the ceremonies, go to church - do this, do that, like everybody else," it makes people very sad inside. You may think you're not sad inside. But, you lose so much. You lose pride in who you are, in who your people are, and all the different things that your ancestors have done to get you to where you are today. So now we have a lot of things going on for our children. We have young people that are real successful, very educated, doing amazing things - very cool, cultural things.

## Ironwork

In construction, I work as a connector.

Connectors are the two guys who set all the steel. They're the first to start putting the steel up. They stand a column up. They stand another column up. Then, they take a beam and connect the two columns together. When you're working with a connector and you're partners, you can start to read each other's minds. You can do things with just a nod. You can point with your lips. That's a big thing in Indian country; everybody talks with their lips. They do a lot of pointing with their lips even if their hands aren't busy. When you've got a good connector, when you're working tight and you're working together you can communicate without any words. Just the very briefest signal.

When you're up there on the iron all day, you get real tired. Some guys'll get up there with fresh legs, and they'll be running all over you and you'll be like, "Aw man, we've been up here hanging on all day," because literally you are hanging on. But you walk on the pieces, and you get used to it. If it's a shorter piece, it's nothing to walk across steel like that. It's pretty solid. But, when we've got a steel beam up there, usually there's only one bolt in the thing. So, it may flop back and forth like this. So, you walk on that. Generally it's not going to go anywhere. But some jobs you have real long trusses -- in the ceiling you have a real long piece - and, that thing gets going, whoosh, whoosh. It swings back and forth. And, that's a little freaky to walk on.

**Student:** How do you walk on it?

**Brad:** You just got to get used to it. I can't really explain it. You have to try to get the rhythm of the wave, because the wave is going like this [motions back and forth] You can't just walk in a straight line 'cause you'll miss it. You've got to be able to catch it on the wave, as it's going back and forth. So, you walk like this.

**Student:** How do you keep your balance?

**Brad:** I don't know. You hope. You just kind of hope.

**Student:** Do you put your arms out?

**Brad:** Once in a blue moon, you'll see somebody put their arms out. But, everybody really rips on them if they go across like that. You don't want to do that. There's little things you can do that aren't written in any books. You don't learn them in a class. You don't learn them in a course. You learn them by experience. You have to do the job enough, and you learn them by keeping your mouth closed



*Students perform a scene about Mohawk high steel workers.*

Photo by Amanda Dargan

and your ears and eyes open. Because you got to listen to the old timers. That guy over there may look like he's an old guy, and you think he can't do nothing, but, he's been ironworking for 30 years. He's got experience. He's seen a lot of things happen. He knows what dangerous things are. He knows what things are easier to do, an easy step. He's got a lot of tricks in his pocket. He knows all these little things that you just don't learn in books.

There's an apprenticeship program for steel workers today. But back in the day, even when I got in, you just get in there and you learn. I've been very fortunate. There's always friends and family. There's uncles and relatives on the job, and they're always watching out for you. You go back to the apartment and they teach you how to tie knots and teach you the language and hand signals. Eventually you catch on. I go by the rule "it's better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool then to open your mouth and remove all doubt." So you just keep quiet, you just listen, and you learn. You try to figure out who's full of it, and who's the serious guy who really knows his business. I've had good partners that were really good, and we got so we could communicate really well. When you're doing ironwork, communication is utmost. It's a loud, noisy job, and sometimes you can't hear each other. So, hand signals are important and being able to read each others' moves is real important.

### **Danger on the Job**

**Student:** What building were you working on when you fell 37 feet?

**Brad:** I don't remember the name of it. It's in Yonkers somewhere. But, I've worked on the Condé Nast building, right in

Times Square. It's pretty big. I worked on the Ritz Carlton Central Park South. I worked at Ground Zero. I worked on a number of buildings around town.

**Student:** How did it feel when you fell?

**Brad:** I don't remember the fall, but I'll tell you one of the scariest things that ever happened to me. I was in a building in Times Square, on 6th Avenue and 60th Street. We were working on the roof of the building moving gigantic chiller tanks. The building is 50 stories tall, and they have these big tanks the size of train locomotives that keep the building air-conditioned. We had to build a crane on the edge of the building that goes up. It's called a "Stiff Leg Derek." I had to climb up the outside of the thing, so I was actually sticking out from the building, 50 stories straight down to the street. I had to climb up the mast to the top, and, I had to hold a big pin - it's like a big, gigantic nail. It weighs about 40 lbs. Where there was a big connection cable, there was a big hole, and then there was another part of the crane that comes up and locks in. There's two holes. So, we've got the two of them lined up, and I got to hold that pin right there for this guy to hit it with a big sledgehammer. He's on the other leg, and he's got to go "BAM." We didn't have safety harnesses on. Today, you've got to have safety harnesses on. If you ever see a crane, you'll see that there's these different X's on there, braces. So, I climbed up there, I locked my legs into those braces, and I'm holding onto that pin.

He's up on this other ledge, quite a ways away. Just before he swings - he's already hit it a few times, and, I'm just going like this [head turned away] because it's so loud, my eyes are closed -- his foot slipped, just enough so that when he came down instead of hitting the pin, he missed and hit me in the shoulder sending me right off the building. But, my legs were locked in, so I went backwards, and it was just like electric shocks going through my body - bzzzz bzzzz bzzzz. But I remembered I had that big pin. And if I dropped that, it would've gone through a car, then

## **Making Connections with Guest Interviews**

Interviews rich in details and personal stories offer many entry points for making personal, cultural, artistic, and curricular connections. The students who interviewed Brad looked for material to incorporate into a scene about high steel workers in New York. At a City Lore artist meeting, we used Brad's interview to explore ways to make connections between these personal narratives and our art forms. We proposed a scenario:

*You arrived for your weekly residency workshop to find your students interviewing Brad Bonaparte, a Mohawk high steel worker and artist. The students are clearly fascinated by their guest and the interview takes up most of your allotted time. With only 20 minutes left, you realize that to hold their attention you need to make a connection between the interview and something you are teaching in the residency. What connection will you make?*

We played Brad's interview and discussed connections. Cecilia Ortega, a Mexican dance artist, connected Brad's skill in reading and anticipating his partner's movements and a dancer's ability to anticipate movements of other dancers. We discussed this skill's importance in other traditional music and dance forms, such as Puerto Rican *bomba*, where drummers are judged by their skill in anticipating the improvised movements of the dancer. Dancer Carrie Stern would mine the interview for possible dance movements but she also noted the skill of communicating with your body rather than with words. And Margaret Yuen, a Chinese dance teacher, saw a connection to work - both to the traditional dance movements connected to work and to the work skills required to learn and create art, such as listening, observing, practicing, and collaboration. George Zavala, a theater and visual artist whose students often create art based on family stories and interviews, saw connections to the influence of cultural traditions and occupational skills and materials on Brad's art work. We ended with a discussion of the people and experiences that influenced our career choices and art forms.

- Amanda Dargan

*Please turn to page 24*

## The Art of Work

*continued from page 9*

it would've gone through the street, it would've gone right down to the subway. It would've killed whoever was down there, and probably me too, when I followed it down.

My legs are locked into the thing, and I leaned way backwards, holding the pin on my chest like this, so I was just about upside down. I remember everything was just like flashing lights in my eyes. He reached over and just grabbed my shoulder, the one he had just hit with the beater. And, he yanked me back up. He says, "What can I do?" and I says, "Take the pin!" So, he took the pin, and I took my other arm, and I just locked myself in there. I just hung on there 'til the flashing, 'til the pain kind of went away. I ended up staying there 'til we got the pin back in the hole. It took me about 15 minutes to get over the fact that I just got hit with a beater and almost sent off the building.

### Art Work

**Brad:** I've painted murals. I've done a lot of graphic design, posters and illustrations. I've made a lot of traditional crafts, baskets, some quill work. I've done some carving. I stopped working in steel after the accident. Then I started doing sculpture, and I really liked it. After I got hurt, I took a metal sculpture class, and I was like, this is pretty cool. This I know; I can handle steel; I know how to move big pieces. I can make anything I want. I can pull the right team of people together. I've got a vision, and this is how we do it. All my latest projects have been real team efforts. I have a group of guys with me. They love it. It's totally different from anything they've ever done. They get to build some really cool things.

**Amanda:** How does your culture influence your art work?

**Brad:** My culture influences everything I do. Sometimes I try to do things that are totally outside the box, but it's a stretch to do things that have nothing to do with my culture, with Native things. It's just the way I think. I have sketchbooks that are 25 years old. I go through them, and I see all these drawings and little sketches I did for projects. At the time I didn't realize it, but I was making them to be sculptures someday. I was thinking in the three-dimensional world and I can make that now.