My Journey:

My name is Melissa-Jo Belcourt, known as MJ, my mixed Métis heritage is Mohawk, Cree and French.

My family's ties are to the Michel Band and the Lac St Anne Métis community. This land, this territory is my home, I was born here Amiskwaciy-wâskahikan / $\ \Box \cap b \cdot \cap \ \Box \cap b \cap \ \triangle b$ (Edmonton), but we moved frequently, keeping within the boundaries of Alberta.

I always knew I was Métis, and felt like there was more to know about my bloodline. So in my 20s, my creative journey began...

I believe we are drawn to something through our blood memory, which is the genetic connection to the teachings of our ancestors. It's the idea that we carry ancient memories in our DNA, so naturally, I was drawn to the traditional arts of my ancestors.

In 1989/90, I was introduced to a program that offered everything I needed to get started in learning the art of the Nehiyawak. I learned to appreciate and honour the natural laws of this land, and through the teachings, I gained the appreciation that art is spirit. As we are born in the creators' image, we too are creators... and as an elder once told me "we are all walking pieces of art"; an honour indeed.

I met my mentor and teacher, the late Elsie Quintal of Square Lake from Northern Alberta. I spent each fall at her home for four years learning the art of tanning hides in the old Cree way. This truly is where my gratitude and respect for traditional art forms stem from.

To me, hide tanning is the authentic foundation that holds all other natural art forms. Such as porcupine quill work, moose hair embroidery, caribou hair tufting, fish scale art, and beadwork. These art forms adorn bags, moccasins, dresses, shirts, leggings, and much more.

We become educators through our art because every piece communicates knowledge of our land, our language, our beliefs, our stories, and our ways of being. It's been a privilege to learn and teach these traditional skills. By passing on the knowledge and teachings, we mentor our youth to ensure this knowledge isn't lost to antiquity.

Thankfully, I had the opportunity to work at the Royal Alberta Museum for a number of years, working in the education department delivering school programs to children. Being in the Indigenous gallery, to visit the collections where our ancestors' works can be viewed and studied, was a great inspiration.

I gained such an appreciation for the work the curators do and for giving me the opportunity to investigate. I was always amazed by the intricate and beautiful artisanship of exquisite pieces in the collection being preserved for future generations. Hands that make are the hands that love.

An artist's work can be very solitary and sometimes lonely, but it can also be a calming form of meditation and therapy.

As for most of us, we love what we do, and it is our passion that pushes us onward. And as 'Art Creators' and 'Art Lovers' we find in our humility the encouragement and support to keep doing what we love.

Often, we are motivated to create, so we can sell our artwork to pay bills, and we are very thankful to those who appreciate what we do by purchasing our work.

As the Indigenous Artist-in-Residence for the City of Edmonton, I am thankful for the opportunities, such as this one and many others, that have broadened my horizons in furthering my art experience. It's been my pleasure.

And to every artist:

- Keep creating
- Keep telling your stories
- Keep educating
- Keep shining

AiyHiy,

MJ