

ALERT | TOP STORY

Allegations that prominent Madison artist masqueraded as Native American spark outrage

Melissa Perry
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Members of Madison’s academic, artistic and Indigenous communities are investigating accusations that a prominent artist has been masquerading as Native American and benefiting professionally, financially and socially.

Kathryn “Kay” Le Claire, who co-founded an Indigenous-owned tattoo shop and sold art and spoke on panels as a representative of the Indigenous community, held a grant-funded position at UW-Madison since March of last year. Le Claire was scheduled to speak in January in conjunction with the opening of an exhibit at the Chazen Museum of Art about reciprocity in Native-land relations. That event has been canceled. Le Claire also no longer has an ownership stake in the tattoo shop, its co-owner said.



Kay Le Claire, who was also known as nibiwakamigkwe, outside her former tattoo shop on Williamson Street in 2021. Le Claire is accused of misrepresenting herself as a member of the Indigenous community.

ADDISON LATHERS, THE CAP TIMES ARCHIVES

“This really violates any trust that was built up within the arts community,” said Jennifer Bastian, director of the arts nonprofit Communication, who knew Le Claire.

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In a statement, Le Claire apologized and pledged to follow the direction of the Native community to move forward.

For at least five years, I claimed Onyota'a:ka, An

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Sussex native's identity is known. Court records from past traffic citations identify Le Claire as a white female. Former friends and associates say Le Claire uses they/them pronouns and identifies as Two Spirit, a term used by some Indigenous communities to describe someone who identifies as both masculine and feminine.

In recent years, they spelled their last name as one word, although the family name appears as two words in Le Claire's high school yearbook, court records and old newspaper articles.



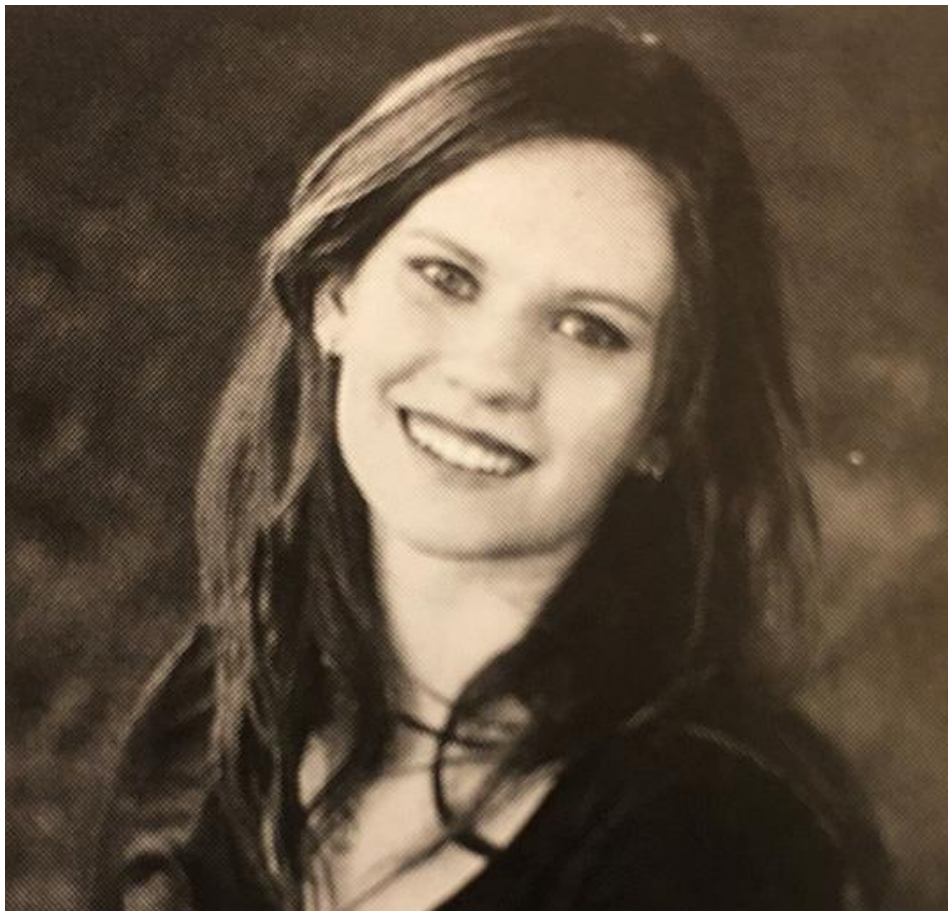
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"I've heard a lot of anger and betrayal and there's also a feeling of sadness and loss," said Kristie Goforth, a member of the Sault Tribe of Chippewa Indians who is running for mayor in Monona and is a former friend of Le Claire. "They were a big part of our community. It's a big circle of grief."

Questions about Le Claire's identity first surfaced in late November on the online website **New Age Fraud Forum**, which works to expose racial hoaxes. An anonymous user who goes by the handle "advancedsmite" posted quotes from Le Claire publicly claiming Native ancestry, along with publicly available genealogy data such as obituaries and census records that suggest several of Le Claire's ancestors come from Germany and are white.

As first reported by **Madison365**, Le Claire graduated from Hamilton High School in Sussex in Waukesha County and attended UW-Madison.

Efforts to talk with Le Claire for this story were unsuccessful. On Wednesday, a Wisconsin State Journal reporter went to their house on Madison's Near East Side and spoke with Le Claire's husband. After speaking with his spouse, he said Le Claire didn't want "to make things worse" and declined to be interviewed.





Kathryn "Kay" Le Claire's 2012 high school yearbook photo
HAMILTON HIGH SCHOOL

Soon after, in response to an email, Le Claire sent a message from an email account with the name nibiwakamigkwe — an email address Le Claire intends to shut down, according to a note Le Claire's husband handed the newspaper. Le Claire said they were recovering from a concussion, limiting their ability to communicate verbally, but provided the same statement given to Madison365.

"I am sorry. A lot of information has come to my attention since late December. I am still processing it all and do not yet know how to respond adequately," the statement read. "What I can do now is offer change. Moving forward, my efforts will be towards reducing harm by following the directions provided by Native community members and community-specified proxies. Currently, this means that I am not using the Ojibwe name given to me and am removing myself from all community spaces, positions, projects, and grants and will not seek new ones. Any culturally related items I hold are being redistributed back in community, either to the original makers and gift givers when possible or elsewhere as determined by community members. Thank you."



Boxes of items from Kay Le Claire, former co-owner of giige, wait to be sorted at the shop on Williamson Street.
AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

The fallout

The allegations have set off a bombshell in Madison's Native queer, artistic and academic communities. In 2022, Le Claire was named the first **Community Leader-in-Residence** at UW-Madison's School of Human Ecology, a position that was funded through the university's Equity and Justice Network.

Wednesday evening, UW-Madison's School of Human Ecology said in a statement that Le Claire resigned from the residency on Dec. 29, two days before it was set to end. Le Claire received \$4,877 in private gift and grant funding, the university said.



“We are deeply concerned about allegations that a community member with whom we have partnered misrepresented their identity and engaged in disingenuous actions,” the statement read. “The School of Human Ecology and its Center for Design and Material Culture do not have plans to further collaborate with LeClaire and have not acquired any materials from Le Claire for its Helen Louise Allen Textile Collection.”



Le Claire, as nibiiwakamigkwe, when she was a community leader-in-residence at UW-Madison's School of Human Ecology. Le Claire resigned from the residency on Dec. 29, two days before it was set to end, according to the School of Human Ecology.

UW-MADISON

Le Claire also has ties to the Overture Center. In 2021, Le Claire, as nibiiwakamigkwe, was a featured artist in Overture's "Everything COVID" exhibition, providing a native "jingle dress" adorned with bells meant to capture the prayers and intentions of visitors. But the dress was actually made by another artist who makes powwow regalia, according to **Madison 365**.

The Overture Center has contacted the artist who made the dress and said it was working to make sure that the person receives the proper credit and compensation.

'Shocked and disappointed'

"We were shocked and disappointed by the evidence that an artist misrepresented themselves and their work, and we are investigating the issue," Overture spokesperson Shari Gasper said in an email to the State Journal. "The Overture Center would never knowingly work with an artist who misrepresented their credentials or background. We are reaching out to the Indigenous community to apologize, and we extend our apologies to the community as a whole."



Hundreds who struggled to find work find new passion at Just Bakery

Melissa Perry

"While we are diligent in our efforts to research performing artists, it appears that this person went to great lengths to deceive the Overture Center and ultimately our community," the Overture Center said.

Le Claire, who positioned herself as a knowledgeable Native artist, academic and social justice advocate was frequently written about and quoted in local media reports related to Madison's Indigenous community under the name nibiiwakamigkwe, **including in the Wisconsin State Journal**.

On Tuesday, Tone Madison, an online news site that covers culture and politics, apologized to readers and issued a retraction of two stories involving Le Claire, including an opinion piece the artist wrote, also under the assumed Ojibwe name.



After hearing about the allegations, Tone Madison Publisher Scott Gordon said he felt an obligation to take accountability in the role that Tone Madison played in giving Le Claire a platform. Going forward, Gordon said, Tone Madison is discussing making its coverage more inclusive, including not relying on a single source to speak to the issues of many.

'Lying about everything'

On Dec. 31, giige, the tattoo parlor that Le Claire co-founded in 2020, announced the studio's separation from Le Claire.



Earrings from Kay Le Claire, former co-owner of giige, are cleaned at the shop on Williamson Street.
AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

When co-founder Nipinet Landsem, who uses they/them pronouns, first read the post in the New Age Fraud Forum, they said, "I immediately believed it." The tattoo shop and artists collective was also started by Mar Gosselaar and Bear Cunningham.

"I thought, 'This matches up with what Kay has told me,'" Landsem said. "This matches up with the documents that I have for them as the person who does all the finances in the business. I completely believe this. They're lying about everything."



Artist's roots in Trinidad bring vibrancy to paintings of humanity's shared experiences
Melissa Perry

One of the first red flags, Landsem said, was that Le Claire liked to tan — a lot. Landsem had even given Le Claire rides to tanning salons because Le Claire said they had a vitamin D deficiency. But then Landsem and others started noticing that Le Claire would also carry around a bottle of spray tan.

Landsem explored Le Claire's now-deleted Facebook page and took screenshots of old photos of Le Claire with fair skin and light hair.

Landsem, who is a member of the Manitoba Métis Federation, also noticed that Le Claire would make inaccurate statements about Métis culture.

"They claimed to be Métis, and I'm Métis," Landsem said. "They told me a bunch of weird stuff about Métis culture and I was like, 'Well, you don't know what you're talking about.'"

But until the recent revelations, Landsem said, she gave Le Claire the benefit of the doubt. Defining someone's Native ancestry can be complex, they noted.

"The legacy of colonialism has left a lot of Indigenous people disconnected. A lot of people don't have super accurate information on their family," they said. "I'm assuming that you (Le Claire) are just stepping out of your lane as a disconnected person."

Currently, giige is collecting and redistributing the cultural items that Le Claire was in possession of to Indigenous community members.

'I didn't want to believe it'

Goforth first noticed that Le Claire often went out of the way to wear traditional regalia. Landsem said Le Claire would often encourage, and sometimes pressure, others to do the same.



Nipinet Landsem, co-owner of giige, cleans make-up off earrings from former co-owner, Kay Le Claire.
AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

"They dressed very Native forward, and that's not something you see a lot," Goforth recalled. "I remember being with them once on Monona Terrace and they were all dressed up and it was beautiful. I remember strangers coming up, asking if they could get a photo with them. I chalked that up to their role at UW and wanting to be very much out there as a Native representative."

Artist Jenie Gao, who worked with Le Claire and considered them a friend, was initially shocked by the allegations.

"I didn't want to believe it at first. It was just too big of a lie to comprehend," she said. "Now in retrospect, I can think of times when they would say things that seemed a bit odd."

Gao, who has written about Le Claire on **Facebook**, said it's not up to Madison's Indigenous community to repair the harm that many are accusing Le Claire of causing.

"Madison is always ready to take credit for uplifting BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and people of color] voices and gets very nervous about accountability for any fallout," she said. "Part of why I said something as somebody who's a person of color but not Indigenous is because it shouldn't be on one community to solve these problems."

State Journal reporter Samara Kalk Derby contributed to this report