

• Meet the Author •

Lee DeCora Francis

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit www.tonibuzzeo.com).

Grades
K-2



Lee DeCora Francis comes from the Penobscot Indian Nation in Maine and the Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska. She teaches at the tribal elementary school located on her reservation. She lives with her husband, two sons, and cat on a small island in Maine. *Kunu's Basket* is her first children's book.

***Kunu's Basket* seems like a very personal story. Is that true? In what ways did you draw on your personal, family, and tribal experiences to create this culturally rich story?**

LDF: *Kunu's Basket* is very personal. Many Penobscot people, including my grandparents and great-grandparents, supported their families by making and selling baskets. My great-uncle made large utility baskets his entire life, and I admired him for having that knowledge and always maintaining a connection to our people and homeland. He and my oldest son had a unique relationship, something truly special. In my culture, traditional knowledge being passed down from one generation to the next is extremely important. Extended family and the relationships that exist between our youth and elders are also significant. I had hoped to capture all of these things in this story.

As I read the dedication in *Kunu's Basket*, I see that it is dedicated to Ben, your Kunu. Tell us more about Ben and why you dedicated this book to him.

LDF: In my language, *kunu* means my first son. Ben is my first son, my *kunu*, and starred as one of the main characters in the story. Since I was writing a story based on

his relationship with my uncle, I believed it would be a great way to honor and recognize the wonderful person he is.

In the text of *Kunu's Basket*, you write that the men in Kunu's family were known "on the island" for making baskets. Tell us more about Indian Island, your island home.

LDF: Indian Island is one of many islands that currently make up my tribe's reservation lands in the Penobscot River; however, our ancestral homeland was much larger. My



people have lived here for thousands of years. We are very connected to this land and water. Everything in our culture is connected to this place.

I know that you are a teacher. What subject and which grades do you teach? Tell us more about how your work as a teacher intersects with your work as a writer. Did one lead to the other? Do they work well together for you?

LDF: I teach Native Studies to children from Early Childhood through the eighth grade. I also teach reading in our middle school. Finding culturally appropriate materials regarding Native people can often be difficult. A bigger challenge is trying to find books that pertain to my people in Maine. I wanted the children of my community, and other tribal communities, to be able to have a story that they could relate to, that reminded them of someone in their lives and of their home. This inspired me to start writing.

Kunu's Basket is your first published book for children. What has been the most exciting experience about being published? What has been the most surprising thing? What has been the most satisfying thing?

LDF: One of the most exciting moments I've had was receiving my first copy of *Kunu's Basket* in the mail, signing it, and presenting it

to my son. Sharing the book with the children in my school and the people of my community has been very satisfying. Many people have shared the connections they've made to the story with me and explained how it reminded them of a special person in their lives. I've heard many wonderful compliments and have been surprised at the amount of support I've received from people. This whole process has been a wonderful experience.

What are your plans for future books? What would you most like to write about? Will you continue to publish only picture books, or might you try your hand at something longer?

LDF: I do have more stories to share with people in the future. Most of the ideas I have relate to Native people in some way. I'd like to continue publishing picture books but would like to also try writing for an older audience as well.

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Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is both an author and a career library media specialist. Her credits include the 2013 Caldecott Honor Book One Cool Friend among nineteen picture books, which also include But I Read It on the Internet! (Upstart, 2013) and Just Like My Papa (Hyperion, 2013). She has also authored many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.