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Jihan Gearon shifts her focus to creating art, opens new exhibit Nov. 4 at Historic Ice House in downtown Flagstaff

Nov 1, 2022

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Jihan Gearon's new exhibit will open at the Historic Ice House in downtown Flagstaff Nov. 4. "Surrender: Quarantine Quest Wisdom" is Gearon's answer to questions surrounding job burnout and the COVID-19 pandemic. (Photos/Amy Martin)

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FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. — When local activist Jihan Gearon, known for her work with Black Mesa Water Coalition, struggled with questions surrounding job burnout just as the COVID-19 pandemic was beginning, she found purpose in turning those questions into art.

The result is an exhibit, "Surrender: Quarantine Questions Pandemic Wisdom," that opens in partnership with Culture Connections AZ at the Historic Ice House in downtown Flagstaff.

The opening reception takes place Nov. 4 from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. at 201 E. Birch. The event will feature live music from the Ginger String Quartet. Tickets are required.

Audra Travelbee, executive director of Culture Connection AZ, said the exhibit illustrates what Culture Connection AZ's mission is.

"We are absolutely thrilled and honored to partner with Jihan on this exhibition, as it speaks to the core of our nonprofit's mission to foster awareness and understanding of different cultures," Travelbee said. "Through this work, we hope to increase connection and compassion within our community."

Gearon said after 15 years of advocacy and about eight years spent as executive director for Black Mesa Water Coalition, she felt the organization achieved major goals — shutting down mines and two coal-fired power plants.

"I felt like it was a good time to let go," she said. "It was a soul-searching type of moment, transitioning out of work, [with] environmental justice work being a huge part of my entire adult life. That was the moment that started this whole art journey for me."

Gearon won the NDN Collective Changemaker Fellowship award, presented to people who have been social justice activists and leaders in the social justice movement. NDN Collective selects recipients regionally.

"I was selected from the Southwest and that was awesome because without that I wouldn't be an artist at the moment. Because it gave me time off, to not worry about the rent, especially during that pandemic time when everything was already so worrying," Gearon said.

The money that came with the fellowship gave Gearon freedom — freedom to find what she wanted to do like take a writing class or hire a personal trainer so she could move around because she was not sitting at a computer all day.

It also gave Gearon time to think about the future.

"I was really asking myself questions like, 'What do I really want to do? What brings me happiness? What makes me feel free? What makes me feel excited?'" she said. "When you have dedicated yourself to the social justice world, that kind of service-orientated thing, it's really hard to then look at yourself and [ask], 'What do I want? What do I think I need?'"

Gearon said she always wanted to create art since she was a little girl. But, in college as a science major, there was no time in her life for art. After college, there was work. But now she had time to explore art.

"I think I discovered not only that I have a talent for it, but that it is something for me that I want to be a major part of my life that I like doing," she said. "I feel it is part of my purpose along with protecting water and protecting the Earth. [This time] has really been trying to figure out how to bring those two worlds together."

At first, Gearon worried and felt that there might not be space in her life to engage with helping the community as she had done with her social justice work. She struggled to figure out how she could tie art to that work.

But the art she made for the exhibit showed her a tangible way of elevating both art and social justice.

"That's what the show is," she said, "an opportunity to share what I've learned through that whole journey of the past few years."

The journey included transitions and the impact of COVID-19, along with learning, experimenting, playing and teaching herself how to paint by creating images that reflect the path Gearon has taken.

"The things I've learned and the questions I still wrestle with are all a part of that," she said.

Tickets are available at www.cultureconnectionaz.org and include appetizers and drinks. All proceeds go toward supporting Culture Connection AZ's continuing efforts to provide opportunities for local artists and other members of the community.