



Artist as Leader: Wes Studi and DeLanna Studi

*For more than 30 years, Wes Studi has been an indelible presence on American film and TV screens, starring in such blockbusters as **Dances with Wolves**, **The Last of the Mohicans** and **Geronimo: An American Legend**, in which he portrayed the title character, as well as in numerous television films and series. A lifelong activist, he currently serves as the spokesperson for the **Indigenous Language Institute**, which works to ensure that cultural practices and identities are passed down to future Native generations in their respective communities' original language.*

*Like her uncle, DeLanna Studi is both a performer and activist. She has acted on stages throughout the country, and in 2018 she performed at Triad Stage in Winston-Salem, NC and Portland Center Stage in Oregon in **And So We Walked: An Artist's Journey Along the Trail of Tears**, a play she wrote based on her experience walking the 900-mile Trail of Tears in the company of her father. The chair of the **SAG-AFTRA Native Americans Committee**, she also mentors young Native artists through a variety of initiatives across the country.*

*In this interview, Corey Madden, who developed **And So We Walked** with DeLanna and directed its recent productions, learns from the Studis how they found themselves in unexpected positions of leadership and discusses the tools they've developed along the way to remain effective and impactful artist leaders.*

Corey Madden: Wes, talk to me a little bit about how you became an artist, how you became an actor.

Wes Studi: I actually ... not really stumbled onto... I actually directly went into this idea of becoming an artist, which was not on my mind primarily, you know, becoming an artist. I just wanted to see what it was like, if I could learn to be an actor. As time went on, no one ever said, "Hey, you're good at this. You should do this." On the other hand, I kept auditioning and getting picked for stuff. So I figured, well, if that's the case, I might be able to do it on a grander scale.

I started out in Tulsa, OK, doing stage stuff, community theater, that kind of thing. After a while, it was pretty easy for me to get a job. I just had to take it on my own recognizance that, "Yeah well, I guess I might be pretty good at this."

CM: So your talent picked you.

WS: [Laughing] Okay. Alright. Yeah.

CM: Did you have at some point any mentor in your career, or did you really carve out your career? Are you in a way the first in a generation of people to do what you've done?

WS: I think I'm the first one to become involved in performance like this, yes. Beyond music. My dad liked to play and was in a band and all of that. But as far as performance as an actor, I think I'm the first one in the family. Both sides of the family.

CM: DeLanna, I know that Wes played a role in you being mentored in the beginning of your career. Could you just talk a little bit about that? How did that influence you?

DeLanna Studi: Well basically I wanted to be an actor at a very young age, and Wes had proven that it could be done. So I think the reason why my dad let me go to Los Angeles and try to be an actor is he knew that people could make a living out of it. Wes went to Los Angeles and he didn't lose his head, so my father assumed that I would go to Los Angeles and not lose my head.

Of course, when I got to Los Angeles, Wes connected me with Sheri Foster, who has become my Cherokee auntie. She helped me along the way as well. One of the things my dad always taught me was, whenever you go to a new place, if you find the Native community, you're going to find home. And so I was able to connect with some of Wes' really good friends, who now have become like family members and mentors for me and helped shape the career that I have now.

But I would not have been allowed that opportunity if Wes hadn't been successful. Because that was just too much of a risk for a little Oklahoma girl to go to Los Angeles by herself.

CM: So it really sounds to me like you [Wes] were leading before there was a group to lead, and then as soon as there were people to follow, you were a good leader. You were a leader of other people who wanted to be actors, who wanted to have a career as artists.

WS: Yeah, I suppose so. That would be after the fact.

CM: Were you considered a leader before you yourself realized you were one?

WS: Yeah, I think it's totally true. I didn't go out there to gather a following to be a leader or anything. I went out to work and ... Early on people began to think or talk about things like, "Well, wow, you could be the next Will Sampson." And then I thought, "Well, wait a minute, wait a minute." I had to remember something that he actually said in an interview: "Don't be the next Will Sampson. Be yourself."

On the other hand, it's kind of at that point that people began talking about role models and all that. At first, I totally rejected the idea. "No, I'm not going to be your role model." It's an uncomfortable place to be seen in or to be placed in, in that you think you have some sort of responsibility. Actually you don't. [Laughing] It's not like they're asking you to raise their kids or something, you know? But sometimes it feels like it, you know? It can be uncomfortable. In my own mind, it'll be judged somewhere in the future as part of your legacy. Your legacy will be made up of what you did and what you said, not who you are. That's mainly all you will ever hear at a eulogy, that's all that's going to come up is: "This is what you've done over your lifetime." But I think very few people actually are doing it to become a leader.

CM: DeLanna, as a young person you were told you would be a leader, and it has been challenging for you to believe in that. I'm wondering if you could think a little bit about this, this idea of what does it mean to find yourself being told that you're a leader, being thrust into greatness, leadership. What does that feel like?

DS: Well, it's a lot of pressure. I'm the chair of the SAG/AFTRA National Native Americans Committee, and I didn't lobby for that position. I was basically thrust into that position, because no one else wanted it. No one else was available, and so I got thrown into it. You have to learn on the job. Even though I didn't think I was qualified, the rest of the committee thought I was, and so I had to live up to their expectations.

And so I feel in a weird way for me being a leader is living up to other people's expectations and learning to meet them for myself and also challenging myself to be more. Like Wes was saying about the role model, I feel that's a lot of expectation to have on you, because people think role models are flawless, and the truth is we're human beings. We're beautifully flawed. I think the best way to be a leader is to not hide away from your imperfections but to show that you have them, that you can overcome them, and that everyday we're trying to be our best selves and sometimes we fail at doing so. Yet we still show up, and we still put up the good fight.

My father told me I would be a leader when I was younger. I didn't hear *leader*. I heard *warrior*. I heard, "You're going to be leading fights. You're going to be taking the charge." And so for me that's what that is: being able to show up and speak out for those that aren't speaking or speak out for those that cannot speak or champion the underdog. That's basically what I view as being a leader, not necessarily sitting at a boardroom. It's also showing up and being active and not asking the people that are on your committee or part of your team to do something that you wouldn't do yourself.

CM: I'm wondering about if you can reflect on the way that artists show leadership simply through the ability to be vulnerable and be fully human in the work. It's a form of advocacy, isn't it? It's a form of bravery, of courage. It's a fighting that's a different kind of warrior. I mean, I think the piece [*And So We Walked*] really revealed that to me while we worked on it, that your ability to be vulnerable is really where the power came from in that piece.

WS: Yeah, the vulnerability actually has played a large part in a step-by-step procession of where I am today, have developed to this point.

The first time I ever put myself out there, I think, was as a writer. I worked for the Cherokee Nation's communications department a number of years ago. To write stories that are real and then to write fiction and stuff, that was kind of my job. One of the vulnerabilities that I had to overcome at that point was, "OK, I'll write down what I think is nice and good and perhaps entertaining and whatever. And I'll put it out there and have other people read it." I think that was my first time ever doing that, though I had done it in terms of book reports and things like that. But when you're being paid to do it and it's actually being seen by people that are outside your classroom, to the public, you throw yourself out there. They could easily jump up and down on it and trash them, love them, whatever, but you're taking that chance.

Later on, I found the same vulnerability in terms of walking out on stage and performing. And then after that, in front of the camera. Now I'm doing it in terms of [laughing] giving you my thoughts and opinions.

CM: [To DeLanna] I'm thinking about your vulnerabilities, because of course I've been in the rehearsal room with you sometimes. What do you think you've learned about how vulnerability becomes a form of leadership?

I like to think of [vulnerability] more as like a connecting tissue as opposed to a leadership technique.

DeLanna Studi

DS: I like to think of it more as a connecting tissue as opposed to a leadership technique. The truth is I think it encourages people to have those difficult conversations and to allow themselves to be fully seen with their armor off, which is not what we do in everyday life.

Once the director of my piece [interviewer Corey Madden], who was a bit of a taskmaster [she laughs], made me go to these personal places, that's when the story became more universal. And all of a sudden not just Native people could relate to the story, but all the people who saw the show could relate to some aspect of the show because of the vulnerability in it. Because it's a human experience, and we all have it. It's very scary to put yourself out there. I think the only way we can actually have effective communication is by allowing ourselves to be vulnerable.

CM: So how has taking on things that you're terrified of and being vulnerable and persisting through your discomfort, what's that done for you?

DS: Honestly it's built my confidence. I suffered from severe social anxiety as a kid, where I wouldn't even get out of my car at school unless I saw someone I knew. I mean, it was just one of those ... I didn't speak to people. I would just ... I would never raise my hand in class.

WS: Oh, yeah? You're one of those?

DS: Yeah. It was really terrifying. So my father made me take speech and debate. I found that by hiding behind a character I was able to actually say the things I wanted to say, and it was a very freeing moment for me. By doing my show, where I played myself and my entire family, it's hard to hide behind a character, because those characters are people that I know. And so how do you create a safe space, and how do you make that happen?

Doing the show allowed me to find my inner strength and overcome my own little personal traumas. It's allowed me to finally say the things I've always wanted to say. Yes, there's still the fear. Yes, it's still uncomfortable. Yes, I always feel like I'm going out here on the stage and I'm going to strip down to my underwear and everyone's going to see that my underwear doesn't match. It's always that kind of feeling, but at the same time for me it goes back to my childhood, just the fact that no one ever told me that this was a career option. No one ever came to my school and said, "Oh, you can make a living out of doing culturally significant works of art." No one ever taught me that. If you were lucky, you were going to get to work in the chicken factory. No one ever came to my school and told me that my story was valid. For me, doing this, it helps me but also helps all those younger people that were like me, who were never told that their story was important.

When you look at the suicide rate among our Native people, especially our kids, it's very important that they feel empowered, and [making art] is one way I feel that I can empower them.

DeLanna Studi

When you look at the suicide rate among our Native people, especially our kids, it's very important that they feel empowered, and this is one way we can ... or one way I feel that I can empower them. I don't know if it works, but for me, I think it would have worked for me if someone had come to my school at a young age and said, "This is possible." I think it would have helped me overcome a lot of stuff that I faced in high school.

CM: I find that so powerful, about the idea of performance, that performance is first something you do for yourself but ultimately you are sharing it with other people. Wes, what performances of yours or what projects of yours have created that awareness in you of, "My performance is actually creating something for someone else?" Where have you felt that connection?

Essentially that's probably the highest achievement of leadership that you can really pass on to anybody: that it's not that difficult if you put your mind to it.

Wes Studi

WS: Over the years, I think I've heard almost everyone who's ever been interviewed in terms of having achieved some sort of success in show business say, "Well, if I can do it, so can you." Essentially that's probably the highest achievement of leadership that you can really pass on to anybody: that it's not that difficult if you put your mind to it. If you really want it, go get it. I know that's cliché, it's been said many times before, but it's been said that many times before because it's true. I think we're all reluctant leaders when it comes down to it. We're probably all reluctant leaders, unless of course you're in office right now [laughs].

CM: Could you both talk more about getting called up to do something that was scary or that required you to be more public than normal or to take a stand? And what does being an artist have to do with how you took that on?

WS: Ah, well, I think that there's a perception that if you're an actor and you practice your craft in front of an audience or in front of a camera, that somehow you're also capable of delivering a speech. Like, "Come and talk to our students. Come and tell your story." And some of my first offers like that that I began to take up, I was totally scared out of my mind. I don't have a script. I'm not playing anything here. I've got to go out there and deliver some sort of thought process, talk about success, and/or talk about working, talk about leadership, whatever, depending on whatever the meeting is about. That in itself is difficult. Like I say, people assume that if you do it in front of a camera or onstage, that you'll be totally comfortable. Well, it's not always the case.

But after a while, you begin to get a bit more used to it. As time goes on, you're more willing to throw yourself out there immediately so you can be trampled or loved [he laughs]. It just depends on what you say.

So that's the other thing, that you're going to be documented too. You're going to be documented as having said this or having done that. You do have to temper your speech in situations like that.

CM: So in a sense it's another kind of performance, right?

WS: It's another kind of performance. Well, it's another case of allowing yourself to be vulnerable in a situation. Then it's a matter of overcoming that, right?

CM: So I'm really hearing that there is a kind of path that starts with taking early risks and being vulnerable, and then as time goes along, once you get more of that authority and leadership, there's a point where you have to be careful with that. You know, they say be careful with the power that's given to you, so you choose more carefully and you're more thoughtful. I think that that's really, really helpful for young people to understand that.

One of the places where we encounter people who have the opportunity to lead is where they fail, where someone has failed to do what they thought they were going to do. And now they have to kind of face change. They have to find their way through that. And that takes some wisdom, right? It takes some introspection.

Do you think about failure at all? And what role it plays?

DS: Oh, all the time. All the time. When I was younger, it was all or nothing, right? I would impale myself on my sword of righteousness like that [snaps her fingers.] Now, as I've gotten older, I've learned that communication is the key and you have to choose your battles. And sometimes you have to negotiate. You have to be willing to compromise or to give up something to win something. Learning what you're willing to live with and what you're willing to not live with.

My oldest nephew, Blayn, recently graduated from high school, and he was gifted with an eagle feather, which is one of the highest honors any Native person can be given. My nephew got it because he maintained good grades throughout high school; he also had a second job; and he did the Remember the Removal Bike Ride, driving out to Tahlequah every weekend and just going through crazy training for six to 12 hours a day. All weekend long. And then driving back to Muldrow, which is where my family lives, and then attending school.

The Remember the Removal Bike Ride is a leadership program for Cherokee youth, where they ride bicycles all the way from Cherokee, NC to Tahlequah, OK, along the northern route of the Trail of Tears. And that's a big honor. Blayn at the time was one of the youngest people to be accepted into that program. He's worked really hard to get his eagle feather.

He asked his high school if he could wear it during graduation, and they said no, because they don't allow decoration on the caps or gowns.

So Blayn actually called the Chief, and the Chief was able to work out a concession with the Superintendent that they were going to change the policy for the future. But it didn't help Blayn in the situation at the present moment. And so my family and I went to visit the Superintendent. We had this really long conversation where we pleaded our case and we were trying to persuade him to let Blayn wear the eagle feather. So the concession that was made was Blayn would not wear it at the beginning of the ceremony, but after he got his diploma, my father could present it to him and place it on his cap so he would be able to wear it off.

So we had conversations between all the schools that are technically part of the Cherokee Nation and the 14 counties that are considered Cherokee Nation to reestablish a new policy with better language that would enable future enrolled Native citizens to wear an eagle feather at graduation.

My teenage self would have said, "That's not acceptable. This is what we're going to do. You're going to have to expel all of us in the family. We'll all get kicked out. It's going to be on national news." And at the same time, if you do that, you shut down communication between you and the school system and it's going to be hostile territory. No one's going to want to work together in the future. But now, I think, the way we were able to settle things, we both got what we wanted and we're open to future communication to make it better for future generations.

And so learning that fine art of compromise and taking the battle and learning what to give up and what to fight for, it was something that has taken me a long time to learn. But we were able to put it into practice. I mean, who knows if we made the right decision. Right now, I feel like we

did. It'll depend on how the future conversations go about changing the policy, whether we made the right decision or not.

WS: Yes, for the moment, I think you did. I don't see how it could get bad or go back to the way it was, because this was a first step in the right direction. And it worked out for you, your family. And it worked out for the school. I mean, they may be standing back in the background eating it, but on the other hand...

DS: Right?

CM: I'm feeling a lot the generational dynamic in leadership because I have two people of two different generations in the same room. I'm thinking a lot about how generations are very important in the Cherokee community. How does leadership work in terms of what you pass on? How do you pass it on, and how do you know? Like you said, you don't know if you're right.

WS: I don't think a person ever passes it on. I think it's the person who receives it, the wisdom, I think that's really the transfer. A person goes about his own life, expressing his opinions, his plans, his ideas. And what makes it work, I think, is when a person listening to that receives it and uses it in a positive way to help themselves and/or whoever else. I think it's on the receiving end.

CM: You can't pass it on?

WS: Hopefully, you have the courage to try something that's suggested by someone older because... when you're talking generations, you can only suggest to youngsters what might work and what might not work in their lives. And they either accept or don't. Essentially that's it.

CM: Yeah, that's kind of deep in a way, isn't it? We can't control the future. We can't control other people really. We can only model what we think is the right thing to do. So in a way leadership is fundamentally humble, isn't it? That's what I'm hearing a lot, that it's not about thinking you have command over people or you have influence.

WS: I think that's the only type of real leadership that exists, because the other type of leadership is domination, right? It's a matter of writing laws that everyone must obey and enforcing those laws. Writing legislation. That's the kind of leadership, if you will, that has come to be known as probably the primary form of leadership when in actuality it's not, not in a democratic form of government that we supposedly have. It's representative. We don't send leaders to Washington. I mean, people should just get over that. Please. And we don't need fighters in Washington. People are always saying, "I'll go fight for you. I will lead you." No. We don't want you to do that. We want you to take our concerns there. I mean, that's a democratic process, right?

CM: I think one of the reasons that this project is important to me is because I think that artists do have influence in a way that I think is gentle and persuasive and demonstrates humility and frequently is on the ground and very person-to-person-to-person.

WS: Because they sway rather than command.

CM: I want to just ask one last question, which I just am really remembering. You talked about storytelling, and I remember meeting the man who was the Cherokee-language guy. Tom ...

DS: Oh, Tom Belt.

WS: [Chuckling] Oh, that guy can talk, let me tell you.

CM: DeLanna, could just tell the story of Tom Belt and his hands?

DS: So, Tom. You know, he ... it's a typical Cherokee story. It starts here, and it goes here, and it goes here. And you don't really know where it's going, but it's doing all these little circles. And the whole time, he's never really making eye contact; he's just looking down at his hands.

It's a really fascinating story about the formation of the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma and us losing the courthouse when it became Oklahoma and the law books being taken out. The Cherokee law books, which were written by George Lowery, were being removed as the Oklahoma English law books were being replaced. And how the women were holding hands.

But it starts out in a whole other story, so you don't really know what's going on there. It was really funny watching Corey, who is not used to Cherokee stories, like trying to, "Where is this going?" And the whole time, Tom is not making eye contact; he's looking at his hands. At the end of the story is the first time he looked up, as he finished the story. Silence fell over the table for the non-Cherokee, because everything just ... you could see them putting all the puzzle pieces together. It's like click-click-click-click-click-click... boom. And then they're like, "Oh!"

In our way of storytelling, we have to kind of condition people who are used to the Western idea of storytelling to this new way of storytelling. And it's also very fun for them. I've discovered in doing my piece that there's a hunger for that. There's a hunger for these new ways of telling stories and for these new perspectives on history and who we are.

CM: What's really just so strong for me is this idea that both of you are part of a tradition that has translated into modernity, right? You're both people who have a long root into the past, and you're also very modern artists and leaders. What I think I heard both of you say: story rather than force. Human storytelling is really one of the main places that we can have the beneficial effect of leading.

For young people who are coming along, who sometimes can get distracted by fame, can get distracted by power, can get distracted by feeling that there's no point... I think that it's good to hear two people like you reflect on in the end where the power really is. Not the power but the influence.

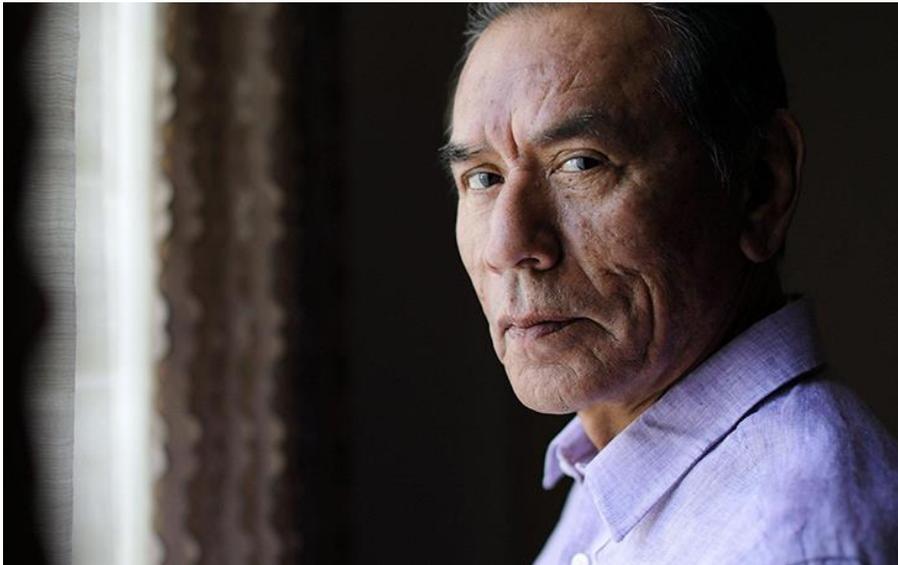
Thank you, both.

Epilogue

The dynamic careers and lives of these two native artists allows us to view leadership through a very special lens. Wes and Delanna's unique history and journey to becoming artist leaders include the following takeaways:

- It takes a dose of courage to lead, and it takes an equal dose of action. Develop a partiality to do something for the greater good when opportunities arise.
- Change the narrative of what is possible. Support others in shaking off limiting beliefs of what they can achieve.
- Treat success and power with the greatest respect. Leadership brings unique challenges that do not exist in other roles.
- Barriers can become opportunities with negotiation and compromise. Growing as a leader includes learning different and broader communication skills.
- The leader's impact is sustained when followers see the opportunities for themselves now, and for their futures. Model the rigor of leading authentically, and then trust the process.
- Frame the narrative, don't force it. And be patient. People have their aha moments at their own pace and time.

~Rob Kramer



Wes Studi
Actor, Cherokee Nation

From small-town Oklahoma native to internationally acclaimed actor and musician, Wes Studi (Cherokee Nation) credits his passion and multi-faceted background for his powerful character portrayals that forever changed a Hollywood stereotype. The eldest son of a ranch hand, Wes was born in 1947 in Nofire Hollow, in Northeastern Oklahoma. He spoke only his native Cherokee until he was 5, when he was enrolled in the Murrell Home to attend public school. He later attended the Chilocco Indian Boarding School in Northern Oklahoma, where he remained

through high school graduation. Yet, unlike many fellow Native American students, he never forgot his language. Drawing from his rich life experience, Wes moved audiences with unforgettable performances in “Dances with Wolves,” “The Last of the Mohicans,” “Geronimo: An American Legend,” and “Heat,” as well as James Cameron’s “Avatar,” Paul Weitz’s “Being Flynn” and Scott Coopers “Hostiles.” Breaking new ground, he brought fully-developed Native American characters to the screen, and then took his craft a step further highlighting the success of Native Americans in non-traditional roles. In 2018, Wes, a Vietnam Veteran, was invited to present at the 90th Academy Awards. To a viewership of 26.5 million households, he introduced a video montage of military movies as a tribute to our veterans. In 2013, he was inducted into the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum’s Hall of Great Western Performers. Throughout his 30-year career he’s won numerous awards, including several First Americans in the Arts awards and the 2009 Santa Fe Film Festival Lifetime Achievement Award.



DeLanna Studi
Playwright & Actor

DeLanna Studi is a proud citizen of the Cherokee Nation whose theater credits include the First National Broadway Tour of Tony Award and Pulitzer Prize winning play "August: Osage County," Off-Broadway’s "Informed Consent" at the Duke Theater on 42nd Street, and Regional Theaters (Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Portland Center Stage, Cornerstone, and Indiana Repertory Theater). She wrote and performed "And So We Walked," based on retracing her family’s footsteps along the Trail of Tears with her father, which has been produced at Triad Stage (Greensboro, NC) and Portland Center Stage (Portland, OR). DeLanna received the 2016 MAP Fund Grant, a Cherokee Preservation Foundation Grant and the Autry National Center’s Butcher Scholar Award, and serves as chair of SAG-AFTRA’s National Native Committee. DeLanna is currently starring in the world premiere of the Emily Mann’s new play "Gloria: A Life" directed by Diane Paulus at the Daryl Roth Theater in New York.