

Playwright shares her childhood story growing up the only Native American in an Italian Brooklyn nabe

By Angela Barbuti

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As the only Native American in her Brooklyn neighborhood, Murielle Borst Tarrant's stoop was her sanctuary.

Tarrant grew up on Degraw Street between Court and Smith streets in 1970s Red Hook.

"The whole neighborhood was Italian," she explained, but the Smith Street area was considered a Puerto Rican enclave. Being neither ethnicity, she was often mistaken for both.

"You'd go down one block to one candy store, and the Puerto Ricans thought you were an Italian and you'd get chased down the block," she recalled. "And so I would go to another candy store and the Italians thought I was Puerto Rican and I would get chased down the block.

"And because of that, I wasn't allowed off my front stoop."

Her harrowing, and hilarious, childhood experiences are now the subject of her one-woman show, "Tipi Tales from the Stoop," running at the Perelman Performing Arts Center in FiDi from Jan. 9-11.

Tarrant recalls her family's monikers.

"If they liked you, they called you 'Indian,' 'Mr. Indian,' 'Mrs. Indian.' If they didn't like you, you were called 'Wahoo' or 'Chief,' she told *The Post*.

Tarrant, from the Kuna and Rappahannock tribe of Virginia, was born and raised in Red Hook.

"My family migrated to New York City in the 1800s, when Brooklyn was considered the country," she said.

Her mother still lives in her childhood home, which was purchased by her great-grandparents, and legend has it neighbors were against them moving into the borough.

"That's the tipi tale, as I say in the play, is that there was a petition going around that we wouldn't buy it," she said.

Tarrant, the artistic director of Safe Harbors NYC, an initiative that promotes indigenous performing arts, recalls that Red Hook was "Mafia-run" at the time.

"These were very nice guys in nice suits who bought tickets to our raffles, who gave money at our weddings and funerals," she said.

With the mob in town, there was no crime, and things like parking tickets went away.

"I think one time in my whole life, my friend Johnny, who owned a pizza parlor on the corner, got his bike stolen. It was just like the biggest crime ever," she said.

"And if someone got a ticket in front of a fire hydrant, someone would come and say to the cop, 'Hey, we



Tarrant, pictured here at her childhood home, was raised in Red Hook in the 1970s. Photo: Erica Price

don't do that here,' and they'd take the ticket and rip it up. For years I used to park in front of the hydrant. One time, I got a ticket, and I was so upset and was like, 'What has happened to this neighborhood?'"

Tarrant, who lives in New Jersey now, began planning her show prior to the pandemic with her husband, Kevin, the director of the NYC nonprofit the American Indian Community House. Sadly, he died from COVID in 2020 at 51.

She said she used the theme of rage — from her experiences growing up and the death of her spouse — to craft the production.

"My first director was my husband. So as a widow, what do you do with that rage? And for me, it was taking all of that and putting it into my work."

Tarrant, who also served as chairwoman for the indigenous women's caucus at the UN, hopes her play sheds light on the Native American experience in the Big Apple — which tends to be left out of history books.

"We have the immigrant experience, the Black experience. But we never talk about the Native experience. We only talk about it way in the past," she said.

"And I would like everyone to understand that there is a living, breathing, thriving native community here in New York City that has never left. And we've always been here and we have survived.

"You know, when New York was New York, before everyone in Ohio ruined it."