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# WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES

AUGUST 2020

## LEADERS IN ACTION

*Nyla Innuksuk*  
Founder and CEO, Mixtape VR



## GENDER EQUALITY THROUGH VIRTUAL REALITY

Nyla Innuksuk, founder and CEO of Mixtape VR, started the company in 2018 with the aim of producing mixed media content in collaboration with Indigenous communities, specifically Inuit communities in the Nunavut territory. Nyla's background in film travels back to her childhood in the northeast of Canada.

Nyla was born in Igloolik and raised in Iqaluit, Canada, just below the Arctic circle in Nunavut. Her introduction to film came by way of her mother who taught her to appreciate film at a young age, following directors such as Hitchcock and Spielberg. Nyla received a video camera passed down from her brother and began making her own films. She developed a passion for telling stories and began editing her own short films while she was a student in high school. Nyla went on to study film at Ryerson University in Toronto and it was there that she began building the community of Indigenous filmmakers and artists she collaborates with to this day.

*"As an Indigenous person, one feels a sense of responsibility to your community. For me, I was very interested in making a documentary about my experience, but also about the people around me, and who I had grown up with. [Documentaries] were a kind of recognition that our stories were more than just statistics. When you would hear about Indigenous communities, if you could understand the faces behind the stories, you could have a better understanding of the community itself."* Nyla said.

## Overcoming adversity and inequality

Nyla brought her passion for Indigenous storytelling through her work in film production. She worked on various film and mixed media projects throughout Canada. Her first position after university was with an Indigenous-owned company called Big Soul Productions where she rapidly expanded her network of collaborators and saw the potential behind larger scale Indigenous-led projects. Nyla then transitioned her work to virtual and augmented reality production, a new and innovative technology for digital artists to this day.

*“I had the same passion about that kind of technology that I did about movies when I was starting to make them in high school. For me, with these new technologies, it’s really exciting because you could be doing things no one’s ever done before... It’s a really exploratory creative space,”* Nyla said.

With this transition, Nyla helped start a video game and virtual reality production company. It was a non-Indigenous owned company and Nyla was the only Indigenous member of the team. The company used Inuktitut syllabics and claimed to be an Inuk company, with Nyla at the forefront representing the Inuit community in its entirety.

*“We were not an Inuk company. Just because I was there didn’t make this [company] an Indigenous company. That was something that was difficult for them to understand. And now of course, I recognize that I was being used as a token for this company.”* Nyla said.

In addition to the perceived pressure of having to represent other Inuit, Nyla also faced income inequality. When she approached the subject of equal pay, Nyla was told that she should be grateful for the opportunity to work there and her co-owners could have been working at far more prestigious companies earning more money. “I was the face of the company, but I was also paid less than half of what my white male co-owners were getting paid,” Nyla said.

Caught between wanting to expand and grow her skills in virtual reality technology and fighting for equal pay, Nyla exhausted herself emotionally and physically. A couple years into working with this company, Nyla learned she had a life-threatening illness requiring treatment and an organ transplant. She realized that all the challenges she faced at the company were insignificant when her life was at stake. “I needed to be focusing on [what] I was really passionate about. And so, three days after my full liver transplant I officially incorporated a new company,” Nyla said.

## Engaging Indigenous communities in film

The company Nyla founded was Mixtape VR, with the goal of representing her unique perspective through mixed media art, film, virtual and augmented reality production. Nyla described founding her company as a “feeling of needing to represent the community authentically, but also provide other opportunities for the community.”

She transformed the challenges from her past to run a more holistic and inclusive production company for Inuit and other Indigenous communities. Mixtape VR has become a blend of training and mentorship, a film and digital art production company, and an example to non-Indigenous institutions on how to embrace and represent the Indigenous communities in Canada.

Since finishing university, Nyla has been involved in a Canadian film festival called imagineNATIVE, which provides mentorship programmes, grants and resident opportunities for Indigenous artists in Canada. Nyla had been an artist in residence at imagineNATIVE while she was ill and undergoing treatment, and the mentoring, support and projects she completed gave her the experience she needed to set out on her own.

Nyla has since co-created an Inuk superhero for Marvel Comics named Snowguard, a teenage superhero from Pangnirtung, Nunavut where her nephews live. She recently co-wrote and directed a Sci-Fi/ Horror film called *Slash/ Back* about teenage girls in Pangnirtung fighting an alien invasion. Nyla saw this as an opportunity for Mixtape VR to offer acting workshops by recruiting an Inuit cast. She recognized that including a story representative of Inuit mythology and including Indigenous cast and crew gave the film an edge.

“Girls fighting aliens is one thing, Indigenous girls fighting aliens, all of a sudden it somehow means something else. So for me, as an Indigenous person recognizing that I’m benefiting from this romanticism of Indigenous people... I [am able to] reconcile that...by raising funds separately for mentorship and training,” Nyla explained. Mixtape VR enabled both the film production and acting workshops to co-exist through charitable donations and an enormous amount of logistical support, transporting a film crew of 60 to the remote town of 1,500 people.

*“For the film to have a real budget and amazing crew up in Pangnirtung on the two-year anniversary of my transplant, I had this feeling of ‘this would have been a dream when I was 13.’ It was just really amazing,” Nyla said.*

## **Embracing equity through virtual reality**

Mixtape VR continues to collaborate on mixed media art projects including virtual reality to showcase Indigenous stories. With VR and XR (extended reality), still new technologies, Nyla says there are no real experts yet – everyone is still learning how to use this new medium. Regardless of background or identity, everyone is a beginner learning along with the rest of the community.

*“I thought, wait a minute, this is one of the few opportunities where the Indigenous people and the white people are on the exact same level of understanding, which is zero,” Nyla says of XR technology.*

“These kinds of technologies are really exciting because it does have a sense of innovation where, as long as the space is inviting and welcoming to everybody, it really can be an opportunity for people to be exploring things in ways that didn’t happen before.”

Mixtape VR’s next project is an augmented reality exhibit at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. The exhibit takes you on a 100-year-journey following Nyla’s grandfather and father as Inuk men living on the land in Nunavut, to a Residential School and then to Churchill in Manitoba, Canada. The Winnipeg Art Gallery hired a full-time four person Inuit curatorial team so the collaboration

will be fully curated by Inuit staff. Mixtape VR will be making an XR experience for the exhibit with a tour in place across different galleries and installations, but Nyla hopes to create a low-tech audio version that she can bring back to communities in Nunavut.

When reflecting on the differences between working in Indigenous storytelling in film back when she first started and today, Nyla said, "The language is now starting to be adopted by everybody. These conversations are growing and expanding and we're able to hold people accountable in ways we couldn't before."

Nyla feels a lot of gratitude to the mentors she has had throughout her journey who not only challenged her, but also inspired her to reach for more impactful opportunities. When asked to share her largest piece of advice to new entrepreneurs, she responded accordingly: "don't be afraid to ask for help and look for mentors and opportunities to guide you along the way."

Mixtape VR became a Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) Signatory in June 2020 and is committed to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment through their innovative mixed media work. With the WEPs as a pathway, Nyla's company will continue to lead the way for diverse and inclusive hiring practices and interactive art production.

## Women's Empowerment Principles



High-level corporate leadership



Workplace HR



Employee well-being and safety



Education and training for women




Supplier diversity & marketing practices




Community engagement



Measurement and reporting

 [weps.org](https://weps.org)

 [weps@unwomen.org](mailto:weps@unwomen.org)

 [@WEPrinciples](https://twitter.com/WEPrinciples)

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