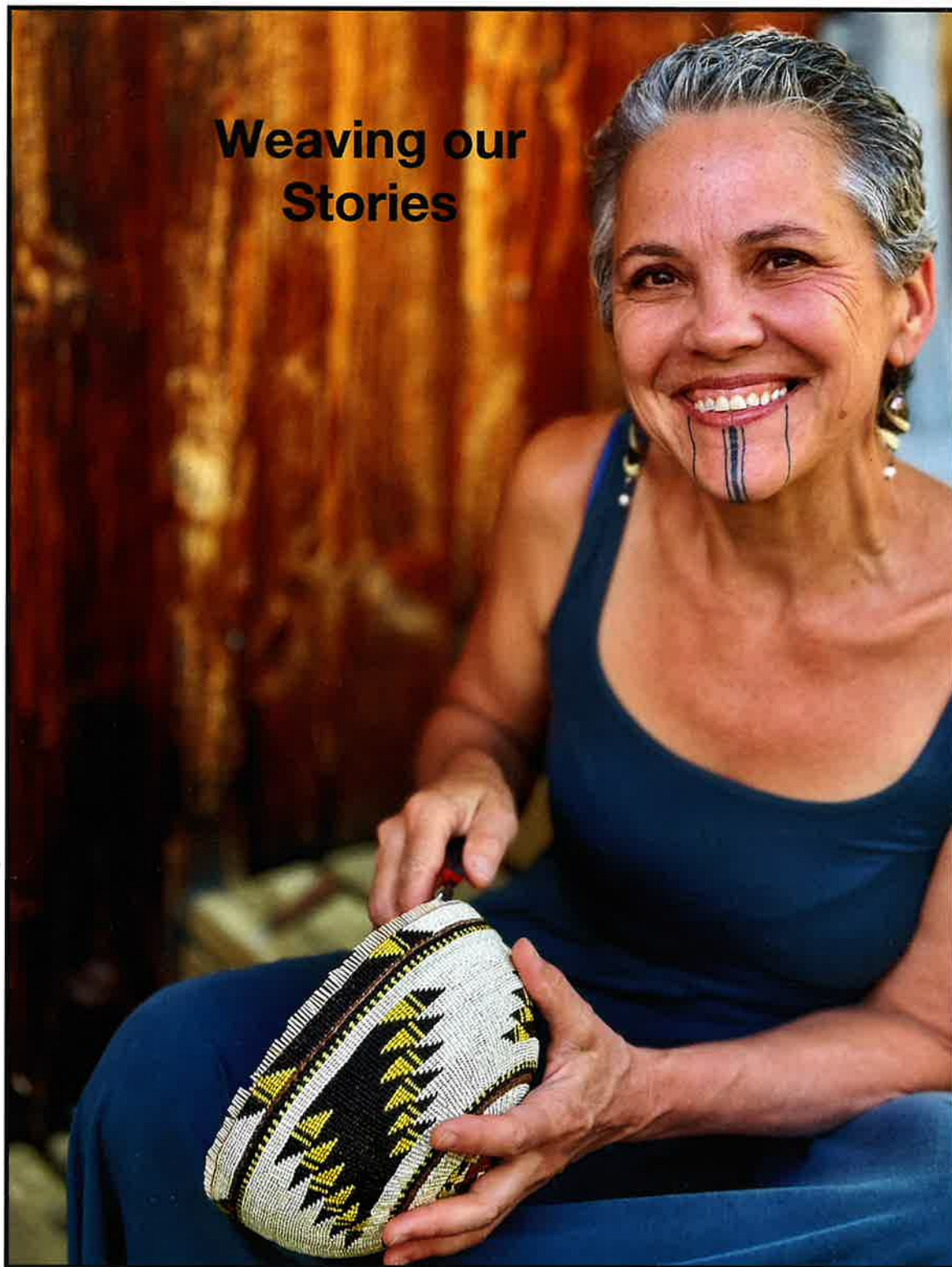




Lisa Morehead-Hillman  
Karuk/Yurok Basketweaver

**Weaving our  
Stories**







## Coyote and the Seven Sisters

My great-uncle told me this origin story when I was a little girl, explaining why the dirt was so red as we drove past Happy Camp on our way north from our people's home in Orleans. This trinket basket has been developing ever since that day.

With maidenhair fern as her background, she shows Coyote in porcupine quill - both the natural white and wolf moss dyed yellow - as he ascends to the heavens to dance with the Seven Sisters.

In a nighttime sky, I've used the yellow quills to highlight the constellation Pleiades - the whole constellation and not just the seven largest stars that we know as the seven sisters. The lid's knob represents the moon, and the white overlay is also done with natural porcupine quills.

When Coyote finally falls from the sky in exhaustion, his blood soaks the earth: I show that on the baskets interior in the red overlay that is Woodwardia fern dyed with alder bark.

To this day, you can see the traces of his demise in the patches of dark red earth in the Karuk Aboriginal Territory.





## Sticks and Roots - aka the Warp and Weft, respectively



Weavers in my area use hazel sticks for all baskets that need to carry substantial weight, e.g. the burden basket on the left, the work cap above, and baby baskets shown in later pages.

My husband Leaf is shown here harvesting cottonwood and willow roots, but the roots in his cap and on the rim of the burden basket are spruce roots.

Conifer roots swell with moisture and become water-tight. Hence, you can even cook with these baskets.

The cap's designs are the "zig-zag" for the main, and "deer poop" for the secondary rim pattern.



## Sticks for Finer Baskets

For the trinket basket, shown right, I used ceanothus sticks, aka "buck brush." These tend to grow straight and strong, and also taper less than the hazel or grey willow sticks. For a drying basket, shown bottom left, I mostly use the grey - or river willow. These are open weave baskets that have a lid and are hung to allow for all-round air circulation. The design on that is "stacked wood." For a ceremonial basket cap, bottom right, I used either willow or ceanothus sticks for the warp.





## Baby Baskets come in All Sizes



Our People are known for "slipper" style baby baskets, referring to the slightly pointed toe. In here, we used to pack moss or grass that could be removed and replaced when soiled. Baby baskets can sport designs, e.g. the "sturgeon-back" to the left, and parents string what is called a "life-line" over the child's head, bottom left, for good luck.





## Open Weave Baskets



The decorative basket bowl on the left done in the open weave style, save where you see the "foot" design. Those rows are close weave. The rim is scalloped.

We use almost exclusively the half-twist twining method in both the open and close weave baskets. Below, the baby rattles are mostly open weave, save for the decorative close weave rows with maidenhair fern and beargrass overlay.

The baby basket I am weaving is not only open-weave, but what is called a "stick basket," in which not only the warp, but also the weft are comprised of sticks.





## Overlay

Like the warp and weft, overlay materials feature significantly in the basket's story. Both my husband and I spend many days throughout the year gathering, processing, storing and preparing basket materials. That year's weather, the place where the plant grew, the mood of the day all contribute to the narrative.

For black and yellow baskets, we use maidenhair fern and dyed porcupine quills. In the early summer, we gather the maidenhair fern. I use only the dark side of the stem.

The porcupine quills are white until they are dyed with wolf's moss. This has to be harvested from higher elevations. The dye transfers when the quills and moss are soaked together.





## Black and Yellow



Baskets with these overlay materials are considered the finest, since both those materials are very tricky to use and relatively difficult to obtain.

On the previous page, the cap's main design is known as "grizzly paw." The two black and yellow caps on the left show the "foot" in the foreground and the "gathering" back right. The cap bottom left shows the "spread hands" design. The hair medallion on the bottom right has, as do the tops of all these caps, the "star" pattern.





## Red

For some reason, baskets that show a lot of red overlay are most often attributed to Karuk weavers - even when there are no records to back that assumption. Yes, we do have ample woodwardia in our territory, but so do other tribes.

Early summer to fall, we gather the giant fern and remove the two strong inner fibers in the stem. These are dried and stored. In the spring, we remove a strip of bark from an alder tree. After pounding into a mash, we soak the fibers until they reach the color we want. Depending on the tree, the hue can range from orange to a burnt sienna.







The style chosen for this cap on the left is very traditional, with the black maidenhair fern dividing the red woodwardia fern background. The pattern here is called "apxankuykuy," which means cap pattern running on and on.

Below that, the main pattern is the "foot" design and the top is called "mountains."

Bottom left is a variation on the sturgeon-back, where I adjusted the connecting lines to create a swimming effect. The top and rim design is called "salt and pepper," or "skip-skip."

Below, the top is "sharp tooth," the main is the swallowtail design, and the rim is "mountains."





## Black and White

I was honored to have been commissioned to replicate a black and white cap woven by the inimitable Yurok basketweaver Stella Moore (see bottom left). Her great-granddaughter made the request to have a copy made to fit an adult head, and both versions are now a mother-daughter team. The main pattern is "flint," or "obsidian blade," intersected by "snake nose."





## Black, White and Red

Clock wise from top left: "flint" or "obsidian blade" intersected by "long worm" throughout; "grizzly paw" intersected by long "worm" in the main, "foot" design on top, and "cat paw" on the rim; "apxankuykuy" intersected by "long worm" in the main; the "gathering" in the main.





## Black, White and Yellow

Again, the addition of the yellow porcupine quill tends to increase the value of the basket. Designs in the main from top left clockwise: "apxankuykuy;" "flint" intersected by "sharp tooth;" variation of the "apxankuykuy" intersected by double "long worm;" and "swallowtail."





## Caps and Their Story

In general, baskets are considered to be women. The designs and their placement follow a fairly strict form: from the navel to the first "turn," the section represents the woman's maidenhood. There is usually a small pattern here. Next, the main body represents a woman's fertile years and is mirror-framed by a secondary pattern - just a couple of rows. There should be at least five rows of plain background separating that from the main pattern. After the "turn," i.e. a row of triple strand twining or a wrapped stick, the woman's matron years are represented with a simple. pattern that pulls the designs together.







A cap's story includes the person for whom the basket is being made. I am very lucky to weave for people who trust and spend time with me so I can make relevant pattern suggestions. This woman, an Indigenous fashion designer, wanted a black and yellow cap, and she wasn't afraid of a bold pattern. I used redwood roots, which are rosy warm in color. For her maidenhood years, I chose the "swallowtail," aka "butterfly" design. Her fertile years are represented by the bold "grizzly paw," and her matron years by a combination of "sharp tooth" designs that I think look like a crown.





## Jump Dance Basket

This ceremonial basket is carried by men in a special dance celebrated by many local tribes. While it is woven by a woman, it is "finished" with leather, paint and feathers by a man. Once the weaving is done, the basket passes from the woman's hands into a man's - and will never be touched by her again.

My husband and I were able to watch "our" basket dance: an unforgettable experience.





## Letting Go

I have a hard time finishing a ceremonial basket: the last rows just don't flow and I struggle. It's as if one of my kids were leaving home, and I'm trying to smile when my heart is breaking.. Baskets have a spirit of their own, and we all are just chapters in those lives - minor bit parts.



This basket has three major sections framed - 'mirror-like' - with a "sharp tooth" pattern. The two larger side designs are "flint," and the middle design is "sturgeon-back." Double stripes separate these sections.

Hazel sticks are sewn to the ends, and the edges are finished with deer hide. The paint is made with soot, red rock and sturgeon glue. The ends of the sticks are decorated with flicker feathers.









I am so lucky: not only do I have a wonderful husband and fellow Cultural Practitioner, but I have the best teacher in the world: Wilverna "Verna" Reece.

Without her patience, support, encouragement and humor, I'd never be the weaver I am today.

I also know that I have been given something special, and I think that my relations and ancestors have made a deal with me: we will help you, but you must pass it on to the next generations.

I hear you, and I'm doing the best that I can.





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