



A new fearless leader! Fearless Ideas welcomes Kristin Leong as Executive Director

SEATTLE, WA, June 30, 2022 - Following a months-long search, The Bureau of Fearless Ideas is thrilled to announce Kristin Leong, M.Ed. as our new Executive Director. BFI is an award-winning writing and tutoring organization serving diverse youth in Seattle's Greenwood and Yesler Terrace neighborhoods. In celebration of her new role, Leong sat down with BFI Board Vice President Sherri Gwizdala to talk about her journey so far, and her excitement for BFI and this next path.

Why BFI?

Love literally brought me to The Bureau of Fearless Ideas. In the winter of 2020, I reached out to BFI for a KUOW Public Radio feature I was producing for Valentine's Day. We were looking for youth perspectives and stories on love. To this day, my interview with BFI student Naomi, who was a third grader at the time, is still one of my favorite interviews ever. She told me about the ["recess wedding"](#) that took place on her school's field, unbeknownst to the grownups who work there. That Valentine's Day story turned out to be just the start of my collaborations with BFI, even though the pandemic shifted our engagements to screens.

Every time I have been welcomed into BFI's community, I have been deeply moved by the clarity and authenticity of the students and their stories, and by the warmth and commitment of the staff. I have worked with a lot of schools and youth organizations, but BFI is a standout. BFI's values of kindness, creativity, and fearlessness are not just words in an outward-facing mission statement. Those values are so clearly infused into every relationship, workshop, publication, and initiative that BFI is a part of.

I am especially excited and grateful to be joining BFI at this juncture. As we all find our footing in this "new normal," I see this as a pivotal time for the organization, with so many opportunities to grow and deepen our work with families and our communities, while amplifying youth and staff voices through our storytelling about the work we're doing. I can't wait for this journey to begin!



Tell us about a time you've experienced kindness.

Kindness has made my path possible.

Before I met my wife, I raised my son on my own until he was nearly a tween. Before that, I was the first in my family to graduate from college or get a Master's degree. And then before that, my family and I moved from Hawaii to Washington when I was in elementary school, and we became the first on my dad's side to leave the Islands.

All of those parts of my life were formative and challenging in different ways, but throughout each of those experiences, kindness (and luck!) played a significant role in shaping how the challenges became opportunities instead of roadblocks.

There was the kindness of individuals and community organizations that supported my son and I when we were on our own. There was the kindness of mentors, professors, and internship supervisors that helped me navigate my college years. There was the kindness of neighborhood families that welcomed mine and didn't look twice while my Chinese dad barbequed on our driveway in the middle of a Pacific Northwest February.

The American Dream image of "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps," is a charming one, but I don't know anyone for whom it is actually true. I believe that kindness combined with systemic support is a radical act that can transform lives. I'm grateful for the ways my own life and the life of people I love have been transformed by kindness and support, and I'm absolutely thrilled to be joining an organization that offers that kind of possibility to others.

What does fearlessness mean to you?

During my last year as a public school teacher, I created a portrait and interview project called ROLL CALL (RollCallProject.com) as part of my role as a 2016 TED-Ed Innovative Educator. I interviewed and photographed students and teachers from all over the world, asking them two questions: *What do you have in common with your teachers or students? Does it matter that students and teachers have things in*



common? The project's aim is to humanize the culture gaps in our schools while drawing attention to the fact that in the U.S. about 80% of our educators are white and mostly female, while kids of color now represent a majority of our students, at the same time that youth gender identity and sexual orientation is also becoming increasingly more diverse.

Across the four years that I was interviewing and photographing students and teachers for ROLL CALL, I was regularly stunned by the stories shared by participants, as well as by their fearlessness in sharing their experiences and perspectives with the world. For one high school student in Seattle, that meant sharing what it was like for him to finally feel less "outnumbered" at school, once he had a teacher who shared his Mexican heritage for the first time. For one transgender literacy teacher, that meant sharing how impactful it was for him to become an unofficial mentor to many of the LGBTQ students in his south Texas middle school.

For a lot of us--but especially for young people who are still figuring themselves out--there is nothing scarier than sharing our work-in-progress selves with the world. When I think about fearlessness; authentic, unapologetic storytelling that shares where we come from and where we hope to go is the kind of act of bravery that I believe can change the world. As a tutoring center and independent publishing house, BFI nurtures exactly that kind of fearlessness both in students, as well as with the adult educators and volunteers who enthusiastically support them.

What's an example of creativity that has inspired you?

I'm constantly inspired by creativity! The main reason I started my ROCK PAPER RADIO newsletter was to share the amazing stories and projects that light up my brain. Every Thursday, I send out three multimedia links--something to listen to, something to read, and something to "hold on to." Here are three examples of creative projects that I've shared in RPR that reminded me that fascinating people are making fascinating things all the time:

I continue to be inspired by Liz Mak's gutting audio documentary "[Return to Kuku Island](#)" from 2018. It's a piece I return to when I need a reminder of the power of storytelling fueled by empathy and dogged reporting. Mak's narration is crushing but straightforward as she travels with survivors to the island where Vietnamese refugees



were abandoned in the 1970's without food, water, or shelter. They had been told they were being taken to a refugee camp.

In the early days of the pandemic, the New York Times launched a photo essay series to transport the restless and locked-down to places far from our living rooms. I was especially struck by this feature by photojournalist Juan Pablo Ramirez, "[Playing the 'Green Lottery': Life Inside Colombia's Emerald Mines](#)," in which we get a glimpse into the lives of the workers who spend their days underground looking for gems with the hopes of surviving the crashing economy. The feature includes stories of vast riches and quick losses. There's scandalous deals and murder. And of course, there's Pablo Ramirez's staggering photos—the mountains swimming in fog, the camps strung with laundry, the miners looking right at us in their green hardhats.

I love artist Hubert Duprat's collaboration with insects. Caddisflies are tiny, river-dwelling creatures that excrete a sticky silk around their bodies and then roll themselves in whatever's around them--usually twigs and fish bones--to create a protective armor. For decades, starting in the 1980's, Duprat partnered with these insects for a spectacularly beautiful but very small-scale collaboration. For his project "[Trichoptères](#)," (the French scientific name of the caddisfly), Duprat gave his caddisflies something a bit more glamorous to work with than their usual materials, such as gold flake, rubies, and turquoise. The bugs did not disappoint. I think the project is a gorgeous reminder that we become what we surround ourselves with.

What does community support mean to you?

To me, community support means genuinely caring about those in our communities who are most in need of support right now, and then being strategic, joyful, and tireless in the ways that we turn that care into action.