

THE *Special Edition*  
**MYSTICIAN**

FROM THE PLAINS TO 5TH AVE NYC

**TRADITION  
NEVER  
GOES OUT  
OF STYLE**

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—Darline Perkins

From Tradition  
to High-End  
Couture:

# Red Lightning Woman

## Darline Perkins' porcupine quill work takes her to NYC

### Quill dreams

"I would have dreams about porcupine quill work, and I didn't know what it meant," Darline Perkins said.

Darline shared her story with a cousin who told her to talk to their grandmother who did porcupine work, so she went and told her what was happening. The grandmother offered to teach Darline, but the lessons would have to wait a year because the grandmother was in mourning.

"There are strict rules about the culture and the traditions," Darline said.

A year later, she started learning quill work—an experience that would lead to a life full of unexpected opportunities and pulling the thread that would lead her to success in the fashion industry and an invitation to show her designs in New York City.

Reverend Darline Perkins is an ordained minister and a former mail office attendant, construction worker, heavy equipment operator, highway flagger and cancer survivor. She is an awareness advocate for breast cancer, diabetes, the elders, climate change, and Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and People (MMIWP).

Reverend Perkins is a humble human being and describes herself as a dabbler in fashion design. In May of this year, that design dabbling is taking Darline and her Red Lightning Couture to the 5th Avenue Fashion Show that takes place in front of the Met Gala.

### Darline's story

Darline's journey into fashion design began simply.

"I started doing the quill work, and it was like a ritual and a rite that I had to go through to obtain it," Darline said. "I started doing small things like earrings and bracelets and working up to bigger projects."

She soon learned because of the frailty of the quills, it would be difficult to put them on cloth. She started working with lambskin, creating dresses, jackets for men, and lambskin leather pants, adorning them with her quill work.

Between 2008 and 2009, things took a sharp turn for Darline. She was diagnosed with breast cancer. In addition to her diabetes, the cancer meant she needed to take a break. Darline stepped back from her ministry and went through a double mastectomy. The illness took a toll on Darline. After surgery and recovery, she realized she would have to rebuild her body if she wanted to truly heal. She started working at her ministry while continuing to do quill work and added a mailroom job to her responsibilities.

Talking over lunch with her friends one day, they suggested that Darline do a fashion show with her quill work. She spent some time thinking about it, and the next time they met for lunch, she gave them her answer.

"I said 'if I do a fashion show, it has to have a purpose,'" Darline said. "And so, we started brainstorming and, well, (they said) 'you're diabetic and you know, breast cancer. Why don't you do one for that?' And so that was the focus."

With her eye for design, Darline put on fashion shows for four years at different reservations throughout the area. The shows raised funds for awareness and education about breast cancer and diabetes. With the growing success of her fashion shows, Darline was



**Asking questions** - Natalie Lawrence and Sophia Fafard listen intently while interviewing Darline Perkins.



**Artful Friends** - Andrea Fagerstrom and Darline Perkins share laughs during the interview, especially when Darline said she 'just dabbles' in fashion design.

determined to rebuild her body strength.

That's when she decided to dive into the world of construction.

"I think it was just basically, wanting to know my body was working, you know, after losing parts of your body," Darline said.

She took a course in heavy equipment operations and worked to make roads. During the boom in North Dakota, she learned to test the ground for oil. Darline worked for every department of the seismic group and eventually became a boss for Native American men in a tribal office. Meanwhile, she continued her quill work and fashion shows.

After the shows on the reservations, people started hearing about what she was doing with her quill work.

The Crow Nation in Montana asked if she would do a benefit show for them. Then people in Jackson Hole, Wyoming heard about her work and invited her to the Western Design Conference, a high-end four-day exhibition of artists, designers and architects sharing their creations. Darline attended the conference for three or four years, and in addition to her traditional quill fashions, she displayed an elk hide traditional horse saddle and a horse mask.

"It was (made of) buffalo, and it had quilled eyes and under the nose were three rows of brass beads," Darline said.

She continued to work construction, but her fashion designs were getting noticed throughout the country. Her next stop was the Gathering of Nations Powwow in Albuquerque, New Mexico where she participated in a breast cancer awareness show, the Pink Party.

After that, she was in Dallas, Detroit and Los Angeles.

"I moved to LA and started working with big projects," Darline said. "I went out to New York City for several fashion shows for New York Fashion Week. And recently I met a producer who wanted to showcase my clothing last September in New York City. He really liked what I was doing and kept wanting me to come back."

New York City photographer/videographer/producer Alexander Gurman called Darline in October 2025 and told her the producers get to choose clothing for the billboards in Times Square. He told her that he had chosen her clothing. And then he called her again and said he was going to put her clothing on the billboards in Times Square on New Year's Eve.

In January of this year, Gurman called her once again and asked if she would be interested in showing her designs at the 5th Avenue Fashion Show in front of the Met Gala.

The show is set up outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art giving designers the opportunity to

display their fashion to fans and people attending the gala. People attending include celebrities from all around the world and Vogue states the event is known as "fashion's biggest night out."

Darline had been invited before but said she didn't go because she didn't know what it was—until she was watching TV and saw Rihanna and all these actors and actresses going up to a museum. She called her son and told him about Rihanna.

He told me that's the place you want to be.

This year she decided she better go.

Darline's son Justin Deegan has been one of her main supporters in her career and her journey as a fashion designer. As a photographer/videographer, he has been instrumental in sharing her designs with the world.

"What's really amazing about this journey is to see her growth from the very beginning to now because I can remember when she went to fashion

"To see her growth from that point to this point is pretty awesome ... that's been really inspirational!"

—Justin Deegan



shows at the Santa Fe Indian Market ... It's called SWAIA," Justin said. "To this day, it's one of the biggest meccas of indigenous fashion. I remember ... when she presented her fashion. It was different from everybody else ... they would get up on stage with their dance regalia—ribbon skirts and jingle dresses and traditional dance outfits, feathers and everything.

"And then my mom came out with her couture—her ball gown, buckskin wedding dress and lambskin, leather skirts with peacock embellishments on them. It's beautiful. But they weren't ready for that because they were traditional. But now that's all you see is couture at the SWAIA Indian Market for fashion. It's really grown, but to see her growth from that point to this point is pretty awesome. That's been really inspirational because I witnessed the growth of her art through the years."

Justin will be going to New York City with Darline and document the event through his creative camera lens.

# Takes Her Fashion to NYC

## Red Lightning Woman

Darline's Native American culture is not only reflected in her designs but is also evident in the name of her clothing brand, Red Lightning Couture.

Darline is from the MHA Nation located on the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation in North Dakota. Her father was Arikara and Hidatsa from Fort Berthold, and her mother was Oglala Lakota from Pine Ridge, South Dakota.

Darline's parents divorced when she was two, leaving her to grow up without a strong connection to her maternal side.

"I always wondered, you know, what's my history and where do I come from?" she said.

The question stayed with her, eventually guiding her to climb Bear Butte, a sacred site located in South Dakota. She began making regular trips to the butte with her son.

During one visit, however, something much deeper took place.

"My son and I eventually ended up going up on top, and we prayed, and it's like four days and four nights without food and water, and you pray," Darline said. "That's all you do."

On one of those nights, Darline watched as a glowing cloud moved toward her. As it got closer, she could see little red lightning coming out of it.

She couldn't help but feel fear.

"And as it got closer, I'm thinking, 'oh Lord, don't scare me'," she said. "...don't strike me at all."

The cloud continued coming until it surrounded her.

"Half of my body was in this cloud, and half of it was out. I could see the stars," she said. "And I just kept praying and praying."

After the experience, Darline made her way to the sweat lodge to share what had happened. An elder who was listening began praying and eventually said to her, "it has come to me that your traditional, your spiritual name should be Red Lightning Woman."

Later Darline would share that story with her friends. When it came to choosing the name of her brand, she was encouraged to carry her indigenous identity into it.

"The entertainment friend said, 'why don't you name it Red Lightning Couture?' and that's where the name comes from," Darline said.

Today, Red Lightning Couture stands as both a fashion brand and a reflection of Darline's identity and heritage.

## What about the gala

The Met Gala is an annual charity benefit for the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and is a major event in the fashion scene. It started in 1948 with a collection that had a variety of fashion, from contemporary pieces to high fashion dresses. Every year, top-of-the-line designers share their works on the runway while celebrities including movie stars, musicians, and athletes attend the event as well to contribute their wealth to the benefit. This year's Met Gala will be coordinated by co-chairs Beyoncé, Nicole Kidman, Venus Williams and Anna Wintour. The 2026 Met Gala theme is "Costume Art."

Outside the museum and before the gala, fans gather to enjoy the 5th Avenue Fashion Show, a type of pre-show, where fashion designers share their creations and sometimes catch the eye of a passing celebrity, which could include Rihanna, Sarah Jessica Parker, Jay-Z, Adele or Anne Hathaway.

For Darline, her journey has not been about fame but about supporting others and meeting people.



**On Camera** - Mystic Media reporters interview Darline in the studio.

The 5th Avenue Fashion Show will be an opportunity for her to share Red Lightning Couture with one of fashion's major annual events.

Darline's artistic focus will be her traditional pieces evolving into higher end designs interwoven with cultural features that are a dominant part of her couture.



"I'm going to have this piece because it's my very first piece."  
—Darline Perkins

"I'm going to have this piece because it's my very first piece,"

Darline said pointing to a light lilac dress made of lambskin with orange, yellow, and red quill work adorning the top. "I can only take ten this year, so I'm really selective of the pieces and how I'm going to showcase them."

Another piece that Darline will be sharing is made from red willow.

"I'm making a dress with it, (and) it's a very sacred piece of art," she said, explaining that the red willow bark (cansasa) is used to make a sacred non-tobacco smoking herb for use at ceremonies.

"My grandfather was one of the carriers of horse medicine, and so, horses have always been special to me."  
—Darline Perkins

—Darline Perkins

A signature design for Darline are pieces she creates using horsehair. She explained that in their tradition, horsehair is sacred, and only certain people on a reservation carry the medicine.

"My grandfather was one of the carriers of horse medicine, and so, horses have always been special to me," Darline said. "I've done quite a few horsehair skirts. And that's what Alexander out in New York ... was drawn to because it was different."

Darline contrasts the organic look of the horsehair skirts with high-end tops made of satin with beads and sparkles. She is working on a horsehair dress for the gala that was inspired by a photo in a magazine of a horse that was shiny silver with a black tail and mane. When she saw it, she decided to design the dress to look like that horse. She has the horsehair and is in the process of dyeing it silver and black.

As part of the fashion event, she will be creating clothing for the models to wear while riding bicycles around the museum and other items for them to be wearing while riding in limousines and arriving at the event.

## Pulling the thread

Darline's journey to the New York City fashion scene has been filled with new experiences and new people.

"When I was really young, I was very shy and inward, and it surprises me now because going into ministry, having to talk, having to preach sermons ... now you can't shut me up," Darline said. "I think I've evolved 180 degrees from what I used to be."

The connections she has made include a network of people from all around the country, including North Dakota and a friendship with Andrea Fagerstrom an

art professor at Bismarck State College.

"Knowing your journey and the different opportunities that have come up—there's kind of a theme I see with anything arts related, whether it's visual, musical, theatrical," Andrea said. "You just keep pulling the thread—where it's not a concrete end goal ... it's not a linear path. It's a weaving and ... taking opportunities as they come."

## People she met on her way

During a life adventure like Darline's, one would expect to meet a lot of characters, whether they be everyday people who enjoy her work, or celebrities that want to show off her style on stage.

One of Darline's early encounters that she remembers fondly involves a man named Jason who called himself "The Groomsman." While walking to a restaurant in LA, she noticed Jason who had an embroidered design on his jeans and struck up a conversation with him about the design.

Jason shared his story with Darline about going from homelessness and addiction to helping the homeless with his skills as a hairstylist.

After talking with Jason, Darline showed him her Instagram page with all her designs and fashion. He said he liked a piece and wanted to come to her house to look at it in person. Darline agreed and discovered that Jason was looking at one of her Pendleton hoodies with a buffalo skull on it and wanted it for Matt Ramsey, the lead singer of Old Dominion.

Jason invited Darline to the set of a documentary that the band was working on.

"Old Dominion was there, and Matt Ramsey fitted with the hoodie," Darline said. "So, he bought it, and I had to sign a waiver not to talk about the documentary until it was over."

Around the same time that she met Ramsey, she got a random phone call from a number she did not recognize. That phone number belonged to Taboo of Black Eyed Peas. He asked Darline to come to his studio with the clothing she had for men. She agreed and now Taboo is saved as a contact in her phone.

Plane rides have provided other connection opportunities including a professional football player and a baseball player, both of whom have purchased her apparel.

Through all her travels, Darline's journey has not only been defined by the clothing she has made, but the people she has met and influenced along the way.

"When you (Darline) visit with people, it becomes evident quickly that you talk the talk and you walk the walk," Andrea said. "It's not just lip service ... when you say you're going to do something, you do it, and you do it well and thoroughly, and you keep trying to work and be your best."

## Forward to the future

Darline smiles when she considers her future and says she is going to retire.

"I don't see that in your future," Andrea said. "You're always saying 'I have to slow down. I have to rest and take it easy.' And then you take on another project and another project. It's in your DNA."

Darline said even after all this time, she doesn't consider herself to be a fashion designer.

"And when they ask me, I'll say, oh, I just dabble," Darline said sharing a laugh with Andrea.

Throughout the years, Reverend Darline's dabbling has taken her in many directions and offered her many opportunities to minister with her art and her fashion, but what shines through is her quiet demeanor, calming presence and humility.

"I never really say no to people when they meet me, and I just take people for who they are and go with the flow," Darline said.

What started with her simple dreams of traditional quill work has led to a career in high-end fashion and a lifetime of charity, education and awareness—one thread at a time.

"I never really realized I did all that until I started talking," Darline said.

*This story is the collaborative effort of Bismarck State College student reporters of The Mystician and their adviser. Students: Sophia Fafard, Natalie Lawrence, Jaxon Miller, Elena Sanchez, Clayton Sicble Fox and Associate Professor of Journalism / The Mystician Adviser karen Bauer.*



Traditional horse hair skirt

Darline Perkins will be showing her designs during the New York City 5th Avenue Fashion Show across the street from the Met Gala.



Traditional beaded belt with horse hair skirt



High-end black dress with ostrich feathers

