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Shannon Lucas-Westrum is interweaving art and community across northern Minnesota



(<https://bsualumni.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2025.0325-Westrum-3.jpg>)
Shannon Lucas-Westrum poses while surrounded by her handmade basketry art. (Courtesy / Shannon Lucas-Westrum)



By Stella Dolan (<https://bsualumni.org/author/stella-dolan/>)

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Even though she came to Bemidji State University to pursue a business degree, Shannon Lucas-Westrum always maintained her creative interests.

She took every art history class available at BSU, studied Ojibwe arts and even attended evening jewelry-making classes at Northwest Technical College.

"I literally sat in the back of classes with my crochet or beadwork," said Westrum, a 1995 Bemidji State graduate. "I always had to keep my hands busy so I could focus better. It helps me pay attention, and it helps me function."

She must have been on to something.

Lucas-Westrum was recently named one of two 2025 McKnight Fiber Artist Fellows, a prestigious national recognition honoring her innovative work in basketry and her commitment to cultivating artistic communities throughout northern Minnesota. The award goes to individuals who are passionate about their work, open to exploring new ideas and push creative boundaries. It's the only one of its kind in the country for textile arts, and it marks a significant milestone in Lucas-Westrum's artistic career.

"What if I had known 20 years ago to combine that business degree with the arts?" she said. "It never even crossed my mind back then. But I'm really blessed that I can do it now with my family. We've found that path."



(<https://bsualumni.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2025.0325-Westrum,Shanna.pdf>)
A handmade basket created by Shannon Lucas-Westrum. (Courtesy / Shannon Lucas-Westrum)



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A handmade basket created by Shannon Lucas-Westrum. (Courtesy / Shannon Lucas-Westrum)

Lucas-Westrum's natural inclination toward handcrafts eventually led her to basketry, though the path wasn't immediate. After graduating from BSU, she worked in retail and insurance before opening and operating Shannon's Art and Soul in Bemidji from 2012-17, where approximately 20 percent of merchandise consisted of her own creations. Her artistic career accelerated following a fellowship that took her to Ireland to study weaving.

The McKnight Fellowship now offers professional development and connections with prominent figures in the field as Lucas-Westrum considers the future direction of her art.

"To go from there and say, OK, now at 50, where do I want my career to go? It's kind of a fascinating place to be at in my life," she said.

Bringing art to rural communities

Lucas-Westrum's basketry incorporates locally sourced materials including driftwood, antlers and wood salvaged from Lake Bemidji, to create pieces that capture the essence of northern Minnesota while experimenting with colors and forms.

"I spend a lot of time playing with colors and shapes that flow in what I am doing," she said. "I think one of the coolest things I've done to date might still be the beaver log that we found on the beach in Lake Superior."

Her creative process often involves transforming found objects with local significance into functional art. For example, when officials recently dug up the shores of Lake Bemidji where the old lumber mills once stood, she found plenty of material to incorporate into baskets.

"Those pieces have been under the Lake Bemidji shore for 100 years, and now they're this really cool structural box that has a lid," Lucas-Westrum said. "We can take that northern Minnesota feel and bring them into our art classes."

With her husband Jesse — a 1999 BSU graduate — serving as her assistant, Lucas-Westrum has dedicated herself to making art accessible to communities both large and small throughout the region. She taught approximately 45 basketry workshops across 3,000 miles of northern Minnesota last year alone and emphasizes reaching rural communities.

Her workshops have reached locations from Warroad to Brainerd to Grand Forks, creating what she calls "little pods and pieces of people who are interested in these things."



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A handmade basket created by Shannon Lucas-Westrum. (Courtesy / Shannon Lucas-Westrum)



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A handmade basket created by Shannon Lucas-Westrum. (Courtesy / Shannon Lucas-Westrum)

Lucas-Westrum outlined her latest initiative, a series of classes focused on teaching the same basket design. The series will be brought to 12 different communities, targeting both large and small areas throughout northern Minnesota.

Lucas-Westrum's vision is to inspire those who aren't currently involved in art to engage with it. She even provides materials for her classes, defying a status quo that often puts the burden of costs on the students.

As she continues to create and teach, Lucas-Westrum remains committed to representing rural artists in a metropolitan-dominated art world.

"I like to think that we are reminding people that there is a lot of talent and interest outside of just the metro area," she said.

A Bemidji State family legacy



(<https://bsualumni.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2025.0325-Westrum-1.jpg>)
The Westrum family. (Courtesy / Shannon Lucas-Westrum)

The Westrum family's connection to BSU spans generations. Shannon and Jesse's eldest daughter, Bridget, is currently pursuing a political science degree at Bemidji State, and their younger daughter, Logan, participates in PSEO classes and is enrolled at BSU for next fall. Those two are the latest in a long line of Beavers.

"My grandpa attended Bemidji State, and that would've been in the late 1940s," Lucas-Westrum said. "I know I've had two, three, four uncles attend BSU. My mom attended BSU, my dad graduated from BSU, my sister went to school all over the place but came back and got her teaching license from BSU."

Bridget recently had her pottery work displayed at Gallery X in Bridgeman Hall, creating what Shannon described as "a community garden collection" that combined her work with that of other local artists.

Shannon marvels at how her daughters have embraced campus life more thoroughly than she did as a student — interacting with everyone from the information desk and the bookstore to the food service staff and fellow Student Senate members.

"I've been so fascinated watching their integration. It's been really cool," Shannon said. "I'm not even sure if some of these things existed when we were there, but it's amazing to see all the experiences students have now."



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