

## Indian Country Today

# Eighth Generation shoes: Made for walking in two worlds with style

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SEATTLE – It happens to me everywhere I go, but this time I was caught off guard. I was standing on the banks of Port Madison Bay where the annual Intertribal Canoe Journey landings were being hosted by the Suquamish Tribe. As I watched the amazing sight of more than 90 canoes come in, a woman dressed in full Coast Salish regalia, a beautiful floor-length cedar dress, woven cedar hat and vest made of dark blue glass beads and bone stopped to talk to me.

“Where did you get those shoes? They are incredible! Make sure that you wear those with pride.”

The shoes are a pair of red wolf custom Coast Salish style Vans by Louie Gong. His work has attracted the attention of thousands through word of mouth, newspaper articles, blogs, Myspace, twitter, and a rapidly growing [Facebook](#) fan page with well over 2,100 fans.



While the attention and enthusiasm has inspired Gong to keep designing new shoes, it has also been a bit overwhelming. Requests to order the shoes have numbered in the hundreds in the past few months alone. “When I start taking orders, I usually reach capacity for the month in just a couple hours. I wish I could make a shoe for everyone who connects with them, but it’s just not possible.” At present,

*Photo courtesy Louie Gong/Eighth Generation*

*These Killer Whale Vans were designed by Louie Gong, who owns Eighth Generation.*

Louie has visions of collaborating with larger shoe manufacturers such as Vans to produce one of his designs so his customers might one day be able to purchase them off the shelf and at a lower cost.

Who is the man behind the shoes? Gong is a mixed heritage person (Nooksack, Chinese, French, Scottish) who works as an activist “on behalf of people who walk in multiple worlds.” In addition to his day job as the educational resource coordinator at [Muckleshoot Tribal College](#), he is board president of [MAVIN](#), one of the nation’s leading mixed race organizations. His racial identity work has been featured on [MSNBC.com](#), and he recently provided a keynote presentation for the National Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families conference. According to Gong, designing custom shoes is an extension of his activism.



While his shoe fans are immediately impressed by the quality of the art, those who continue to engage with Gong begin to understand that “the conversations that the shoes spark is the true artistry.” The message behind his art is that “you can have a strong cultural identity while still exploring popular culture and style – these things are not mutually exclusive. We can merge our expressions of identity rather than compartmentalizing them. It’s okay to be both.”

*Photo courtesy Clarita Begay*

*Pictured here are Eagle Vans with artist, Louie Gong, owner of Eighth Generation.*

Gong's company, [Eighth Generation](#), was established in March 2009. It's important to him for people to understand that "Eighth Generation started organically, not as a business idea." He made his first pair for himself, as a way of fulfilling a dream deferred since childhood to be able to afford a pair, and to have the confidence and style to wear them. Once in the store, he felt that he "couldn't connect with the patterns on the shelf. None of them represented my experiences or culture," which prompted him to take a Sharpie marker to a pair of plain grey Vans.

Since that first shoe, Gong has refined his designs, artistic skills and tools, and recently shared his hard-earned knowledge in a how-to video titled, "Make Sick Shoes: Custom Vans and Chucks by Louie Gong," available on [YouTube](#). The video, which was recently featured on [thevansblog.blogspot.com](http://thevansblog.blogspot.com) and the Vans 300,000 member [Facebook](#) page, explains the basics of making custom shoes so people across the world can create shoes that represent their own identity and raise social consciousness about what it means to self-identify on your own terms.

It's Gong's way of giving back to his fans. It's also a way he seeks to inspire youth to understand that success is built upon process and that "failure is part of success, persistence is key."

He originally began by customizing Vans, but in recent months he has started experimenting with designs on Converse Chuck Taylors and Nike N7s. The Eighth Generation [Web site](#) features a gallery of the shoes and the Facebook page often offers glimpses into Gong's creative process by showing his experimental in-progress designs. Gong is also the focus of a short film by Longhouse Media that will premiere at the Native American Film Festival in Bellevue, Wash. Nov. 6. An art show held at the same time will showcase the full range of his art.