

Pride Month



Native LGBTQ+/ Two Spirit People

The term Two Spirit was first coined in 1991 during the annual general meeting for Gays and Lesbians of the First Nations in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It originates from the Ojibwe words “niizh manitoag” (two spirits).^{1,4} Those at the meeting decided to replace a derogatory term created by colonizers with the term Two Spirit to distance themselves from non-Natives.^{1,4} There are more than 100 different Indigenous words that refer to Two Spirit people but not every tribe uses the term, so the general reference is Native LGBTQ+/Two Spirit.

Traditionally, Two Spirit refers to someone who is Native and who expresses their gender or spiritual identity in Indigenous, non-Western ways.² Native LGBTQ+/Two Spirit people existed pre-colonization and are people who are male, female, and sometimes intersexed.² In many tribes, they are considered neither man nor woman but a separate gender altogether. Prior to colonization, Native LGBTQ+/Two Spirit people often had specialized work roles, distinguished temperament, dress, lifestyle and social roles, and were regarded as sacred.² More than 150 tribes have acknowledged Two Spirit in their communities.³

Male-bodied Native LGBTQ+/Two Spirit people had many specialized roles and social functions in their communities, including as healers or medicine persons. They often were responsible for conducting mourning rites and other duties associated with death; they also were conveyors of oral traditions and songs and performed other ceremonial rites, such as foretelling the future and conferring “lucky names” on children or adults.⁴ Male-bodied people could also go to war and partake in male activities such as sweat lodges.⁴

Female-bodied Native LGBTQ+/Two Spirit individuals occupied roles such as chief, council member, trader, hunter, trapper, or fisher, but also participated in warfare and raids, as well as peace missions and vision quests. They often were prophets and medicine persons. Oftentimes within tribes, a child’s gender was decided based on activities they participated in and, by puberty, clothing choices physically displayed their gender choices.⁴

The Native Center for Behavioral Health, in cooperation with [Matt Ignacio, PhD](#), a member of the Tohono O’odham Nation and assistant professor in the Arizona State University School of Social Work, has developed an extensive curriculum called *Honoring Our Relations: Increasing Knowledge of Our LGBTQ+/Two Spirit Wellness*.

References

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Pride Month



We'wha

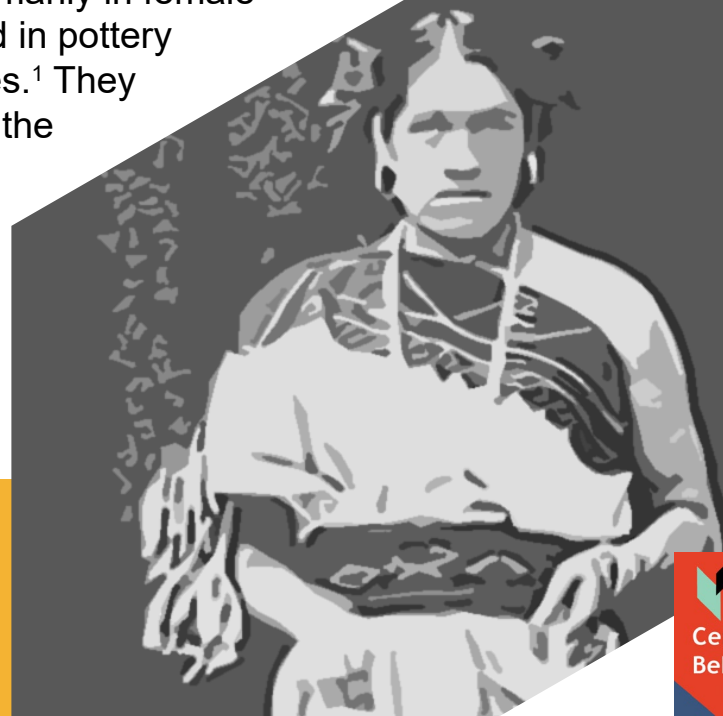
We'wha was a Lhamana, a Zuni Two Spirit person, who occupied both male and female roles within the tribe. They were an important cultural ambassador, spiritual leader, and pottery and textile artist and worked to preserve the history, traditions and knowledge of the Zuni tribe.¹

We'wha was born in 1849 in what is now New Mexico and was orphaned as a child; they remained a part of their mother's clan but maintained ceremonial ties to their father's clan.¹ Though they were born into a male's body, as early as the age of 3 or 4 they demonstrated traits the Zuni associated with Lhamana, which in the tribe are male-bodied people who take on roles traditionally performed by women; Lhamana also often wear women's clothing.¹ We'wha was instructed primarily in female tasks, such as how to grind and prepare corn.¹ They also were trained in pottery and weaving and were the first of the Zuni to sell their pottery and textiles.¹ They helped perform rituals in spiritual ceremonies and became a member of the medicine society.¹

In 1885, We'wha visited Washington, D.C., as an Indian delegate. Everyone believed them to be a cisgender female, so their participation garnered a great deal of attention as it was rare for females to be delegates at this time.¹ We'wha died at the age of 49 from heart disease.¹

References

1. We'wha. (n.d.). National Women's History Museum. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/wewha>





Susan Allen

Susan Allen was the first American Indian woman to serve in the Minnesota Legislature and the first openly lesbian American Indian to win election to a state legislature. A member of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, she served in the Minnesota House of Representatives from 2012 to 2018. Allen is Lakota, Dakota, and Anishinabe and identifies as Two Spirit.^{1,2} She is an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe.

She earned her JD from University of New Mexico Law School and focuses her practice on helping tribal governments draft substantive tribal laws that address child welfare, housing, economic development, and health care.³ She is an expert in nearly all areas of taxation and other matters relating to internal tribal governance and tribal government relationships with federal, state, and local governments. She also has served as associate judge for the Lower Sioux Community in Minnesota and for the Prairie Island Dakota Community Children's Court.

References

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Pride Month



Ilona Verley

Ilona Verley made history when she sashayed her way onto *Canada's Drag Race* – not because of her fiery entrance or fierce monochromatic, pastel drag looks, but by bringing Indigenous and Two Spirit representation to the show. The Nlaka'pamux drag queen identifies as Two Spirit and trans and non-binary. She was eliminated in the 7th episode of the show but was invited with all other contestants to appear in the season finale. She used the platform to draw attention to the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women with a look that blended a First Nations jingle dress hands painted red (red handprints are used to symbolize missing and murdered Indigenous women).

“Being on the show helped me connect with my inner self that I was always trying to ignore,” Verley was quoted as saying in a profile in *Vogue* in August 2020. “I went in there being very open about viewing myself as non-binary, and by the end of it, I walked away feeling confident and understanding of myself. I was able to come home, have a conversation with my mom, and say, ‘I’m trans.’”



References

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