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NEWS & COMMENTARY



A Tribe Called Queer

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BY JON ROTH

In the Native American community, two spirits can be better than one.

Illustration by Simon Pemberton

Gay couples can't marry in Washington. But near Seattle, tucked away off the Puget Sound, there's a sovereign nation whose citizens can marry whoever they choose. They're called the **Suquamish**, and they were there before Washington was a president, much less a state.

The Suquamish enjoy the right to same-sex marriage, thanks to Heather Purser, a 29-year-old lesbian tribal member who grew up near the reservation. She'd already tried to come out of the closet twice during her childhood, and retreated both times before

she arrived at Western Washington University and started attending LGBT events. "I saw that I could be safe there," she says. "I decided I wanted to have that feeling back home, too."

Purser began speaking with her tribe about same-sex marriage in 2007. A year later, she addressed the tribal council, which cautiously encouraged her cause. She did her research: contacting a tribe that had recently passed a similar law, requesting copies of their ordinance, reviewing it with an attorney, and translating it into Suquamish. After three years, she put her petition to a vote at a council meeting. "Everyone said, 'If you do that, it'll kill your dream. We have to do this slowly,'" she says. Purser demanded a vote anyway. In a room of 300 people, not one dissented. In August of 2011, her dream **became law**.

This isn't the first victory for queer Native Americans. In 2006, the **First Nations Two Spirit Collective** formed, creating a political platform for LGBT native people. In 2008, the **Coquille tribe** of North Bend, Ore., became the first to allow same-sex marriage. This summer, the Suquamish became the second. Two months later, the Oglala Sioux tribe of Pine Ridge, S.D., issued a **proclamation** in support of LGBT equality, declaring it "time to ignite the civil rights movement of the 21st century."

This may sound progressive, but Native Americans' recognition of queer people predates Columbus. The Navajo call them *nadleeh*, the Lakota say *winkte*, the Plains Cree use *iskwekan* -- there are almost as many terms as native languages. One word you probably won't hear is *berdache*, a pejorative (something between a catamite and a male prostitute) introduced by early French colonists. In 1990, a queer Native American caucus settled on "two spirit" as an umbrella term to describe indigenous people of alternative gender or sexuality.

"In traditional communities, 'gay' wasn't even a category," says Dr. Karina Walters, an out member of the **Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma** and Director of Washington University's **Indigenous Wellness Research Institute**. "Quite often there were third gender statuses, sometimes up to seven," Walters notes. "These relationships weren't homosexual, they were heterogendered." Two spirits often inhabited the in-between spaces, working as medicine people and mediators between rival factions, living on the outer ring of camp to serve as buffers from outsiders. Some two spirits were even present in Washington, D.C., during treaty negotiations. At best, they were revered. At worst, they were tolerated, sometimes teased.

Like smallpox and whiskey, homophobia was a Western import, codified once the U.S. and Canada became

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nations. Government-run boarding schools spearheaded this reeducation: Students were given Western names, clothes, and haircuts, along with a set of foreign values. Dylan Rose, 24, who describes himself as a mix of Plains Cree, Scottish, Irish, and French, deeply resents the lasting cultural impact of those schools, which flourished through the 1970s. "They taught us not to be Indian," he says. "We're devalued because of same-sex relationships now, and that's not how it used to be."

Generations of ingrained homophobia and sexism have led to high rates of assault, depression, and suicide among two-spirit youth. They often leave reservations to seek refuge in cities, though cities don't ensure safety. "I know of two-spirit people who end up homeless in cities because they had to leave the incredible bullying in their home communities," Walters says. Rose, who spent his youth traveling through reservations in Saskatchewan, now makes his home in Saskatoon. Purser met her girlfriend in Seattle, where she now lives.

Coya White Hat-Artichoker, a member of the First Nations Two Spirit Collective and the **Lakota tribe** in South Dakota, didn't meet a queer Lakota man until she visited the Stonewall Inn.

After being forced to recant so much of their heritage, many Native Americans seem poised to reclaim their two-spirit brothers and sisters. "Two spirit was very much an urban term," says Dr. Alex Wilson, a member of the **Opaskwayak Cree Nation**. "But it has spread to small communities and reservations, which I think is fabulous." In many cases, queer native people are reclaiming their roles as mediators -- Walters notes a disproportionate amount of two spirits working as counselors, community liaisons, and activists. Rose documents his experience as a queer indigenous person on his blog, **Urban Pionquer**, where he shares his story with anyone who will listen. "Talking about who you are helps you become stronger," he says.

This resurgence reclaims traditional values, but also recognizes that, more than five centuries since colonization, there is no room in the Native American community for discrimination. More than a gay rights victory, the Suquamish decision sends a strong message that everyone deserves recognition. Purser trusted that when she put her petition to a vote. "We're a community that supports its own," she says. "I knew that people would have my back."

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