

EAST COAST TWO SPIRIT SOCIETY

LGBT PEOPLE EXISTED AND SERVED VITAL ROLES IN MANY NATIVE AMERICAN OR FIRST NATION COMMUNITIES LONG BEFORE COLONIZATION BEGAN. TODAY, THIS LGBT COMMUNITY ORGANIZES UNDER THE TERM "TWO SPIRIT." WE SAT DOWN WITH SHELDON RAYMORE, THE CHAIR OF THE EAST COAST TWO SPIRIT SOCIETY, WHICH SERVES THE NORTHEAST REGION OF TURTLE ISLAND (A.K.A. NORTH AMERICA).

HOW DID YOU COME TO BE INVOLVED IN THE EAST COAST TWO SPIRIT SOCIETY?

I went to my first Two Spirit gathering six years ago; that's when I embraced the term and identified with it. I had been living my life as a gay man and that was the first time I didn't have to choose between being gay and Native American. They were both included in that term: Two Spirit.

WHAT'S YOUR HERITAGE?

I'm from the Cheyenne River Reservation, part of the Sioux Nation. That's in La Plante, South Dakota. I graduated and moved to the Northwest for a while, lived in Las Vegas, then eventually came to New York. I was working in the fashion industry and that's what brought me to New York in 2005. Today I work for an Italian menswear designer at the Plaza Hotel.

TELL ME MORE ABOUT THE EAST COAST TWO SPIRIT SOCIETY.

The original organization that founded and started here in New York City was called We'Wha and Barcheeamp. Then, 10 years ago there was the Northeast Two Spirit Society, and now we've restructured and have a new direction, so we are now the East Coast Two Spirit Society. We serve the LGBTQI Native American and First Nations community; we increase the visibility of our Two Spirit identities. We do presentations, have weekly powwow dance practices, host a gathering every year in upstate New York, and participate in many Pride marches like Rochester, Philadelphia, and New York City.

WHAT CHALLENGES ARE UNIQUE TO THE NATIVE AMERICAN TWO SPIRIT COMMUNITY?

One of our goals with the Two Spirit Society is to reclaim our place of honor in Native American communities. One of the impacts colonization had on us, especially residential boarding schools that strictly divided men and women, is that it erased a place for Two Spirit people to exist. The work we do is to reclaim our role and function within our communities.

There's a divide between traditionalists and the colonized Native Americans who try to exist in today's world and still identify as Native American. We align ourselves with the traditionalists. In every Native American nation there is a word—and it's a different word for each—for Two Spirit people, which means they were a part of the community. Some tribes had four genders, some had six genders; so long before Stonewall, before the LGBT movement, we were already living as part of our communities,



PHOTO BY WEL PIERCE

our tribes, and were fully accepted. We had very important roles like healers, matchmakers, counselors, or medicine people.

We coined the term "Two Spirit" to be intertribal because there are so many languages. But as a result of colonization, we aren't as accepted as we once were. We have high rates of suicide among our LGBT Native youth, along with other challenges like drugs and alcohol. There is a lot of isolation and separation from community without our Two Spirit roles and a lot of intergenerational trauma; being made to feel isolated from a role in the community can be very difficult.

We always say that part of the purpose in reclaiming our role within our nations is repairing our sacred hoop of life, which is broken and will never be mended or healed until Two Spirit people are accepted back into the circle.

TELL ME ABOUT THE CLOTHING YOU'RE WEARING.

This is the traditional regalia of the grass dancers, people who would come into a new area on the prairie and flatten the grass so that others could move in. The fringe represents blades of grass—when we dance we bend and sway like a blade of grass. I'm carrying a basket and a bow, which are part of a traditional Two Spirit ceremony among the Mojave. The bow symbolized choosing to walk the way with men and the basket is choosing to walk the way with women—it's a choice that all people have. There was no judgement to your choice because we listened to our dreams; they were visions or instructions from the ancestors or creator, the Great Spirit.

WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE THE BROADER LGBT COMMUNITY TO KNOW?

We would like to make allies with other LGBT organizations to help increase our visibility. We're always looking for partnerships. Look for us on our new website EC2SS.NET and reach out to us to learn more.