

'There's so much more of a spectrum'

BY COLLEEN KEANE
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

ALBUQUERQUE – “May beauty surround you wherever you go,” “hózhó náhásdlií,” are among the first words at many gatherings. Throughout the 2nd annual Young Indigenous Queers Re-

treat held Aug. 3 and 4, Native youth received an extended version of this ancestral blessing, ‘May safety surround you, wherever you go!’ Hosted by the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women, the retreat explored ways LGBTQ2S+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer,

Two-Spirit, plus additional communities) youth can stay safe in a society that is often hostile towards them. Held on the Native American Community Academy campus, the gathering drew 24 youth, ages 16 to 25, from different tribes. LGBTQ2S+ youth are at the highest risk of violence, accord-

ing to the New Mexico Youth Risk & Resiliency Survey. “There were so many transgender and non-binary people getting killed within this year, and they are mainly people of color,” said 16-year-old Ashley Southworth, Diné. Non-binary refers to individuals who don’t box themselves

into male/female categories, or any other category. Because LGBTQ2S+ youth are threatened with violence more often than other students, they miss more classes for fear of being bullied or harassed, noted the coalition in a press release. Topics at the retreat included safe sex, HIV prevention, health

care, reproductive justice, intergenerational trauma, legal rights, gender identity, collective art dialogue and staying safe amidst lingering colonial traits and attitudes. Jaren Kee, from the University of New Mexico School of Medicine, encouraged youth to express concerns about health care, especially when facing barriers.

“This (will) empower you to address your own health care needs,” he advised, adding that UNM staff were there to listen. “We want to have constructive dialogue for people who come and see us,” he told the participants. Kee brought attention to several preventative measures for HIV, the human immunodeficiency virus that causes AIDS.

He noted that while HIV incidences have remained stable for the past years, it’s been increasing in adolescent populations. The two-day retreat also focused on how to stop the violence. “Bringing youth together is an important step in stopping the violence,” said Keioshiah Peter, Diné, youth coordinator for the coalition who organized the retreat. “Their ideas and knowledge should be used to teach us how to imagine a future without violence.”

Southworth said staying safe is always on her mind. She said institutions, government agencies and churches can help create safer environments by adding inclusive lists of self-identifiers on intake forms. “School just got to putting in (spaces) for preferred gender and preferred name. Hospitals (often) don’t have that option,” she said, adding that that includes the Indian Health Service where she goes for health care.

When there are no options and busy clerks put patients on the spot to explain their preferred identity, she warned, this can lead to violence from hostile people. “(Overhearing) at the front desk, someone may get aggressive,” she said, noting hospitals and other organizations should watch out for the “safety things.” Southworth’s recommendation is to educate people.

“With mainstream society basically looking out a hetero lens,” she said, “the (LGBTQ2S+) community is left out. It’s important for people to realize that it’s not just male and female. There is so much more of a broader spectrum.”

She said it also would help if the media focused on good news about the LGBTQ2S+ community. “News is always negative,” she said. “If the news would cover the rights we have and want to keep, I think it would be easier (and safer) for all of us.” “I want to be an orthodontist,” she said. “There’s a lot of people who don’t feel good about themselves because of their teeth.”

Twenty-two-year-old Orien Long Knife, Chiricahua Apache/White Clay/Chippewa Cree, who’s working on a bachelor’s degree in fine arts at the Institute of American Indian Art, said throwing off colonial perceptions and returning to traditional ways is a major path to break the cycle of violence. “With our (tribal) languages, gender language didn’t exist, only when it was necessary,” he said. “Binary (male and female references) disrupted our language patterns.”

“Some tribes, like the Ojibwa from the Great Lakes Region, have five different gender identities,” he said. “They don’t assign gender roles until puberty. Then, it’s up to the person to choose. That knowledge was buried at the turn of last century (after colonists arrived).” Looking back to the 1970s, he said a group of LGBTQ2S+ Natives convened to ditch colonial terms and craft new language that reflected their ancestral identities.

That’s when the term “Two-Spirit person” evolved, recognizing that each person has feminine and masculine energy within them, explained Long Knife. “This gave me a lot of comfort,” he said.

The coalition is planning a 5K run on Oct. 6 at Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute in Albuquerque. A third Young Indigenous Queers Retreat is planned for next year. Organizations supporting the retreat included: University of New Mexico, LGBTQ Resource Center, Transgender Resource Center of New Mexico, New Mexico Health Equity Partnership, Solace Crisis Treatment Center, Tewa Women United, Planned Parenthood, Native American Community Academy, Self-Serve, UNM School of Medicine and Young Women United.

Information: csvanw.org, #Iwillrunforher5K.



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