

Randy Burns

Randy Burns is a gay indigenous activist born of the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe in northwest North America (located slightly north of what is today Reno, Nevada). In 1975, Burns co-founded North America's first LGBTQ+ indigenous organization, the Gay American Indians (GAI), in San Francisco, California. GAI began as an inter-tribal LGBTQ+ social group whose mission was to reclaim and restore the lost historical identities, traditions, and cultural and spiritual roles of queer Native elders. GAI offered a range of social, economic, legal, and cultural services specific to the needs of LGBTQ+ native peoples, first in the San Francisco Bay Area and then elsewhere in North America. In 1987, for instance, Burns co-founded the Indian AIDS Project to combat the drastic toll the virus was taking on their communities. Burns' work with GAI laid the foundations for what would become the "Two Spirit Movement." In the 1990s, queer indigenous communities coined the term, "Two Spirit," chosen to reference the traditional indigenous understanding of individuals possessing both "male" and "female" "spirits," or characteristics. Many precolonial tribal cultures had different variations of "two spirit" or third gender people with a range of important cultural and religious roles.

Document A: "Gay Native Americans Find a Safe Harbor," by Randy Burns, San Francisco Examiner, Pride Edition, June 23, 2000, page 114.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/462622770/>

SAN FRANCISCO EXAMINER: PRIDE 2000

Gay Native Americans find a safe harbor


By Randy Burns
SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

I moved to San Francisco in 1975 from Nevada leaving behind my tribal homeland, Pyramid Lake Indian Reservation. Like so many young lesbian and gay Native Americans I moved here to continue my higher education at San Francisco State University.

During my summer break months, I was employed at the American Indian Center located on Valencia Street. It was there I met so many lesbian and gay Native Americans like myself.

It was the very first time in my life I felt safe to be myself and free from ridicule and harassment for being different as a gay man. I met other Native Americans, some of mixed heritage, representing over five hundred Inter-Tribal nations.

So it was easy for me to organize



Randy Burns works as a nurse assistant in San Francisco General Hospital.

port for lesbian and gay people living here in the San Francisco Bay Area. At one time GAI membership reached over one thousand strong.

Never in my dreams did I ever imagine meeting so many queer people living here all in one place. Every year, I looked forward to marching in the gay parade behind our home-made banners.


During the mid-eighties the AIDS epidemic began to take a toll on our membership. I remember the news media reporting of the Gay Plague killing homosexual men in New York and Los Angeles.

I knew it was only a matter of time that it would come our way to take away our special and talented warriors. Our local Indian leadership and community members were convinced that AIDS was only a white man's disease.

During this time there was rampant AIDS-phobia and GAI membership felt that we had to challenge our own peoples' ignorance and fears about this deadly disease.

GAI started the American Indian AIDS Institute, a group devoted to providing emotional, practical and spiritual support to those living with the virus.

On the Web: examiner.com/gaypride has the full version of these First Person submissions and many more



Document B: Gay American Indians information sheet, Date unknown, Randy Burns Papers collection, Box 1, Folder 1, GLBT Historical Society, 989 Market St, San Francisco, CA.

Gay American Indians (GAI) was founded in July of 1975. GAI has been involved with activities in both the Gay/Lesbian community and the Indian community of the San Francisco Bay-Area.

Our goals are to meet the unique needs of the Bay-Area's gay Indian community. Certain aspects of our gay Indian lifestyle create needs which are not currently being addressed by existing service organizations. Those needs fall into several categories.

- * Counseling i.e. Youth, Drug, Alcohol, ✓
Lovers/Couples, Urban Survival
- * Temporary Housing ✓
- * Health
- * Employment
- * Social Services
- * Historical/Contemporary Cultural Activities
- * Legal Services

GAI currently operates informal networks for service delivery addressing these unique needs. We constantly seek methods to upgrade these services and funds to develop quality services delivery.

Our membership is open to all Indian and non-Indian, and our current mailing list exceeds 500 individuals, many from throughout the U.S.A. . A significant number are non-Indian members and supporters.

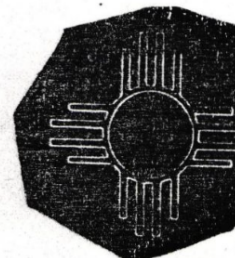
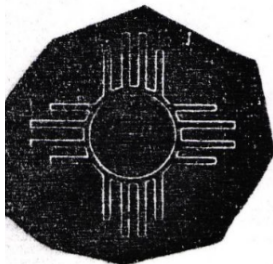
The representation of many tribal groups has provided us with a wealth of social and cultural tradition. This has added to the unity of GAI and has enhanced the self-esteem of individual members.

GAI holds its general Board meetings * on the first Monday of each month. Committee meetings are held at various times to coordinate social and fund raising activities as well as to plan for the development and realization of our mission and goals.

GAI central office operates out of the Pride Center, 890 Hayes Street, San Francisco. For additional questions or information please direct all inquiries to our office manager at 863-9000 or ERNA at 552-1070.

All Donations can be made payable to:

GAY AMERICAN INDIANS
890 HAYES STREET
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94117



Document C: “Two Spirit Today: Drawing from the Past, Living in the Present,” by Adam Armstrong (Nipmuc), *Two Spirit Times*, Volume 1, Issue 2, Spring 2007, page 2.

https://web.archive.org/web/20071101001140/http://ne2ss.typepad.com/northeast_twospirit_socie/2007/03/spring_twospiri.html

Two-Spirit Today

Drawing from the past, living in the present

By Adam Armstrong (Nipmuc)

A Two-Spirit community member recently expressed to us that he felt lost. His concerns about how his community perceives him, how he “fits in,” and how he self-identifies, speak to the experience of many Two-Spirit people today.

“Back in the day,” each Nation had its own way of defining what we call Two-Spirit. Across Indian Country, Two-Spirit people tended to perform the work and assume the characteristics/dress of genders not biologically their own. In general (though with some variation across nations), hunting, defense, and day-to-day governance were relegated to men. Caring for children, harvesting crops, and cooking were frequently the domain of women. As long as Two-Spirits “lived as a woman or a man,” they were considered and treated as such. Some would live their entire lives as their adopted gender. Others lived as women, but in certain circumstances would switch and assume the identity of men. Some would occupy a unique gender as neither man nor woman.

Today, lines defining women’s and men’s roles based on occupation/activity have become blurred. Tasks traditionally the vocation of men are performed by those who are biologically women, and vice versa. No longer can we identify ourselves based on performing “women’s work” or “men’s work.” Thus, we may not be able to look exclusively to some of the traditional ways we were defined to guide us in understanding ourselves as Two-Spirit today.

Today, many begin their Two-Spirit journey by identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or as intersex/transgendered. We often feel something else, something more than merely to whom we are sexually attracted: a strong and inherent connection to either feminine or masculine energies, with some feeling a balance of both energies.

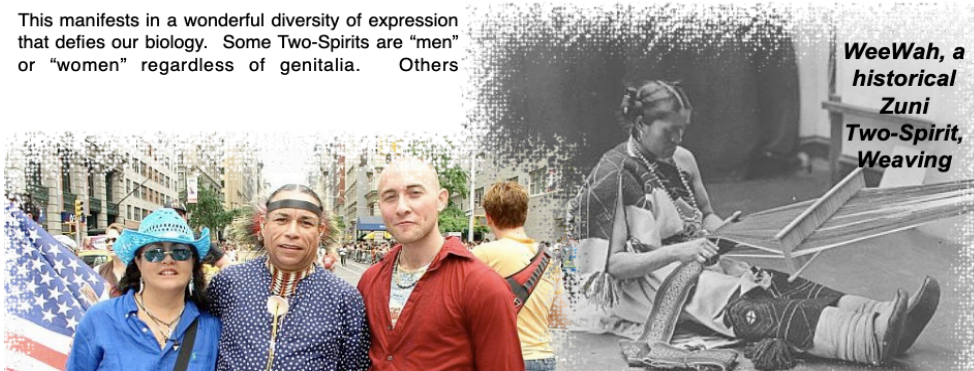
This manifests in a wonderful diversity of expression that defies our biology. Some Two-Spirits are “men” or “women” regardless of genitalia. Others

experience a shape-shifting of identities, at times sensing the feminine side as more present, defining our thoughts, feelings, actions, and identity. Other times masculine energies dominate, and we are “male.” An enormous spectrum of Two-Spirit definitions exists; many elements interconnect to determine them.

Colonization has devastated much of the “Two-Spirit Tradition,” relegating it to wisdom possessed by a handful of Elders. Through them, we are building for ourselves and our People an understanding of who we used to be, who we are now, and what our future holds.

Today we live in many worlds. Our Indigenous and LGBTI communities, local neighborhoods, and collective national societies influence the direction of our lives. Too often people form identities based on the opinions others have of us. For Two-Spirit people, this can be to our detriment.

How do we know who we are? How do we find our place now? We can look to each other in the Two-Spirit community for strength. We can learn Two-Spirit traditions from our Elders and each other and incorporate these practices into our own lives. We have a responsibility for our individual and collective health to maintain and protect the knowledge and ways, and to educate ourselves and our People about our place and importance. We must look within to know who we are.



Reading & Reflection Questions (for Small Group Discussion)

Close Reading & Reflection Questions

Please reflect on the following questions based on your reading of this Case Study. Then, discuss your findings with your group.

1. How did the Gay American Indians (GAI) come to be? Why did Burns find it necessary to create this organization when gay and lesbians Natives were already safely gathering at the American Indian Center?
2. Why did the GAI's mission of restoring lost cultural heritage require inter-tribal communication and cooperation?
3. Before colonization, "two spirit" peoples held positions of unique importance in their respective tribal communities, often being entrusted with duties like teaching, healing, prediction, childcare, and artistry. How did the services that GAI offered the LGBTQ+ Native community serve their mission of restoring those sacred roles? Give two examples.