

1975

GAY AMERICAN INDIANS IS FOUNDED

Gay American Indians was created to support the indigenous peoples of all nations in North America who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, or two-spirit. The group, the first formal organization of lesbian and gay indigenous peoples, formed at a critical time for urban American Indians: a few years before the coming HIV-AIDS epidemic, which struck the San Francisco area with particular harshness.

LOCALE: San Francisco, California

CATEGORIES: Civil rights; organizations and institutions; HIV-AIDS; race and ethnicity

KEY FIGURES

Randy Burns (b. 1955), Northern Paiute activist, author, and health care provider, cofounded Gay American Indians

Barbara Cameron (1954-2002), Lakota Sioux/Hunkpapa activist and author, cofounded Gay American Indians

SUMMARY OF EVENT

American Indian cultures in the early historic period of European contact and documentation demonstrated and accepted a broader range of gender variation than typical of Euro-American societies of the time. This generalization holds for many North American tribal societies, though it must be recognized that the expression and meanings of different genders varied depending on regional, tribal, and linguistic conventions, which also changed through time.

With the influence of Christianity, government-enforced schooling, and other acculturating influences, traditional gender practices and understandings became stigmatized, which ensured that mid-twentieth century American Indians who identified themselves as gay or lesbian often were no longer accepted positively by their indigenous communities. This meant that large numbers of young people who wanted to express their nonhetero-

sexual gender identities in a supportive context found it necessary to migrate to urban centers, such as San Francisco, which had, and still has, a thriving and politically active gay and lesbian population. By the 1970's, San Francisco was home to an increasing number of American Indians, including an unknown percentage of individuals who had alternative gender expressions.

This was the context that led Randy Burns and Barbara Cameron, with a small group of friends, to found Gay American Indians (GAI), the first formal organization established in North America by and for gay and lesbian Native Americans. Within a year of its founding, the group had approximately thirty members from about twenty different tribes.

GAI provided support and practical assistance to young people new to the San Francisco area, and it served a social role for long-term community members. Reportedly, the organization had 150 members by the late 1970's, an indication of its importance to its constituents.

In the early 1980's, Will Roscoe, a researcher and writer, became involved with GAI, and with his assistance the Gay American Indian History Project was founded in 1984. By this time, the group numbered several hundred members and was still the only North American support organization for gay and lesbian American Indians.

By this time, AIDS was severely impacting the San Francisco gay community, although the effects on American Indians went unrecognized because the Centers for Disease Control were not collecting statistical data on indigenous people with HIV or AIDS. Instead, the indigenous were categorized as "white," "black," or "other." This meant that no intervention was offered to American Indians specifically, so there was no awareness that indigenous people living in San Francisco and other urban centers, with unique needs (as is the case with any group not part of the mainstream), were at risk for HIV-AIDS, as was the general population.

It was a huge shock to the GAI when one of its

members, Jodi Harry (a Miwok) was diagnosed with AIDS in 1987. The distress was compounded when he committed suicide soon after his diagnosis. Members of GAI grieved over his death and were sad that he had not requested support from the GAI community. Harry's death, however, had two positive consequences.

In 1988, when GAI members collaborated with Roscoe to produce *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology*, they made sure Roscoe included information about AIDS services in the endnotes of the book. In addition to providing agency contacts, the book also included a list of tribes with documented alternative gender roles, and it provided accounts of contemporary gender variation among American Indians. Burns wrote the book's preface, and many other GAI members contributed autobiographies, essays, short stories, and poems. *Living the Spirit* makes a powerful statement about the ongoing presence of alternatively gendered Indians and their feelings of continuity with their tribal histories.

In the year before *Living the Spirit's* publication, GAI had established the Indian AIDS Project in memory of Jodi Harry and Herbie Jeans (a Navajo/Otoe), who died of AIDS complications. By 1988, this initiative formed the basis for the newly established American Indian AIDS Institute. Other gay and lesbian Indian organizations were formed in Minneapolis, Toronto, and New York City around the same time. All of these groups provided AIDS education and support services for their communities, which began to suffer the ravages of the illness.

Sadly, and despite more intervention and health education projects, the membership of GAI continues to be impacted by AIDS. Burns remembers that "at 65 plus deaths from AIDS," he "stopped counting." He continues to speak at memorial services for community members and is involved with promoting health initiatives for the indigenous of California. He and others involved with GAI celebrated the third decade since GAI's founding and hosted a writers conference of LGBT indigenous peoples in July of 2005. Also, Burns was the grand marshal of the 2005 San Francisco LGBT pride parade. GAI

disbanded as a formal organization in the late 1990's, however, and its records are archived at the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco (www.glbthistory.org), ensuring the preservation of GAI's history.

SIGNIFICANCE

Gay American Indians, the first formal organization for gay and lesbian American Indians, had a major impact on the lives of gay, lesbian, and two-spirit American Indians living in the San Francisco area. GAI provided an activist role model for other indigenous groups that followed its own formation, including the Bay Area American Indian Two-Spirits (BAAITS). BAAITS (www.baaits.org) hosted an international two spirit gathering in the summer of 2005.

—Susan J. Wurtzburg

FURTHER READING

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