

# Respect is a Tribal tradition: Change Team supports LGBTQ/Two-Spirits

## Elders tell of those with two spirits

Before colonization and throughout many Tribal communities and histories, there existed a deep understanding and affirmation of broad and mixed gender roles. People were not just born men or women, masculine or feminine, we all had a mix of both traits within ourselves.

*"Our Elders tell us of people who were gifted among all beings because they carried two spirits, that of male and female. It is told that women engaged in Tribal warfare and married other women, as there were men who married other men. These individuals were looked upon as a third and fourth gender in many cases and in almost all cultures they were honored and revered. Two-spirit people were often the visionaries, the healers, the medicine people, the nannies of orphans, the care givers." Sandra Laframboise and Michael Anhorn<sup>1</sup>*

After colonization, there has been little recognition of this history and often our Two-Spirit Tribal members feel isolated and invisible in both their Tribal community as well as the larger world.

In 2010, with the support of the Western States Center, the Siletz Tribal Change Team was created to improve the services that are utilized by the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgendered and queer (LGBTQ) and Two-Spirit community.

Mindful that we have not as a community or Tribal government made explicit efforts to reach out and serve our LGBTQ/Two-Spirit community members, the team committed to create awareness, provide education/resources and change the culture of the Native community to be more accepting of LGBTQ/Two-Spirit individuals.

In the last few months, the Change Team has succeeded in:

- Hosting a staff retreat where members developed their overall vision and goals, creating work plans that detailed the activities and objectives for the next year
- Holding monthly support groups in the Siletz, Portland and Salem offices. The support groups provide education, peer support and an environment that is accepting and safe for LGBTQ/Two-Spirit and allies
- Changing policies in the 477 Self-Sufficiency Program to be more inclusive of LGBTQ families and individuals
- Developing visual resources for Tribal offices that depict diversity and acceptance
- Planning upcoming events, including a National Coming Out Day gathering on Oct. 11

In an effort to promote the National Coming Out Day event as well as elevate the lives, voices, experiences and leadership of LGBTQ/Two-Spirit Tribal citizens, the Change Team will profile Tribal community members who are proudly LGBTQ/Two-Spirit leaders. This month, the Change Team will profile one of its own members, Kurtis Barker.

Barker is the director of the 477 Self-Sufficiency Program and chair of the Tribal Transportation Advisory Committee. He previously served as chair of the Change Team and as chair for several years on the Tribal Election Board. He also has run for Tribal Council.

Barker was interviewed and a summary of the questions is listed below:

**What's it like being Two-Spirit in Siletz?** Being Two-Spirit and "out" within the community definitely feels isolating as there are not many who identify openly as LGBTQ, men especially. There are times when I have faced discrimination, homophobia and hate. I grew up experiencing and accepting homophobia and discrimination. This is one of the main reasons I participate on the Change Team – to create positive change is important to me.

**How were you raised in your family to understand who you are and what identities you can claim?** Gayness was never spoken of positively in my home. Discussions about the subject created an environment where I could never truly be myself. I'm 28 and I've been "out" to my immediate family for two years now and sometimes it still feels hard.

**How have you been able to share this identity with other folks in your family and community?** I've only shared my identity with my immediate family, friends and several close extended family members. I've also participated on the Change Team for well over a year now. Sharing very personal information about myself is not something I like to do; at the same time, sharing that part of me has been uplifting. I hope by doing so it can change someone's mind about how they feel toward the LGBTQ community.

**How have they responded?** For the most part, the response has been positive. I think acceptance from my immediate family has been the hardest. It's a coming out process for them as well and it's a conversation that will need to continue. The response from my friends has been extremely positive and I probably wouldn't be where I am without them.

**What would make you feel welcome and affirmed within your own community?** Everyone wants to feel some sort of affirmation or acceptance and I think the Siletz community is getting better with that. I think making it known that the Tribal community will support you regardless of your sexual identity is very important and voicing that over and over so acceptance is the norm.

**How has your sexual orientation shaped your role in the community and the way you have grown your influence and leadership?** I wouldn't be anywhere near where I am today if I didn't first face my own internalized homophobia and know and accept myself. Being part of the LGBTQ community has led me to want to help others and prove that I can create positive change, positive influence and show leadership, not just within my program but within the community and Tribe.

**What factored into your decision to come out to your family or community?** Growing up, I feared rejection from family and friends if I came out. So I chose

to come out when I was independent and financially stable. I also grew to accept who I was as I got older and I was tired of portraying a person that I wasn't.

**If the Tribe were to become truly welcoming and affirming, what would that look like to you?** We are moving in the right direction and the Change Team has made many positive changes. I would like to see Tribal programs identify clearly in our policies and procedures that we serve LGBTQ/Two-Spirit families and individuals. The Change Team also would like to create a marriage equality ordinance that allows same sex marriage and have employee benefits that cover partners of LGBTQ employees.

**Why are support groups for Two-Spirit folks in Siletz an important response and effort to building a welcoming community within the Tribe?** I think the support groups are extremely important. They create a safe space where LGBTQ individuals and allies can come together. We need to hear from the community on what needs to be improved and where we can move forward within the Tribe. We are creating awareness and having conversations that wouldn't exist if not for these support groups.

**How are LGBTQ and Two-Spirit issues seen or thought of within the Tribe?** I think the Change Team has brought up situations and conversations that people didn't think would happen within the Tribe. I think many of the changes we have done or are planning to do will be accepted by the Tribe. We have had resistance, but overall we are making positive changes and getting results with our work. I hope our work is seen as something that's long overdue and needed. All members of the Tribe should feel accepted and affirmed regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

If you would like to be profiled and included in the Change Team's efforts, please contact Jamie Bokuro or Tracey Worman at 800-922-1399 or 541-444-2532.

<sup>1</sup> Retrieved July 19, 2010, from dancingtoeagle-spiritsociety.org/twospirit.php



## Upcoming Events

### Siletz

Support Group Meeting – Sept. 18  
5:30-6:30 p.m. (potluck, bring your favorite dish)

Celebration of National Coming Out Day – Oct. 11

Time TBD. Contact the Change Team if you would like to participate in the planning process. Barbecue to be provided. More information to be included in the October issue of Siletz News.

### Portland

Support Group Meeting – Sept. 19  
5:30 p.m. (potluck, bring your favorite dish)

### Salem

Support Group Meeting – Sept. 20  
5 p.m. (potluck, bring your favorite dish)

### Eugene

Support Group Meeting – Sept. 21  
5 p.m. (potluck, bring your favorite dish)

Please contact the area offices if you would like to participate in our upcoming events or if you would like more information on the Change Team. You also can find valuable information on our Facebook page. Just search "Change Team" and click "Like"

## CEDARR

### Community Efforts Demonstrating the Ability to Rebuild and Restore

**Mission Statement:** We will utilize resources to prevent the use of alcohol and other drugs, delinquency and violence; we will seek to reduce the barriers to treatment and support those who choose abstinence.

Sept. 5 • 5:30 p.m.

Siletz Public Library  
255 SE Gaither, Siletz



## Siletz Tribal Behavioral Health Programs

### Prevention, Outpatient Treatment and Women's Transitional

Siletz: 800-600-5599 or  
541-444-8286

Eugene: 541-484-4234

Salem: 503-390-9494

Portland: 503-238-1512

Narcotics Anonymous Toll-Free  
Help Line – 877-233-4287

For information on Alcoholics  
Anonymous: aa-oregon.org