

# Indigenous Knowledge and Two-Spirit Leadership: Pathways to Inclusive Futures

## A Guide

*This resource intends to educate people about the role of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer identities by highlighting the importance of their traditional roles, histories, current reclamation, and impacts across Indian Country.*

### Introduction

Throughout the history of Native nations across Turtle Island and around the world, communities have been led, lands have been stewarded, and connections have been built through the roles of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer leaders. These individuals carry many responsibilities and a great deal of knowledge. Their leadership heavily influences and guides their communities forward. Since colonization, Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer communities have been ongoing targets of mistreatment, violence, and policies carrying harm that directly impact the safety and sovereignty of Native nations and Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer people. At Native Governance Center, we affirm that queer and trans relatives have always existed in our communities and will continue to exist as strong leaders.

Before European colonization, Two-Spirit people played important roles in Indigenous communities across Turtle Island. In many communities, the ability to hold both masculine and feminine spirits meant unique abilities and responsibilities, resulting in Two-Spirit people holding various leadership roles. With colonization, Indigenous ways of being were disrupted. Two-Spirit people who refused to abandon their ways of life and assimilate were harshly penalized, including being imprisoned or having their families' treaty rations withheld. Executive orders, laws, and other policies rooted in colonialism ignore the original cultures of the land. **We call on Tribal leaders to engage in governance that includes, supports, and protects our queer and trans relatives.** For non-Native allies and accomplices, we encourage you to take action in your local communities after reflecting and doing research on how you can support Indigiqueer and LGBTQ+ people more broadly.

**At NGC, we want to acknowledge and uplift Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer leaders in our work, and we are honored to have been joined by incredible leaders during our event, “Sacred Voices: Learning from Indigiqueer and Two-Spirit Leaders.”**



**Giiwedin**, a descendant of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe and an enrolled member of the St. Croix Chippewa Indians of Wisconsin, is a two-spirit Anishinaabe influencer, educator, and water protector. They utilize platforms like TikTok and Instagram to share free educational content on Ojibwe language, culture, and environmental issues. In 2022, Giiwedin was honored in GLAAD's 20 Under 20 list for their impactful activism. Recently, they have ventured into modeling, showcasing their versatility and commitment to representation. Through their multifaceted work, Giiwedin continues to inspire and advocate for Indigenous and LGBTQ+ communities.



**Susan Allen** is an attorney and shareholder of the Jacobson Law Group in St. Paul, Minnesota, where she represents tribes and tribal entities on a full range of matters, including complex commercial transactions, construction law, finance, corporate governance, and taxation. Susan is a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe.

Susan's dedication to public service propelled her to the Minnesota House of Representatives for three terms (2012-2018), where she was elected as its first Native American female member and the first Native American/LGBT to serve in any state legislature. She moved from place to place during her childhood to various Indian reservations and urban Indian communities, and this transient experience still influences her call to service. She raised a son as a single parent, then attended law school to earn two law degrees.



**Isaac Casados**, a Diné political leader, has nearly two decades of experience in advocacy and community engagement. He serves as Secretary for the Democratic Party of New Mexico and Vice President of CNN Hero Award-winning Moving Arts Española. A seasoned campaign strategist, he has helped elect LGBTQ+ candidates to the NM House and Senate. In 2021, as Chairman of the Native American Democratic Caucus of NM, he advanced equitable Native representation. In 2023, he became the first openly gay Native American Executive Officer in the state's Democratic Party. He also serves as a board member for the Victory Fund Campaign.



**Jordan Dresser** is a member of the Northern Arapaho Tribe located on the Wind River Indian Reservation in central Wyoming. He graduated from the University of Wyoming with a Bachelor of Arts degree in journalism and a Master of Arts degree in museum studies from the University of San Francisco. Dresser served as the Chairman of the Northern Arapaho Tribe. He is a filmmaker, and his latest film, *Who She Is*, is screening across the country. He currently serves as the Curator of Collections at the Fort Collins Museum of Discovery.

Through the insights and experiences shared by our panelists, we can learn more about the importance of diversity across leadership and inspire action that supports and sustains leaders.

## Language & Terminology

It's important to note that this language is **exclusive** to Indigenous people. While Indigenous people **may or may not** identify with these terms, this language is not for non-Indigenous people to use to refer to themselves. We also cannot assume what terms people use to describe themselves. While an individual may identify with Two-Spirit or Indigiqueer, they may instead use nation-specific terms and/or other terms like lesbian, gay, bisexual, nonbinary, trans, and much more.

**Two-Spirit/2Spirit/2S:** Elder and organizer Myra Laramée (Fish River Cree Nation) pulled this phrase from the Anishinaabemowin language “niizh manidoowag”, which translates to “two spirits.” This was agreed upon as an umbrella term for gender variant people across Indian Country to use at the 3rd Annual Inter-Tribal Native American, First Nations, Gay and Lesbian Gathering in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1990. Some Two-Spirit people may also be nonbinary, trans, or queer but these identities are not the same. Two-Spirit specifically includes the specific social and ceremonial roles Two-Spirit people play within their communities, not just their gender or sexuality.

**Indigiqueer/Indigequeer:** This term acknowledges that not all LGBTQ+ Indigenous people identify as Two-Spirit. Indigiqueer was created by TJ Cuthand (Plains Cree) in 2004 when working to title the Vancouver Queer Film Festival’s Indigenous/Two-Spirit program. After the term began being used more widely, TJ wrote, “I liked the idea of Indigequeer. Because Queer is kind of a confrontational label, it’s one of those old reclamations that makes people uncomfortable. Indigenous isn’t a really confrontational label (although everything else about it is because we are all still all over the globe resisting) so putting the two together makes this word I really liked.”

**Nation-Specific Terms:** In addition to the terms above, the language of many different Native nations affirms many diverse gender identities and roles within communities. This reflects a larger cultural framework that values the fluidity of gender. While we cannot share a full list of these terms nor the roles they play within their specific communities, we wanted to share a few examples reflecting the diversity of Indian Country:

1. Nádleehí/dilbaa’ (Navajo)
2. Winkte/winkta (Lakota/Dakota)
3. Badé (Crow)
4. Mixoge(Osage)

***“These political systems today, we're still learning them because they are not ours. We're trying to navigate them. I always think about the power of the Tribal sovereignty. Nobody should be able to tell them what to do. I think that's a true power that we have. I think that goes back to this new generation who is recognizing those things as well but also being comfortable with who they are and being true.”***

***– Jordan Dresser (Northern Arapaho Tribe)***

# The Role of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Identities in Indian Country– Their Importance, History, and Current Realities

Gender variance and expression are a natural part of human existence, as indicated by many different communities recognizing far more than two genders. Before colonization, Two-Spirit individuals held important roles within our communities, such as healers, spiritual leaders, artists, teachers, and mediators. These unique roles were integral to the social and spiritual fabric of their communities.

Colonial forces sought to erase Two-Spirit identities through assimilation policies and violence, disrupting traditional roles and marginalizing these individuals within their own communities. Contact changed some of the original stories and beliefs of the land, but Two-Spirit people have resisted and maintained their traditions despite colonization. Today, Two-Spirit relatives are reclaiming their roles and living authentically.

Now, as before colonization, we are seeing Indigenous people reconnect and reclaim their traditional roles within Native nations as leaders, knowledge keepers, organizers, and more. Through art, language revitalization, storytelling, and finding out more about their traditional practices, people are gaining and experiencing what it means to be Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer in their own communities. However, Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer individuals continue to face challenges, including discrimination and a lack of representation.

***“When we go into places where there have been not been Two-Spirit or made of people, then we transform those places that we go into to serve our lead. So when I first served in the legislature, I was the first Native American female and Two-Spirit. People didn't really know how to react. But what did I bring to the legislature? Well, I brought different perspectives. I brought – I may not look that different from any other legislator or attorney or Native person, but part of my identity is that I am serving a role within a community. So every place I go, I bring that community with me. So when we serve as community-centered people, we bring those people with us into those spaces, wherever we go, and we transform them.”***

***– Susan Allen (Rosebud Sioux Tribe)***



# How Can I Support the Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Community?

**Educate Yourself and Others:** Learn about the histories and cultures of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer communities. Engage with resources created by Indigenous scholars, knowledge-keepers, storytellers, and organizations.

- Work within your own Native community to begin breaking down existing stigmas and stereotypes often rooted in colonization.
- Don't hesitate to acknowledge/call out bias or harmful behaviors within your community.
- Support or lead re-education efforts about history within your Tribe. Revitalize and reform education using culturally knowledgeable elders and researchers in our communities.
- Update curriculum and early education to be more inclusive, real, and authentic.

**Support Indigenous-Led Initiatives:** Contribute to and amplify programs and events that center Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer voices, ensuring they lead the narrative.

- Research, identify, and commit to supporting Indigenous-led initiatives near you.
  - Is there a local Two-Spirit group or organization you can support? If one doesn't exist in your area, are you a Native leader who can help start one?
- Provide and support Native leaders looking to participate in governance in and beyond their communities. Give them resources and education that will support them in being a strong political candidate.
- Support programs and events through donating resources you have access to, offering skills you specialize in, and by simply showing up to learn more.

***“We've got to continue to fight, but we've got to get people ready. You know? And sometimes those leaders don't even know they're ready, but everybody else can see it, and it's giving them the confidence to be like, Okay, this is what is next. So I think it's getting ready. I think it's going to be a tough few years because just Native culture across the board, just going to try to get erased in different ways. So I think we need to get those strong people to the front and show them the most support that we can.”***

**– Jordan Dresser (Northern Arapaho Tribe)**

**Advocate for Inclusive Policies:** Work towards policies that recognize and protect the rights of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer individuals within both Indigenous and broader societal contexts.

- Across all levels of governance, both Tribal leaders and other leaders must participate in the discussion of:
  - Tribes, cities, and states can adopt anti-harassment policies, supportive marriage and adoption laws, mental and physical health policies, and more that affirm and protect queer and trans people.
  - Are efforts around policy change ongoing? Is there a group leading policy change that you can join and/or support?

***“How we help people grow is through policies and laws...an opportunity to strengthen Tribal Governance policies to meet the federal requirements, but, at the same time, be Tribal specific and be useful in protecting Two-Spirit communities and access to health care and access to important services.”***

***– Susan Allen (Rosebud Sioux Tribe)***

**Support and Collaborate with Native Nations:** Native nations are always encouraging non-Native folks to join their movements, support change, and become allies to their communities. Through a respectful approach to standing with Native nations and their communities, specifically with the Two-Spirit community, you can help shift the narrative and bring awareness to challenges faced and promote sovereignty. While we have a few recommendations below, we encourage you to research and connect with folks on how best you can support!

**Research:** Before you collaborate with Native nations, do your research! Do you understand their status as political entities? What is their history especially with the specific topic area you are trying to support? If you are proposing a new initiative or action, be sure to check if that nation already has a plan that is similar!

***“I suggest each and every one of you get active in your communities. Reach out to your Tribal leadership. Find ways you can advocate to make sure that these important areas that not only affect our Indigiqueer communities and other communities.”***

***– Isaac Casados (Diné)***

**Time and Resources:** Can you set aside resources every month that you can contribute to the Two-Spirit community? Can you attend events featuring Two-Spirit folks? Can you set up a recurring donation to a Two-Spirit organization? Support comes in all shapes and sizes, something as simple as setting aside time to educate yourself on the community is a great first step!

**Policy Change:** Are there policies that harm Two-Spirit citizens of a certain Native nation that you oppose? Contact your local representatives and encourage them to implement changes! How can you actively support and promote the sovereignty of Native nations?

*“Tribal sovereignty is strong. We predate the Constitution. I'm going to trust that that fight is going to be continue and that we will continue to preserve sovereignty.”*

*– Susan Allen (Rosebud Sioux Tribe)*

## Advice for Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Leaders

During our event, panelists were asked what advice they have for Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer leaders, they shared:

*“You're not alone. I think a lot of us have gone through this exploration. I call it an exploration because I didn't really come out until I was in college. The challenges you face and the fear that you face is everything that we've gone through and that you will always have support amongst a dynamic community who sees you for who you are, who respects who you are, who loves your identity, who wants to embrace you and wants you to not only take your voice for what you feel you need to give to this community but wants to take your voice and spread it to the world because it's that dynamic. It's that important. It breathes new life into our communities.”*

*– Isaac Casados (Diné)*



*“Have some sense of identity, what is your role going to be in our community? Why are they here? Young people should have a sense of how important they are, that we’re counting on them. But acknowledging that and helping to guide them to assume those roles, I think that is what I would focus on and encourage them to help each other to do that, to prepare them for what they're going to be doing and to help our community and to live in our communities.”*

– Susan Allen (Rosebud Sioux Tribe)

*“We're all Tribal people. I think the key thing is don't be afraid to take part in your ceremonies because there's a place for you there. That's where you're going to find out who you really are and show you all the different sides of you. And that's one you can't run from, you know. I encourage everybody to take part of that. It's a rich life and will carry you in a way that's meaningful.”*

– Jordan Dresser (Northern Arapaho Tribe)

## Additional Resources

**Find, connect with, and support your local Two-Spirit Society** like the ones listed here:  
<https://www.indigenouspridela.org/connecting-communities/#twospiritorgsus>

**Tribal Equity Toolkit:** Tribal Resolutions and Codes to Support Two-Spirit/LGBT Justice in Indian Country <https://graduate.lclark.edu/live/files/12487-tribal-equity-toolkit-preview>

**You Are Made of Medicine:** A Mental Health Peer Support Manual for Indigiqueer, Two-Spirit, LGBTQ+, and Gender Non-Conforming Indigenous Youth  
<https://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/yamom>

**What Does “Two-Spirit” Mean?** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4lBibGzUnE>

**At These Powwows, Two-Spirit People Are Always Revered**  
<https://www.them.us/story/two-spirit-powwows-trans-indigenous>