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Gathering of Nations: A Story of Challenge and Triumph

By Sadé Heart of the Hawk

There are many stories of our Two Spirit Ancestors and how they were honored and considered sacred in many tribes. However, those of us in our 60s and 70s didn't experience that at all. We needed to clear the path and build the road. It is a process and one with which we're continuously engaged even still.

A story of challenge and triumph for Two Spirit people concerns one of the largest, if not *the* largest powwow in the world. The Gathering of Nations, held in Albuquerque, NM, in an auditorium holding 20,000 people, attracts Indigenous people all over Turtle Island. In 2018, over 5,700 dancers registered to compete in multiple dance style contests. That was also the year that a group of Two Spirit people from throughout Turtle Island decided that we were going to make our presence known in a meaningful way.

The Southwest Two Spirit Society had recently come together in the Albuquerque area and they offered to host a pre-Gathering of Nations reception for those of us who had come in from out of town, making certain we had hotel rooms close to the venue and that we were comfortable.

The day before, we all registered as dancers to ensure that we were able to participate in Grand Entry. Most of us on the Powwow Trail know that style categories are usually gender and age specific. Unlike many powwows that have Golden-age categories (age 55 and up), the Gathering of Nations has a category beyond that, Elders, (age 70 and up) and it was in this category that I registered.

That night, we got together for a potluck in a local center for social justice and, following ceremony and prayer, we planned for Grand Entry the next day. We would take the Eagle Staff of the Southwest Two Spirit Society, we would set up a staging space for



1. Sadé with her registration to dance at Gathering of Nations





2. The group at the reception before the Gathering of Nations

ourselves outside the auditorium where we could smudge and pray, and we would join the evening Grand Entry in order for us to have the greatest impact.

The next day, dressed in our beautiful regalia and from the four corners of Turtle Island, we met at our designated place outside of the auditorium. We created sacred space for ourselves with medicines and prayers. Our reigning Miss International Two Spirit, a lovely young person from the San Carlos Apache,

decided that they were going in with the other royalty, and that's what they did. They were unaware of what we were going to go through trying to enter the circle.

As a group, we approached the circle and as we did, we heard other folks in the space where the dancers' families and friends sat remarking, "Oh! Those are the Two Spirit people," not with disgust, but with reverence. However, as we proceeded on, we were stopped by the arena director. Anyone who has ever either danced in or attended the Gathering of Nations knows that the rule is "women go in on one side and men go in on the other." We were halted by that arena director who repeated that order at least three times, "men go in on this side, women go in on the other." Those of us old ones in the front of our group kept responding back that we were the Two Spirit people and that we needed to go in together. He also told us that the only Eagle Staff permitted in the circle was the one representing the Gathering of Nations. After many assertions that we needed not only to go in together but that we needed to go in with the Eagle Staff, the arena director gave up, threw up his hands, and walked off. Another arena director came over and we continued to identify ourselves. We are the Two Spirit people!

This arena director told us to just go in where we were, behind the men. And there we were, last to come into the circle. But we were together, and we carried the Eagle Staff representing not only the Southwest Two Spirit Society, but *all* Two Spirit people, especially our young ones.

That night, we came together again and celebrated our Grand Entry. It was broadcast live on Powwows.com and some of our Two Spirit relatives around Turtle Island took screen grabs. In them was one of our Miss International Two Spirit among the



3. The group in their regalia at the Gathering of Nations





other royalty from around Turtle Island. We were not able to compete in the pageants held in our tribes, so we created our own. We were very proud.

Following the event, our Southwest Two Spirit Society relatives communicated with the committee responsible for the powwow and shared what had happened and the difficulties we had. There were apologies, promises of training for event staff and an invite to return the following year.

My heart broke when I realized that I would be unable to attend because of a National Indian Health Board conference at which I was presenting on Two Spirit people, but we returned to Gathering of Nations.

This time, the door was open wide for us. The Two Spirit people were not only welcomed into the circle, but we also entered in the front, right behind the warriors with the main Eagle Staff. I cried when I heard this.



4. Alma Rosa and Ezak with the Eagle staff and the Medicine staff

I believe that our Two Spirit Ancestors were walking with us when we were marginalized and sent to the back the year prior, but I know also that they were with us when we were given a place of honor, with the Two Spirit Eagle Staff, at the front. They wrapped their arms around us, as they always do, and whispered, “Good job, Grandchildren.”

We, as Indigenous people, have been forced to endure many assaults on our very existence and, as a result, we live under the shadows of multiple layers of trauma. Depending upon how far removed you are from the residential/boarding school era, the impact of those traumatic events is spirit-numbing. But even those of us who are three generations away understand that what is done today will impact seven generations into the future. There is so much healing to do. However, our people are resilient and many of us have found ways to reconnect with the *root system*; the ways of our Ancestors, to access the healing and restorative medicines and ceremonies that have worked for thousands of years. These healing ways have never been written up in medical journals or peer-reviewed papers, they have no clinical trials, and no research has been done on them...nor should any *be* done on them. So how do we know they work? We know because, in spite of everything, we’re still here.

