



LGBTQTS
spirit • honor • inclusion

In Two-Spirit Kinship: Epidemic Redux – A Memory

It's April 2021, and we have just completed a full year of living through a global pandemic. Like me, maybe you lost a loved one. Or as we saw COVID-19 ravage our tribal communities, perhaps it was more than one person. If so, I offer my condolences as we continue to pray for our Indigenous communities and people around the world. I hope vaccination efforts increase, and we are able to gather again for the social, traditional, and religious events that have kept us resilient for thousands of years. Until then, as I reflect on this somber milestone, I'm reminded of another place and time when disease and fear touched the lives of many of my friends and their families.

I left home for college in Washington, DC, when I was 17 years old. It was the late '70s, disco ruled, and the world I'd known as a Pawnee and Otoe-Missouria/Iowa girl growing up in Oklahoma City, OK, was about to change forever. While I grew up in the city, my tribes are Oklahoma-based, and we often visited family in the communities where my parents and grandparents had been raised. Like many teenagers, I was ready to see the world and happy to be leaving my small town. I was an avid reader and had long looked forward to being in a big city. I wasn't wrong to be excited: DC was everything I'd hoped for. After college, I would stay for many more years, and the '80s would usher in a time of change and activism in my adopted hometown as the AIDS epidemic was about to erupt.

My mother's cousin Gene was gay. I remember him as a kind, smiling, good-natured man who was always cooking as he cared for his elderly parents who were born in the late 1800s. I have no memory of him being shamed or excluded from family events or tribal activities. In fact, as I spoke with a family elder to prepare for this article, she reminded me that many tribes considered homosexual members as a blessing worthy of respect. Given this background, I made friends in the gay community easily. These friends were fun, funny, care-free, and supportive, everything a small-town teenager needed to build a home away from home and a chosen family.

One spring afternoon in DC, I visited my friend John at his office in the Department of Education. Like many Washington officials, he did not display his homosexuality





openly, but neither did he deny it. This was the compromise LGBTQ professionals made in our nation's capital in the '80s. I had mentioned not feeling well, chalking it up to allergies, and somehow AIDS came up. I didn't know what he was talking about and I asked what AIDS was. He was surprised I hadn't heard of it, knowing my circle of friends, and he described it as a "gay disease." When he said that, it jogged a memory of an article I'd read about an illness that was being seen in the gay community, but I didn't know much about it. He admitted he didn't either. It was the first of what would become a major topic of conversation among my friends for the next several years leading into the '90s.

It would take years of misinformation, ignorance, activism, and education before resources were directed to the research and treatment of HIV/AIDS. Until then, my friends in the LGBTQ community were dying. We learned that transmission was by bodily fluids and we could not catch it by touch or through the air, but in the early '80s, I would visit friends and see signs on their hospital doors. Big red signs warning about the patient inside, creating fear instead of compassion. Nurses who tended to the patient's most private needs wore the gowns, masks, and gloves that we've become familiar with due to the current pandemic, but at the time, these were unique and seen only in wards where rooms were marked by warnings of biohazards. Back then, among my friends, I was the only one who had the luxury of time. I worked part-time and had taken a break from my studies, so I visited friends who were in the hospital or sick at home. I always left them with a hug, the physical touch that I hoped let them know I wasn't afraid, we would always be friends, and I loved them.

DC is a city of transients. As my friends became ill, almost all of them returned to their respective hometowns. Those of us left to organize memorials and mourn losses encouraged action and understanding. As allies we supported the LGBTQ community as much as we could, but that paled in comparison to how the community made a stand for themselves. DC is home to activism, protests, and progress. As the years passed and research was funded, we reached a point where HIV was no longer an automatic death sentence or even debilitating.

A year into a global pandemic, we continue to face a virus that is mutating, but we have promising vaccines offering protection against the worst effects of COVID-19 and its variants. Just as in the '80s in the face of HIV/AIDS, we must remain vigilant in keeping ourselves, our elders, and our communities safe. Masks, social distancing, and vaccinations will be important components to the return of social gatherings with family and friends. We can do this together!

