

Sacred Together

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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The largest Indigenous Pride gathering adjusts to pandemic

From starting with about 250 attendees at the Window Rock Flea Market in 2017 to pulling in over 6,000 visitors over two days in 2019 at the Window Rock Tribal Park and Veteran's Memorial, Diné Pride has become the largest Indigenous pride event in the United States.

When plans to host an even larger event this year had to be scrapped due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Alray Nelson, executive director and one of the co-founders of Diné Pride, said the event was redesigned to be the largest virtual Indigenous pride gathering in the country.

The theme for this year's event is "Sacred Together."

"We thought we should come up with a theme that reflects the times we're living in right now," Nelson said June 10. "When we're living our lives through that theme, we're sharing our experiences with youth and relatives and our culture.

"We were always seen as sacred beings. We will continue to be sacred together [even if] we can't be together physically," Nelson said.

The schedule for Diné Pride 2020 includes four events, all of which will be streamed on the event's Facebook page:

Indigenous LGBTQ+ Youth Panel, June 24 at 5 pm.

Sovereign Nations Leadership Panel, June 25 at 6 pm.

Trans Indigenous Leadership Panel, June 26 at 6 pm.

Welcome Ceremony and Pride Drag Show, June 27 at 6:30 pm.

All of the events will be free to tune into, and will be recorded as well.

New to this year's event is a scholarship created for Indigenous LGBTQ+ youth, the Naatáanii Scholarship. It was created to empower and uplift the next generation of youth leaders after western enculturation distorted the identity and the existence of Indigenous LGBTQ+ people, according to Diné Pride.

"We plan to change that narrative by helping our own students excel in their higher education journey," their Facebook page reads.

The scholarship is a one-time \$1,000 dollar scholarship to be awarded to two high school seniors from the Navajo Nation who self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and/or two-spirit. Applicants must contribute to the LGBTQ+ community and actively address concerns facing their peers today. The application is available online at navajonationpride.com.

The deadline for the application is June 19 at midnight.

THE MOVE ONLINE

Nelson said the decision to make the event virtual was both a financial and time investment, but one he thought was worthwhile.

“At the end of the day, it is hard to be living through what we’re living through right now, and to not have our friends and family around us and for us to have that physical touch and laughter,” he said.

Nelson said Navajo people are living through new times where a virus, one of the smallest things in existence, is taking lives across communities, including the LGBTQ+ community.

“We’re feeling [the effects], and we want to make sure our events are respectful of what’s happening right now,” he said.

But more than celebrating their community, Nelson said he wants to make sure the efforts for the future of LGBTQ+ youth are celebrated.

“Diné Pride has never focused on just older people. We continue to encourage our young people,” he said. “We want Navajo LGBTQ leaders to step up and speak on behalf of the community and provide opportunities of leadership for them.”

This is why Diné Pride has grown from being a pride event to a movement, Nelson added.

“Because of our event, you see more tribes taking on the challenge of taking on an [Indigenous pride event] and replicate the same success as Diné Pride,” he said.

Between 2017 and 2019, the event grew from being hosted in the flea market parking lot to being hosted right next to the Navajo Nation Council Chambers in Window Rock, with rainbow pride flags being flown next to the Navajo Nation flag. Diné Pride also gained the support of Navajo Nation government officials who advocated for changes in Navajo law to protect their LGBTQ+ citizens.

As it has grown, Nelson said Diné Pride has gotten the attention of people from across the world who were planning to make the trip to Window Rock this year and be part of the largest Indigenous Pride gathering before the pandemic disrupted their plans.

Still, Nelson remains hopeful they can reach their goal of doubling the number of attendees from their last Diné Pride Symposium for their next gathering in 2021.

“What we can do now is remain hopeful, pick ourselves up and move forward,” Nelson said.

Diné Pride Communications Director DeAndra Wagner shared Nelson’s sentiments.

“The LGBTQ+ community has overcome many obstacles over the years and has always emerged stronger and more unified,” Wagner said. “Diné Pride will be one [event] to remember regardless of a physical experience this year, and our hope is to resume in-person events in 2021. Our community will once rise up against this adversity and stand together in solidarity.”

For more information on Diné Pride 2020, as well as event details and how to tune in, visit <https://www.facebook.com/NavajoNationPride>.

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