

## Indigenous Healing Festival takes virtual form after year off

Written by By Kevin Opsahl Sun Correspondent  
Friday, 14 May 2021 04:28

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The Indigenous Healing Festival is back — but in virtual form — after a hiatus last year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Elena Higgins, co-founder and executive director of the nonprofit IndigenousWays, and its artistic director, Tash Terry, spoke to the Gallup Sun ahead of the event, scheduled for May 8 and 9.

“We have put on physical festivals, but this is a different beast entirely,” Higgins wrote in an email.

Terry called the event “a new beginning” for festivals — ones which can be attended virtually or in-person, depending on the participant’s choice.

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“Because [of] this surge into Zoom as a result of the pandemic and the need to stay safe, a lot of the venues are going to be able to go hybrid,” Terry said. “My hope is that, with this festival, we’re showing this is the best way we can stay connected without having to wear masks.”

The Indigenous Healing Festival was revived this year thanks to Santa Fe’s Department of Arts and Culture, which awarded IndigenousWays funding in the category of Digital Collaborative Impact.

“There have been numerous online festivals but the focus of the indigenous healing and timing will help this one stand out,” Pauline Kanako Kamiyama, director of the Santa Fe Arts and Culture Department, wrote in an email to the *Sun*.

“Given the theme of this year’s Indigenous Healing Festival and the current situation in the state/country/world, IndigenousWays has the potential to reach more people with an interest in the topics of the festival,” she said.

“Survivance” is the festival’s theme, according to Higgins and Terry.

“As we have survived as Indigenous people through time, it’s been through our stories, our laughter, our song,” Higgins said.

The Indigenous Healing Festival will feature music, presentations and workshops, including a presentation on using herbal supplements during the pandemic; the performing arts’ impact on mental health, and a Native American Sign Language workshop.

“The goal is to break through the walls of separation with compassion and love — always saying that there is room for all of us,” Terry said. “All we need to do is look at the stars and the moon at night and see how much room there is for all of us.”

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Terry also referenced the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, which hit the Navajo Nation hard last year but has recently seen some good news after reporting that it has vaccinated more than half of its adult population.

“It’s been a really challenging year for a lot of us,” Terry said. “People have suffered loss. Let’s bring wisdom from the elders and the children and everyone in between, to give attendees the ability to be inspired as they heal and continue to follow the CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] guidelines.”

Asked what events might particularly stand out at this year’s virtual festival, Terry named James Wooden Legs, who knows both Native American and American forms of Sign Language.

“He’s a heck of a guy,” Terry said. “I mean, how many festivals have that kind of workshop?”

One performing artist at the festival will be Geri Barney, a Navajo woman from Tohatchi. Barney is a guitar player and singer, who sometimes uses Navajo “vocables” in her songs. She will be singing her own composition, “My Red Road” and giving a talk called “Coming Home.” Barney told the *Sun* the talk is based on her life experience, having moved to Boston to study music before deciding to come back to New Mexico after a family member died of coronavirus.

“COVID was like a mirror held up to my face,” Barney wrote in an email. “I looked deep within myself and asked ‘what is most important to me?’”

“Self healing through song, sharing experiences through words and being uplifted by musical artists who are mentors that have persevered in this world,” Barney wrote. “I’m happy and proud of IndigenousWays to have adapted and learned to navigate ZOOM in providing the Festival this year.”

Terry and Higgins started as a musical duo in 2007. People liked what they heard and the two started IndigenousWays, finding that “opening pathways through music, story-telling and the arts provided opportunities to raise awareness and global support for Indigenous communities.”

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The pandemic may have stopped the festival, but it didn't stop IndigenousWays from helping its target audiences. Through grant funding and stakeholder support, it was able to launch IndigenousWays Virtual Events on April 1, 2020.

"The 'Indigenous way' is doing it as a collective ... keeping our communities connected through these electronic circles," Higgins wrote in an email. "That is how we have survived historically — together through laughter, story, song, dance, etc."

But beyond its workshops and music, IndigenousWays has also used the last year to do "relief runs" to the Navajo Nation to deliver emergency supplies during the pandemic. The deaf and hard of hearing community in the Four Corners region has also received relief from the nonprofit.

"We've been able to do that because of the support of this online community, which is really amazing," Higgins said.

***To register for the festival, visit: [indigenousways.org/healing-festival](https://indigenousways.org/healing-festival).***

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