

New Mexico celebrates its meaningful heritage

Written by By Rachel Pfeiffer Sun Correspondent
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Representative Derrick Lente guided Indigenous Peoples' Day from inception to celebration

New Mexico celebrated Indigenous Peoples' Day as an official holiday for the third time this year on Oct. 11. Indigenous Peoples' Day officially replaced Columbus Day in the state in 2019. The day offers New Mexico's Indigenous population a formal opportunity to celebrate their culture and their heritage. However, the holiday only came to fruition after a great deal of work and debate.

The process of changing the holiday began with legislation sponsored by Rep. Derrick Lente, D-Sandia Pueblo, and co-sponsored by Rep. Andrea Romero, D-Santa Fe. Lente said the idea of a formal day to celebrate Indigenous heritage is something he as an Indigenous person has wanted for some time. With his position in government, he decided it was time to take steps to

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make this dream a reality.

The Committee of Indian Affairs enthusiastically supported Lente's proposal for the new holiday. In fact, many committee members were shocked they hadn't heard a proposal about this before. Lente prepared the bill for the regular session and Romero signed on as a co-sponsor. Once it reached the house and senate in the early months of 2019 a debate ensued.

Some representatives were concerned about what might be lost or forgotten by replacing Columbus Day. But Romero didn't see a conflict. He pointed out that many New Mexicans didn't want to celebrate Columbus' complicated colonial legacy any longer.

"Columbus Day celebrates a sort of false history. We don't share that history, and Christopher Columbus that was never part of New Mexico history," Romero said. "Part of the real debate we had before [the bill] became law was just why it was so important to the people of our state to have that day of recognition and day of reckoning with our own history as New Mexicans."

House Bill 100 passed in the house by a vote of 50-12 before surviving stiffer opposition in the senate, passing by a vote of 22-15. Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham signed the bill April 2, 2019, officially designating the second Monday in October Indigenous Peoples' Day. The governors' office reached out to Lente the day the bill was signed into law, and he says it was amazing to hear the news.

"[I felt] vindicated, not personally, but for indigenous populations around the world," Lente said.

For the inaugural Indigenous Peoples' Day in October of 2019, Lente attended a celebration at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque. The organizers anticipated up to 200 guests, but thousands showed up. The event drew global media attention, with reporters on the scene from as far away as Taiwan and countries in Europe. Lente said that celebration really embodied what Indigenous Peoples' Day is all about.

"This piece of legislation is not about any one person," he said. "That day exemplified it perfectly."

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“The people that were there, from the youngest and most innocent of children to our elders that spoke on stage, talked about their experiences and talked about how important this was going to be for all people of Indigenous descent. It was beautiful,” Lente said.

While COVID meant that last year’s celebrations took place online, this year Lente was once again planning to attend in-person celebrations.

To him this holiday represents more than just a date on the calendar.

“It’s not just a simple celebration on one day of the year. It’s the notion that Indigenous people in the United States can feel proud of their descent and their heritage,” Lente said. “Even though we’re not well represented in mainstream America, the fact that we have a visibility here and now means that we are not invisible.

“We still have a meaning and a purpose here, and we play a huge part in the society today.”

This year, Indigenous Peoples’ Day was marked with a 34-mile horse ride that started at Cornerstone Ministry Center in Smith Lake at 1299 N.M. Highway 371 and traveled west to Rehoboth Christian School.

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