

Project Title: **COUNTRY QUEERS**

Interviewee: **Crisosto Apache**

Location: **Crisosto's kitchen table, Denver, CO**

Date: **June 28, 2014**

Interviewer: **Rae Garringer**

Transcription: **Montanna Mills**

**[00:00:01]**

Rae: Okay. So the first question is your name and your age, and where you live.

**[00:00:07]**

Crisosto: Okay. It's customary that I introduce myself in my native language, so I'm gonna do that.

**[00:00:12]**

Rae: That's great.

**[00:00:13]**

Crisosto:

Shí'tai k'an dé, ni' daagut'é. Shí Crisosto Apache húun'zhyé'. Shi Mashgalénde áan'sht'íid.

So, what I basically said is: Hello, my name is Crisosto Apache, and I'm Mescalero Apache. I'm, 42, and I currently live in Denver. But I'm originally from the Mescalero Apache Reservation in New Mexico, and I'm getting ready to move to an area near Albuquerque.

**[00:00:46]**

Rae: Okay.

**[00:00:48]**

Crisosto: Yeah, just sort of - kind of going back home, I guess. In a way.

**[00:00:52]**

Rae: Yeah. So, the next question is what is it like where you live, but maybe you'd rather talk about where you grew up, maybe? I don't know...

**[00:01:01]**

Crisosto: Yeah, I think in order to understand, like, my whole story, I think that's what I should do.

**[00:01:08]**

Rae: okay.

**[00:01:09]**

Crisosto: Where I should start.

**[00:01:10]**

Rae: Yeah.

**[00:01:11]**

Crisosto: I was born and raised in the Mescalero Apache Reservation. I originally grew up with my father, who was Diné, Navajo. So, when I was really young, I remember staying with him a little bit, and he was from To'hajiilee, that's formerly known as Cañoncito, outside of Albuquerque. So, after a while, he ended up taking me back to my mom's, in Mescalero, so I

grew up on the Mescalero Apache Reservation.

On the reservation, we sort of moved around a little bit, because there's a lot of - it's really vast, and huge. The area that I grew up in is between seven and eight thousand feet, so it's up in the mountains. And that's pretty much what I remember growing up, is like wherever I went there's forest around, and we used to run around and play in the forest. But growing up on the reservation I think is... it's a very interesting experience, and I think it's taken me a long time to sort of realize the significance of being Native American, being two-spirit, and also having an education, which is really, kind of unique to my family.

It was difficult, growing up, because my mom had separated with my father and then remarried to my step-father, who's currently still in the house. It was hard growing up. You know, we were sort of a poor family. My parents, meaning my mom and my step-father, the highest end-level of education they had was tenth grade. They both dropped out. My step-father had some experience working trades, so whatever experience he could get in, as a tradesman, is what he did. They both have a lot of experience in silversmith, so they make jewelry on the side to supplement the income. My mother worked as a dietician when I was a lot younger. But then, because we moved around a lot, ended up having to take care of us.

In our family, because - my older brother is from a different parent. And then there's me and my little brother, we're from my mom and my father, and then there's two step-sisters who are from my stepfather's previous marriage, and then there's my two sisters - from their marriage now.

**[00:04:02]**

Rae: Okay.

**[00:04:03]**

Crisosto: So there's - we kind of grew up off and on with a huge family -

**[00:04:05]**

Rae: Right.

**[00:04:06]**

Crisosto: So there was a lot of us, so it was kind of interesting to sort of just, move around on the reservation. And I'm sure that - was really hard, to raise that many kids, you know, on the level of education that he had, and for whatever jobs they could get. At the time, I didn't understand that, but now that I'm older, and now that I have my nephews, I start to realize what it takes to raise a family, and to be financially responsible for them, to be emotionally responsible for them. You know, all of these things that parents go through, I've sort of been thrown into that within under a year. But yeah we grew up with very little money, but we've managed.

I always knew, my whole life, that I was gay. From a very young age. I was very curious about it, but I didn't - I didn't understand it. And in the back of my mind I've always wondered if people were all like that. You know, so, all the friends that I had growing up in school, in the back of my mind I've always wanted to ask them if they felt the same way, but I was always afraid, because I started to see that there was this sort of behavior that was happening where guys and girls got together, and that was dating. But I never did see girls and girls or guys and guys. And I didn't see that - in any of the relationships that I observed on the reservation or off the reservation, in

the schools or not in the schools.

However, you know, while I was growing up, I did remember seeing, people that - some guys that would dress up as women on my reservation. And I knew who they were, you know, and the community knew who they were. In fact, me and my mom, we talk about that all the time - from her experience too, growing up on the reservation, she knows some people that were men that dressed as women, and that, you know, that's the way they presented themselves.

There's a heavy debate, I think, in Native American communities about how much of that is real, and how much of that is cultural, and how much of that is part of our culture, or how much of that is just, you know... So I think from all the research that I've done in terms of two-spirit people and reservation communities - and all the different elders that I've talked to who are very traditional - I've come to make the determination that, culturally, that behavior was accepted within the community because they had a function. There was a spiritual function, there was a communal function. And there's a lot of what we talk about that: we don't disown our people, we don't disown our families, and everybody has a purpose - are some of the basic teachings that we have within our culture.

So within the culture itself, these people are given responsibilities. They might not fit the responsibilities that straight people have, such as, you know, procreation, providing for the family. But in terms of the way they operated within the community, there was a purpose for them, and in some societies and some cultures, because of how that balance is integrated within one person, a lot of these communities saw that as a gift. Because of how we describe the universe around us. There's a male universe and a female universe, and there's a sense of balance

that allows it to sort of interact with each other. Our seasons are male and female. Our directions are male and female. Our environments are male and female, even to like, the rain, there's a male rain and a female rain. There's a lot of different interactions in the cosmos that determines, you know, our identity within ourselves. So, those are a lot of things that I've been taught growing up in terms of like, who I was.

Now, growing up, however, there has been this conflict, and I've sort of inherited that a little bit in terms of Western thought and Western religion, and how much guilt and shame that was sort of pushed on a lot of people for practicing their culture, and for participating in their culture. But I think now - that is something that I see a lot of people struggle with still. You know, it's that integration of fundamental religion, and how much damage that has - that continues to do - to Native communities. And I think in terms of the work that I do, that is some of the work that I integrate into some of the teachings that I have, and some of the things that we want to educate people about. Cultural sensitivity.

So growing up, we did identify that there are people that exist within our community that are able to express themselves the way they do, and there isn't...there isn't any shame in presenting yourself that way. And I remember that a lot of the interactions that I have had with my mom - because my mom comes from a fairly traditional background - she continues to teach us that we are sort of an integrated community, and we have to accept one another for who we are. And we have to teach each other that, and we have to be there for one another.

So, that's what I was taught growing up. But I was still confused, you know. I went to a public school off the reservation, and I did my own research, in terms of like, what I thought I was. And

I started hearing from other people and the way they talked: the derogatory terms, you know, like faggot, gay, sissy... You know, all the - what you hear. So, I started looking those up in the dictionary. And I was like "well, what does this mean, 'you homo'?" [laughs]

So I started looking at that, then I started finding out what these terms were, and that these terms were identifiable to an identity, but I found out that they weren't nice. So I started to internalize a lot of that, and I was like, you know, "Who I am, and what I am, I can't tell anybody, because it's wrong" quote unquote. But what I should've done is I should've talked to my mother early on. And I didn't know that she knew all this time, you know. My aunts and my grandmothers, they already knew, but I was the one that didn't. I didn't go and seek out the information like I should have.

But I grew up, I mean - growing up in our household, it wasn't the typical household because we were poor, and there's alcoholism in our family. There's domestic violence, and there's...you know, my stepfather really didn't like us very much. And so I sort of grew up with that. And I struggled with that, and how the relationship with my stepfather is not the greatest. So, I didn't really have a father figure in my life to sort of, rely on, to teach me what I was supposed to [know].

One day my dad, my stepfather, challenged me. He said, "If you think your life is difficult living here, why don't you try living out there?" And I thought to myself, "Well how different could it be?" So I left. I left home. And I, to this day, seem to have managed pretty well. I'm the only one in my family that has a high school diploma. I'm the only one in my family that has higher education, and now I'm the only one in my family that has graduate degrees under my belt. And



it's, it's just amazing that I can even sit here and say that, because - everybody in my family and my whole lineage - there's not many people who have done that. I'll encourage my nephews, and my brothers and sisters, to continue doing that, cause it's very important that we get education. Not because it's conforming to Westernized culture, but, to sort of have a better understanding of who we are as Native people.

So, um... and when I was younger, I had to try to figure out what this thing was: being gay. Cause that's what they called it. Homosexual. "You're a homosexual." "You're a homo." I had to figure out what it was. So, I remember on the weekends I used to hitchhike into town. It's a small town - at that time, there was probably like, maybe 40,000 people annually, or seasonally, in summer and winter. And mostly rich people from Texas, you know, half a million dollar homes to a million dollar homes, kind of tucked off in the foothills, in the mountains.

[00:13:32]

Rae: And that was on the reserv - off the

[00:13:34]

Crisosto: Off the reservation. But town was probably like - eleven miles away.

[00:13:36]

Rae: Okay.

[00:13:37]

Crisosto: So, we had this tiny road that winds into town. And it's up in the mountains, so that's what I grew up in. I grew up in the Ponderosa pines. It's a small town and, you know, I was bent on trying to figure out what this was, this gay thing. So, I would hitchhike into town. I ended up finding a job on the weekends, and after I was done with my job I just wandered through town, and I was young. I was fifteen, sixteen. And I started to figure out that, you know, people met at the public swimming pool. The public swimming pool was there, and behind it there was a parking lot, and there's some picnic tables that you can just sort of...and I used to go there and sit and watch people swim. Cause of course I didn't have the money to go there, I would just sit there and watch them. It was one of the free things that I found myself doing, besides walking up and down the street. So I would sit there and watch, and all of a sudden I started realizing like, these cars pull up, almost one by one, [one] after another. And sometimes they're the same ones, and these guys going into the bathroom. So, I was like "What's - what's that about?" And - it happened frequently, that I knew that there was a pattern. So I got curious. And I went in there. And I guess, walked in on two, two males in their, uh, and it clicked in my head. Like "Oh, so this is what they do. This is where they go. This is what I'm gonna end up doing," you know? So, I mean, as a young kid you don't have anybody telling you what this is, so you start to make these determinations for yourself, and then, you know, it's a small town and everybody seems to be doing it, and quiet. You know, so I'm like "Oh my gosh, this is really what I am. What is this, still?" And I still couldn't at that point determine what that was. You know, "What is this still? We have to do this in the bathroom? And why in the bathroom?"

And, so it was really crazy, the summer, that's what I did. I sort of frequented that place a lot, because - one, I wanted to further my identity and who I was. Two, I wanted to find out and talk

to other people who were like me. And three, I wanted to fit in somewhere. Growing up in a small town, that's really hard to do. And I know that still - some of my cousins are gay, are effeminate, but they have not come out and said it. And I know that they're back there doing the same thing. And I just wonder - I really wonder to this day, how that can change. Because I don't think that it's right that people should just find these, these secret places, unsanitary places, to be. You know, to find solace within themselves, and be okay with it.

So, growing up, that's pretty much what I've - was exposed to. And so, after my dad, my stepfather, challenged me to go out, of course, in my mind, that's where I thought we met. So wherever I went, I was always on the search. And it wasn't until, after growing up and graduating high school and getting a scholarship to go to the Institute of American Indian Arts, I entered college, and I started meeting gay people there. And some of them were out, and some people were just like, out and about, and you know, they didn't care. And I'm like, "You're just supposed to be that way in the bathroom!" You know? "You can't be that way here! You have to go in the bathroom and do that." That's what I was thinking in my mind, and I could never get out of that head trip. That part of my identity.

It's taken me a long time to sort of... and plus, living with a dysfunctional family, it really put a pressure on myself. I was very self-conscious about being Native American, and being gay, and, being a teenager, and all of these different things that you go through as being a teenager. And I became very insecure, and of course I turned to drugs, and I turned to alcohol. And I just sort of thought that's what you do. Now, this is pretty much who my identity is. I'm doing drugs, I'm drinking, I'm running off into these weird places, and doing just about whatever to, to satisfy that

part of me that was screaming to be normal.

And I lived that way for a good while, a good part of my life. And I've traveled across the country just to get that sort of affection that I wanted, from being with another male. That was what my desire was, and that's what my personality wanted, and that's who I was my whole life. And it was a hard struggle. I really beat myself up pretty good about it. About who I was and - what my identity was screaming out to say.

It wasn't until - I'd been living that way pretty much... I graduated out of college, got a scholarship to come up here to Boulder to go to Naropa University, and was doing really well. And that's when I came into this whole different culture of being in a larger city, being connected to Denver, and started realizing that, you know, "This isn't a choice anymore." I had to start being who I am.

During that time, I sort of made this notion that I'd accepted the fact that this is who I am, and - there's nothing in the world that will change that. So, one of the trips home after - when I was running, when I was younger, seventeen - I went back home, and I was in the kitchen with my mother. We're doing dishes, and something in the back of my mind said, "I need to tell my mother. I need to tell my mom, what is going on." So, when I turned seventeen, I came out. So then that's when my whole family knew. I said, "I'm gay." My mom was... she wasn't upset, because her idea, in terms of what gay [meant] - was a western term, a western sense of the identity. So because I said that, and that was my only connection to what this identity was - it was something that she wasn't prepared for in terms of what, in her mind, I was. Because it's very different in Native American culture and tradition.

So I told her I was gay. She basically told me, “You know what, you're my son. You live your life how you were born into. There's nothing you can do to change that...all I care is that you're happy, and that you take care of yourself. Because, you know, I'm still your mother, this is still your family, and you're still my son. You know, nothing's changed.” So, it wasn't later 'til I found out - after I came out again as a two-spirit person - that she was not happy. Not because I was gay, it was because, I had had a disconnection to my culture. So, when I came out and found the term two-spirit and realized that there was, a cultural part of my identity, which is what I felt was missing all these years - even though I told myself I was gay and was living in a gay way, there was still something missing. And that wasn't until I discovered the term two-spirit. And that was whatever was closest to whatever it is I was looking for, was wanting to put back. It was that connection to my culture, that connection to my language, that connection to my creation stories. That connection to my family, and to my community. My heritage. My lineage. All of that.

So once I started to understand that, I went back home, and I started integrating myself back into my culture, my language, and all of that. I started including my cultural aspects in my identity. And I told my mom, you know, “I remember telling you I was gay a long time ago, do you remember that?” She says, “Yeah.” And I was like, “Well I don't think I'm gay.” I said, “I think I'm a two-spirit person.” And she said, “Well what's that?” I said, “Well it's somebody that is...is connected to their culture, to their tradition, but still represents the male and female within themselves.” And she goes, “Yeah, I know what you're talking about.” And then we started swapping stories about, the people on the reservation and talking about their roles within the community, and some of them are spiritual roles. I don't claim myself to be one of those people, but I know in terms of my family, what my place is. So, she then said, “You know what, I'm very

happy for you, because I think you came back, you came back into who you were supposed to be.”

So I think it's really interesting as Native people, how we come out multiple times. We're coming back into recognizing who we are. And I think about that story a lot, because, all this trouble that I've dragged myself through - to solidify my identity or to incorporate my identity, or to sort of, find it - I mean, it was always there. So it's kind of interesting how I just sort of, dragged myself through that, only to come out in the end, knowing that there were people there that already knew, and sort of reserved a place for me to stand back into.

So I think of that now, and just how much of a gift that is, and realize that. I think, I'm so fortunate because my family has - I don't even have to say they've accepted me, because it has nothing to do with acceptance. It has something to do with being a part of something. You know, it always has been, because of that idea of that balance of male and female. Some of us are born with just strictly male, and some of us are born with just strictly female, but somehow that integration happens within one person. And, I think for me, that's what the conflict was, is this kind of back and forth that I fought, and that I didn't embrace that. And I think had I done that early on, I would have sort of been walking in that, in that footsteps, in terms of who I was as a Native person.

So, I think about that story a lot, and I think that's what brings me to talk about it and advocate for the work that I do. Cause I think it's so important that the community sort of take a step back, and start to look at their participants. And, through this whole journey, in terms of what I've done - in terms of my life, and, and the work that I do - I learned a whole lot in terms of what capacity

I can work in.

There's this whole idea - called historical trauma. It's the transmission of intergenerational trauma that a lot of Native Americans have dealt with. From forced removal from their homelands, to massacres, to the school systems, to you know, just starvation, to internment camps. Whatever, you name it. All of that plays into my history, and it plays into a lot of Native American history. And that is something that I really think a lot of people don't really think about. You know, we have a political identity that's not really tied to the United States, that is separate from the United States, and that doesn't exist anywhere else in the world. Because of the United States, and the state sovereignty that is located within each state. So those are some of the things I educate people. There's a presentation I do, called "Sovereign Genders," that talks about the intersections, of gender identity and sexuality as a political identity, as a social identity, as many of these - cultural identity - many of these identities that they hold because of that designation that has already been established, before the, the development of this country.

There's a term that I like to tell people, called "Time Immemorial," which is the beginning of time. A lot of our emergence story talks about... the two-spirit people. A lot of our ceremonies, and a lot of our cultural dances, still talk about the two-spirit people. If you look across a lot of different cultures, there's a lot of that representation of male and female embodied in one person. And there's some deities that are named after them. So, it's really interesting when I hear Native American communities say, "Oh, well that doesn't exist," what my response to them is, is "That's Western colonization talking. When you go back to your own tradition, and when you go back to those people who remember, they will tell you that we've always been here."

A lot of the political rhetoric that I hear, especially in the LGBTQI community, I think Stonewall is their benchmark. But I think our benchmark is our people, our communities, and those elders - those community members that remember, and have stories told to them over and over and over again, that we exist. I think that is our benchmark in terms of who we are as indigenous people, and our sexuality, and our gender expression.

So it's kind of interesting, when I say things like that, I think people don't want to accept that, sometimes. So, it's always a challenge to run up against people, especially from the LGBT community who don't really understand Native American gender expression and sexuality. And our basic point of view is that sexuality is something natural. I mean - there were chiefs, there's documented cases where chiefs have married two-spirit people. And there are some ceremonies where two-spirit people were said to be powerful, that all the men in the community wanted to sort of have sex with them, because - they thought that that would give them some of their power, because of that direct connection to the creator. So, I mean, there's a lot of these stories from all different cultures, that I have learned, and that I've heard of, and that I talk about. Some of them are really funny, and some of them are very spiritual, and some of them are very enlightening. And these are stories that have been passed down from generation to generation from the beginning of time. So I think it's very interesting that some of these communities still remember that there are two-spirit people, and I always have to remember that I'm part of that.

I'm very grateful that my parents recognize that, so I don't try to take advantage of that. It's really sad for me when I go out and I do public talks, and - people are willing to come up and talk to



me. And there's always one individual who comes up to me, and it's always sad for me to hear that they've been kicked out of their family's house just for who they were, and that their families don't want them around or recognize them as family anymore. That is such a sad scenario for me to hear, and sometimes I just wish that there was already a community somewhere that I can say, "Well you can go there, and they'll say come on in." You know? "You don't have to worry." And it's always a young person. It is always a young person that I always hear that story from, and it's heartbreaking. So I think for myself, I have taken that, and tried to use that energy to try to make a difference wherever I'm at. And I think it takes a lot of courage to sort of stand up and say,

"You know what, I'm gay. I'm a member of the LGBTQ community, and I'm also two-spirit." It also takes a lot of courage to do that in your own traditional community, because there's so much influence from Western culture that a lot of that residue is still there, that homophobia is still there. A lot of people don't understand, when I talk about Native Americans, they hear a Native American is coming to talk, in their minds they're thinking, "Oh the feathers," you know, very romanticized ideas, but when I present them with statistics, and when I show them pictures and documentaries of what it's really like, I think something turns in their heads, and they have to start thinking about what that means.

So, it's really interesting. My whole story... I didn't set out to set up this organization to work with people like that. My whole background is in writing. I'm a creative writer, so, and that's what I'm getting my graduate degree in. I'm getting an MFA in creative writing. So, I do write stories, and I'm writing stories also in terms of my own experience of growing up. I interviewed my mother because she has some wonderful stories of her life growing up, and some of the

similar situations, and I think that's wonderful. So, when we're talking about some of these things, I think it's important for stories to get out there to be told, and to be listened to. Because we come from - well I come from an oral tradition. These stories are passed down from generation to generation. Historically, there are people in my tribe that were seen as two-spirit people. Some people deny it, and some of the family members - because of the influence of Western culture and religion - they don't want anything to do with that. They get upset when you talk about that. But there's documented accounts. What are you going to say about that, historical documentation that refutes those allegations? Now they're not really allegations, they're just, simply, being, you know...

But, I use those examples to empower me. I know in our culture we're not supposed to speak of the dead, but I think in that way, and the way that I'm using that, they do empower me. They do empower me because they were allowed at that time to be who they were. In our culture, in our tradition, that's just the way it was. And I think that, that is my goal - is to sort of bring us back to this revitalization of culture and beliefs, and sort of move away from all of those damaging effects of Western culture. I think the more we educate our people about that - I'm hoping that it will be easier.

But growing up, and finding that out for myself... I think it was 1992, I was having a conversation - when I was attending Naropa, I was having a conversation with a non-Native person, and he came up to me and realized I was Native American, and he asked me if I believed in the berdache tradition. Of course, I didn't want to sound like an idiot, so I agreed with him. "Oh, yeah, yeah, I do." So as soon as we were done talking, of course, I went to go research what berdache was. I found out what it was. It's what Westerners saw as gay people in Native

American tradition. So I started reading a lot more books about it. I started finding more information out about what that identity was, and that made me realize that if this exists, and people are writing about it, then it must exist where I come from. So that allowed me to go back and talk to my family and talk to my mother and talk to my aunts, and grandmother and all that to try to find out more about what the standing was in our community.

It was a journey for me, a very painful one, but I think it's one that I think I've pulled myself out of to try to set a good example for my nephew and nieces, and hopefully for my community. I think it's very important for LGBTQ Native people to stand up, and tell their stories, because it will encourage other people to do that. And I think when people find out that there are other Native people talking about this, I think that that's something that they will see as something good. It's sort of a return back to who we were, and I think it's always good for me to hear elder people talk about two-spirit people, or two-spirit identity.

Sometimes I'll put up a booth for our organization at some of the pow-wows, and there's a banner that we made, that says "Traditional equality for all generations." And it has historical pictures of two-spirit people, and contemporary pictures of two-spirit people, in union. It always sparks a conversation amongst people who are just passing by, because I don't put the banner inside the tent, I put it on the outside, so that people can walk by and read it, and look at it. And so one day, at one of the pow-wows, I heard two elderly Navajo women talking about nádleehé. Nádleehé are, I guess, the LGBTQ people in their culture. So it's kind of interesting to hear them go back and forth, talking about them, because there's a representation for female and also male.

I think it's just a topic that a lot of people are just beginning to talk about. I think it's something

that people are wanting to know more, and a lot of people don't quite yet understand what it means. I think Native communities are still struggling to know what it means, even though they have people in their communities that identify as Native LGBTQ, two-spirit people. But I think for me, it's taken quite a long time for me to understand that.

I've been partnered for like 15 or 16 years with my partner, and I think, by being partnered, he's allowed to participate in our culture, allowed to participate in a lot of Native American activities. There's so much that he's learned in terms of who we are as Native American people, that I really appreciate him for that, because there's not many people I think that would sacrifice their life just to want to know. I think it takes a lot of dedication to get to know Native American people. In a lot of ways, I think we're sort of forgotten, and we're sort of a group of people that's sort of in the back room. I think a lot of people don't mind being descendants, because they're sort of, somewhat haphazardly incorporated into Western culture, but there's no evidence of cultural connection or traditional connections.

And I think that's the issue that I have with a lot of urban settings because I come from a background that involves my culture and my tradition. I have yet to say - I've lived here in Denver for like seventeen years, and I hear people say "Oh, I'm Apache, too." And so I start to talk to them in my native language, and they don't have a clue what I'm talking about. So that's frustrating for me. So, I mean - I can't say that they're not Apache. I think they're Apache that have not been connected to their culture. That again, is also a sad thing - not being allowed to participate in your own culture if that's where you're from. Because I know a lot of people, if they find out they're from a tribe, the tribe doesn't mind them integrating themselves into that

tribe.

When me and my partner first got together, I took him home. So we're driving, and I say "Okay, so, you sort of have to be careful. You have to get your passport ready, or your ID, because there's gun towers, and we have to pass through them." You know, just joking around. So I'm driving, and we're driving toward the reservation and, it's just the cattle guard, you know, "vroom-vroom" we're on the reservation now! And he goes "Where - where's that tower?" And then he realizes at that point I was just joking. Cause - he'd never been on a reservation before, you know, and he's just gonna believe whatever I said.

**[00:40:17]**

Rae: Right.

**[00:40:18]**

Crisosto: Our community is a matrilineal community. So we drove up to my mom's house, and I didn't know at the time that she was preparing this dinner. And it's always an honor for your family to get together and cook for a person. So when I drove up, I saw the cars there, and I was like "Oh, we're all together." So I went inside, and I see my aunts and my grandmothers, and my female cousins all sitting in the kitchen and they're peeling potatoes or making bread, and you know, doing all kinds of stuff. And then my mom comes from the back and says "Oh, we're making you a dinner tonight!"

I was like "Oh, wow! That's exciting," and I was really excited, and of course, my partner Todd, didn't know that we were matrilineal, so everything goes through the women - the women have all the power. So of course, he just goes in there and is just, very curious. Starts peeking through

all these dishes, and like, looking in here and is like "What's here? What's this? What - oh what's this?" You know, right - and very excited. So, all the women started looking at each other. The looks kind of went through them all, and they ended up at my mom, and so my mom pulls me aside. "Well, you have to go explain to Todd how things are." So of course, we took the walk, and I had to explain everything. Because the women, they do, they just run everything. It's crazy.

But, my role, though - is sort of, you know - it goes back and forth. There was another time I took my partner back to the reservation, and we're helping one of my relatives with our ceremonial feast. One of the ceremonies that we have is a puberty rite of passage, and it goes back to our emergence story of white painted women. So really, they're sort of copying how white painted woman emerged from where she came from. And sort of lived with the Apache people, and how she returned back to where she came from in the sun. So a lot of the ceremonies are associated with the sun, and certain parts of the season throughout the year - during the summer. So, I took him back for one of those ceremonies, and they last four days. For the potluck - to come, and feast, and eat, and then there's ceremonies on the sides, and some of our dancers like that. They're - we call them ga'an. They're mountain spirits. They've been given to us for protection. So a lot of those dancers will come and do a lot of the protection dances for the girls. And while that's happening, family members pitch in to help cook. We cook for about 6,000 people, breakfast, 6,000 people for lunch, 6,000 - roughly.

**[00:43:10]**

Rae: Wow. For four days.

**[00:43:12]**

Crisosto: Yeah.

**[00:43:14]**

Rae: Wow.

**[00:43:15]**

Crisosto: And we can't say no to people who come and want food. So whatever we have, we have to feed people, and that's sort of an obligation. So... I took my partner back to help, and so he got to go into a lot of the background where most people can't go. So my mom was helping facilitating one of the kitchens, so he was back there helping my mom. My mom was instructing him on what to do. So, because, you know, we're gay, we got to do a lot of the kitchen work. Which was only a privilege for women, because they get to direct people.

**[00:43:52]**

Rae: Right.

**[00:43:54]**

Crisosto: And the men, they sit on a bench, and be told what to do, and are given tasks.

**[00:43:58]**

Rae: Yeah.

**[00:43:59]**

Crisosto: Uh, "Go do the dishes," and someone will go and do the dishes. "Oh, go take the trash out," they take the trash out.

[00:44:02]

Rae: Right.

[00:44:03]

Crisosto: "We need some more wood," and they'll go get some more wood...and all this stuff. So I was kind of going back and forth. When I was done doing what I was doing in the arbor, I would have to go sit on the bench, and then, of course, my partner would get to come out and tell me what to go do. So, it was a lot of fun. I think he enjoyed participating in this whole process. When I was out and about - these arbors are long, there's like maybe six teepees of families that are putting on these ceremonies. We were probably, the second teepee down toward the bottom. So he was cooking, and I went out to go visit with some of my relatives, and my mom asked me to give a note to one of my grandmothers that was down here, at the teepee. So as I'm walking, I'm saying hello to all my relatives, talking, chit-chatting, and each one that I went to...Oh they're making meatloaf. I don't know what it is about meatloaf that Native American people like, but "Oh, they're making meatloaf, at the second arbor" - you know. And it went to, "Oh, there's white people making meatloaf in the second arbor." And then later it's a white woman, "There's a white woman making meatloaf down there." So it's kind of funny how those stories kind of built into a white woman making meatloaf in the second arbor down there. They're telling me that, not knowing that it was my partner they were talking about.

[00:45:33]



Rae: Right.

[00:45:34]

Crisosto: So I had to go back and tell him that story. I thought it was kind of funny. My mom just laughs. Yeah, so... I don't know...I think now I can sit back and actually enjoy being in the identity that I have. Because I understand it now. I understand it implicitly, and I don't have to hide anymore. Because I think all the components that make up my identity as a person - I feel it's all there, you know. Whether I'm partnered or not. I think what I was missing was that cultural part, that cultural piece. Even though I was stating that I was gay, in actuality that was a part that was missing, was the cultural part to make me feel connected, and I think that's what people want. They all want to feel connected. And I find that connection easier in a city. But then, I'm also sacrificing the cultural part.

When I have to go home, I drive ten hours, to go visit, and it costs money to travel. So every time I want to go home, it's a ton of money, and it's ten hours. And right now, I think the move that we're planning is so that we can be closer to home, so that my nephews can have access to their culture. Cause I certainly don't want them to grow up not having that, because I know how detrimental it was for me to go through that whole process, and I don't want them to reach the age of thirty and realize that they're missing something in their life. I always want them - because my mom raised them - she raised them to speak their language, to sing their songs, to remember the stories, to help with ceremonial. So it's definitely a big part of them, and I think Native American people can easily lose themselves outside of their communities, and I think for myself, that's the experience that I've had. And it can be lonely. You really want to speak to somebody in

your traditional language. You want to talk about things that are similar in your culture, but, you can't really do that with someone who doesn't know what that is.

So in a lot of ways, I'm glad that we're finally making our way back to New Mexico. And I think my partner is feeling good about that now. He grew up here in Denver, up in Broomfield. And his brother lives here with his wife, and their daughter's grown up and moved back east. His brother's wife is from back east, so I think they're making a decision to move back there, and I think that's one of the reasons why...there's not really anything here left for him. But it's going to be a new adventure, you know. I don't know what will happen, but I'm thinking that it'll be something new. Uh -

[00:48:47]

**Rae:** So I have some questions about - you talked about doing presentations, and so maybe you could describe more like, what the Two Spirit National Cultural Exchange...what specifically do you do? Wou do presentations, it sounds like you do them in Native communities and in non-Native communities, and to -

[00:49:08]

**Crisosto:** Our organization works with governmental agencies. We work with community-based organizations. We work with service-providing agencies. We work with churches, schools, universities. So a lot of these presentations, depending on what setting it is for our training - a lot of it really just includes kind of an overview of what the definition of the two-spirit identity is, and how it fits in many cultures. The terminology, how it evolved, how many tribes see two-spirit people, maybe some of the cultural names for a lot of these communities. The

historical context of two-spirit identity, and how gender identity and sexuality are sort of, embodied, and how it operates within the Native American community. We also try to provide supports - in working with other organizations on how they can define procedures and policy for Native American two-spirit people. What are best practices? How can our identity fit with some of their missions, along with our mission. One of the largest things that we really talk about, because we're not so much focused on HIV, which is what a lot of other organizations do - we're really focused on the social aspect of the identity, which includes substance abuse, domestic violence, suicide, discrimination. All of the different social aspects that delineate what are problematic in social communities.

We just recently finished a social media campaign. We received a grant from the Northwest Area Portland Indian Health Board. The objective was to sort of, how can we lessen the stigma of two-spirit people. So that's where our organization became vital, was to sort of start looking at some of the ways that we can start informing the tribal communities on how to support their two-spirit people. What's some of the things they can do to sort of help alleviate some of the disparity that some of those people are feeling? And it's really hard to do that in tribal communities, because some of these tribal communities are very small, some have three hundred members. And even though the Diné Navajo Reservation has 300,000 members, a lot of their communities are small within that nation. So, it gets very difficult sometimes, and sometimes there's not any technology surrounding that. So, that's where I think we differ from a lot of organizations who have the capacity for technology. Whereas we, working with tribal entities, we sometimes have to go there physically to get this information to them. Because, a simple webinar wouldn't work, or a Skype conversation wouldn't work. Or e-mail, Facebook, or

whatever social media - because some of these communities don't have access to that.

One of the things that I definitely would like to do, which is a lot more work, is to have sort of a physical newsletter. But, you know, of course that costs money, and that is really hard to sort of sustain. Because I think there's still a lot of information out there that people don't have access to. So, it's definitely a challenge of when you're working with Native American populations - what types of information they're accessing, and what they're not. Or what the tribe is developing, and what they're incapacitated by.

But, I always have hope, that somewhere...tribes will hear about what we're doing, and they will invite us to come and participate in some of the programs that they're working on. Because I mean, we're all working towards an identity of sovereignty. So why do we think that what we're talking about is included in that. But you know, the political system is a very funny machine. People who are in politics, that is so different from, the traditional mind that a lot of people are. The more pragmatic you are, versus the more traditional you are - and they always clash. That's something that, I have to be really careful about how I give my information, depending on what groups of people I'm working with. If I'm working with more pragmatic people, of course, you know, power points, and technology and everything, that's gonna work. But if I'm talking to a traditional person, maybe more oral kinds of presentations are better. Something that's more interactive in a community or something, a talking circle, and that sort of thing. Yeah.

**[00:54:54]**

Rae: [coughing] I'm sorry, excuse me.

**[00:55:02]**

Crisosto: But, our goal as an organization is really just to work with non-tribal organizations, and tribal organizations, and just sort of - be out there in the community to be a resource, and maybe filter people to some of the other organizations that we've worked with in the past. And do a lot of outreach and to know that - there are two-spirit out there, there are two-spirit people out there that are advocating. Because there are definitely a lot of resources out there, and if you are living in a specific place, what are some of the other people that are doing the same thing? Like in Los Angeles - I always revert back to a lot other organizations, but again, they're always in urban areas. There's a new organization that just popped up about maybe ten years ago, The Red Circle Project. Again they're primarily HIV/AIDS, but, right now that's all we have that generates money. I think we're slowly starting to identify the historical trauma aspect of it, to develop curriculums for that type of training, and now, another large issue is same-sex marriage. That's a large issue, and how that's working politically within sovereign lands, or within Native American lands. Because their operation is separate from states, you know.

**[00:56:35]**

Rae: Right.

**[00:56:37]**

Crisosto: So, I mean, the state of Oregon, for instance, on the reservation, they allow same-sex marriage, but off the reservation in the state of Oregon, they don't. In New Mexico, it's quite the opposite. The state of New Mexico allows same-sex marriage, but, the Diné reservation does not. So, but I've also heard that some of the Pueblos that are along the Rio Grande, their judges will

allow same-sex marriage, so it just really depends on where you're at and what tribal community you're from. Really really interesting political identity.

**[00:57:13]**

Rae: Yeah.

**[00:57:14]**

Crisosto: So that's another challenge I think we're working on. There is the Lewis and Clark College out of Portland, Oregon. They've put out a toolkit to help tribes and organizations train: on the political rhetoric, on developing their legislation for adopting within their constitution, wording that will support same-sex marriage. So I think that there's a lot of training that's being done now to make that more inclusive. I think we're at like, maybe, nine tribes now, out of the over five hundred tribes -

**[00:57:55]**

Rae: Wow.

**[00:57:56]**

Crisosto: - that exist federally -

**[00:57:57]**

Rae: Wow. Wow.

**[00:58:00]**

Crisosto: So, we've definitely got our work cut out for us, in terms of education.

[00:58:03]

Rae: Yeah.

[00:58:04]

Crisosto: 'Cause it's a pretty large spread.

[00:58:07]

Rae: Right, right. Hmm.

[00:58:10]

Crisosto: So, I mean, but the idea - the idea for me [is] as long as there's people who don't know, that's work for me.

[00:58:16]

Rae: Hm. Right, right! Yeah.

[00:58:18]

Crisosto: But at the same time, I'm now trying to focus more of my energy on the writings that I do. Cause that's really what I've always wanted to do. Teach. Teach creative writing. Yeah. 'Cause, I mean that's what I do, is write.

[00:58:34]

Rae: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:58:36]

Crisosto: And that's crazy, how I just sort of haphazardly took this detour, you know -

[00:58:39]

Rae: Into creating this -

[00:58:41]

Crisosto: Right -

[00:58:41]

Rae: Whole thing, yeah.

[00:58:42]

Crisosto: This organization, yeah. Cause I mean, that wasn't really my intent, but I think it's something that I've benefited from, and I think it's something that I think I've enjoyed. It's really great to hear - if you've gone somewhere, and I mean, I still get stories like that. I went out to a pow-wow, and because we're so open and people know me from the internet or whatever, they'll come up to me. "We're really glad you're here, because we know that as long as you're out here doing this, we know we can always come to this booth, and you are representative of us. And I know that this is a place that I can always come." Sort of like, refuge. So, I think that's great to hear. And I certainly don't do it for myself, I mean, like I said it's taken me many, many years to sort of get to this point of being able to stand up and say "You know what, there is nothing wrong with who I am." You know, "If the Creator was courageous enough to make me who I am, and the Creator's nobody I can argue with, then who are you to do that?" So I mean, that's pretty



much what my philosophy is - is that we all have a purpose, and we are all here for that purpose, and nobody has the power to take that away from us. Because that's what we were born into. You know, I mean, how crazy that somebody can say that? Or, how crazy a government can say that? To try to break your spirit in that way, try to break your identity in that way, when it was given to you specifically from a higher power. To me, that's unfathomable. I just don't understand that. How we're still struggling for rights today, to justify who we are. People still hate who we are when they don't fully understand where we come from or what pains we might have endured. And that's what I think for me, powers me to continue doing what I do. Cause I think, somewhere, I hope it's making a difference.

**[01:01:04]**

Rae: Yeah.

**[01:01:05]**

Crisosto: And hopefully, with the stories that I do, and the videos that I put on the internet - I hope that people are watching them, and that people are remembering them, because I think that that's one of the ways we can make a difference in terms of, what we're doing, beyond changing people's minds, people's attitudes, outlooks... crazy, it's very, very, very crazy.

**[01:01:33]**

Rae: Yeah.

**[01:01:34]**

Crisosto: But you know, I always think... my story is not over. And there's still a lot to talk

about. There's sort of this - I can sit here and just talk about all the different things that went on, but I think the most important thing is that, I've given myself time to sort of accept myself, and be okay with that, to the point where I'm able to talk for other people, and represent and advocate, and educate. So it's kind of a very cool thing, like it's transformed into -

**[01:02:11]**

Rae: Yeah.

**[01:02:12]**

Crisosto: Back in 2009, I had organized an international two-spirit gathering, me and another woman. A Chickasaw woman. It was held here in Estes Park. It was the 21st annual international two-spirit gathering. So we had people from Mexico come up, we had people from Canada come up, and we had record-breaking numbers of attendance from all the - international two-spirit gatherings happened. There was about maybe sixty to eighty people that ever showed up. We had one hundred and eighty people show up.

**[01:02:44]**

Rae: Wow.

**[01:02:45]**

Crisosto: And I think a lot of it had to do with the location, because it was up in the mountains and it was centrally located, and who doesn't want to go to the mountains and spend four days, talking about their gender identity and sexuality?

[01:02:58]

Rae: Yeah.

[01:02:59]

Crisosto: And be included in a community that accepts them for their- indigeneity, that accepts them for their culture, their tradition, their individuality. They're being a part of a community, and just their experience. Our largest attendance was women, which I thought was really amazing, trans people and women. The male population was really low. So, I think that's what made my week, after finding out that our largest attendance was women.

[01:03:37]

Rae: Yeah.

[01:03:38]

Crisosto: Where before, it's mostly men. You know. I think all the two-spirit gatherings that I know of, a majority of the people that show up are men. I'm not really sure why, but you know, I always say that, being a two-spirit person is not about me being specifically gay, or, not me being specifically a lesbian, it's about incorporating both the male and the female part of who we are. I might be biologically male, but I'm also responsible for that female side of me, because it's that balance, you know, I have to consider. And, the same thing with female. I mean, you shouldn't really speak about just your lesbian side or your female side, you also have a responsibility to the male part, you know. And I tell people that when I go out, is, I feel that's our responsibility. I just can't sit here and say "well, this is for gay people, or, you know, for the men."

**[01:04:39]**

Rae: Right.

**[01:04:40]**

Crisosto: You know, I don't represent that, I represent both. And I have to do it equally.

**[01:04:43]**

Rae: Yeah.

**[01:04:44]**

Crisosto: And sometimes, it's hard. Because they're so opposed.

**[01:04:49]**

Rae: Yeah.

**[01:04:50]**

Crisosto: You know. So I really have to listen more so than I do talk.

**[01:04:54]**

Rae: Yeah. Yeah.

**[01:04:56]**

Crisosto: And that sometimes is a hard thing to do, is just sit there and listen, and hear what people have to say. Because the male side of me wants to have an opinion, and be egotistical I guess. But, you know, it doesn't hurt to sit and listen. Yeah, and to hear both sides.

[01:05:15]

Rae: Yeah.

[01:05:16]

Crisosto: That's one thing I've learned, is that there's two sides to every story, and it's not just one-sided, you know. Yeah. So...

[01:05:27]

Rae: Hmm. Well, so, I didn't - this was great, and I don't even know if I need to ask any of these questions. I feel like you covered it, all of them really, which is wonderful. And that's really interesting. But... I guess, like, do you feel like, I don't know - Is there more you want to talk about? Are there things - you've sort of looked at this list - in terms of you know, whether I'm interviewing other people, other two-spirit people or not - Are there questions you think should be added, or...?

[01:06:02]

Crisosto: I think as Native Americans, I think that's just something that - we have to really just talk about, and giving a platform, and being allowed to talk about it, because, it's sort of giving credence to that. Because, there's definitely a lot of history there. There's a lot of stories, that still can be told there, and I just don't think people are given that opportunity or reverence to be able to talk about that. And I think, for myself, being a writer, I think that that's what I have to look for, now, is to find stories and write about them. Talk about these things that people don't necessarily talk about. The manuscript I just completed is pretty much sort of what that's about.

It's a poetic manuscript that I'm sending out to - hopefully somebody will pick it up, to publish. I just sent it out to Oberlin College, they're having a contest right now, and I should hear sometime next month if I get accepted or not.

But, there's some other places that a lot of my other friends are telling me to send that out to, because I specifically talk about the gay identity as male and female, and some of those juxtaposed situations that we're placed in. Because, as a two-spirit individual, like I said, I can't really put more specific focus on just male, because I happen to be male. I have to consider the female aspect of it as well. Because it - well the gift that I've been given, it's not just one. It was both. So I really have to take care of that.

And so I think, that's what this manuscript that I've put together, that's really what I was trying to do, is sort of represent both. And, make people aware of that. Because, I think we're so caught up in this whole idea of Western culture that we lose our sense of culture and our sense of tradition as to who we are. We're so tied up in, you know, the televisions, the cell phones, the... immediacy of Western culture that, we're distracted by, our cultural backgrounds.

So I think, in terms of some of the questions that come up, I think it's something that should always be addressed, is like, where do you fit in within your culture? What is your responsibility to that? Because I find it to be a huge responsibility, not one that I sort of wanted, but I think because of who I am, I sort of have to accept that, you know. And I don't see it as a burden. I really don't, because, I get to interact with a lot of people. And I think it's a privilege to hear a lot of people's stories, because you're sort of... involved in part of their lives by hearing that story. So I think it's great when people tell their story and share it with you. But, I don't know, I mean -

your questions are good. I, I love them.

**[01:09:26]**

Rae: Okay.

**[01:09:26]**

Crisosto: They're very poignant and you can definitely get a conversation going with them. But in terms of, just the Native American side, I mean, just that you're able to incorporate that is excellent. Cause I think there's a huge story there. There's so much experience, there's history -

**[01:09:49]**

Rae: Yeah.

**[01:09:51]**

Crisosto: I think if people would put themselves aside and go into a Native country, they can find American novels -

**[01:09:59]**

Rae: Yeah.

**[01:10:00]**

Crisosto: There. And I think some writers have.

**[01:10:02]**

Rae: Yeah.

[01:10:03]

Crisosto: You know, Love Medicine -

[01:10:05]

Rae: Yeah. Yeah.

[01:10:07]

Crisosto: - is one of them, you know. Sherman Alexie... House Made of Dawn, you know, all these different stories that people talk about -

[01:10:16]

Rae: Yeah.

[01:10:18]

Crisosto: And those are just some of the stories that -

[01:10:19]

Crisosto's Mom: It's okay, you can sit there. At the end of the table, they won't mind. [Speaking to one of Crisosto's nephews who came into the kitchen]

[01:10:22]

Rae: Yeah.

[01:10:23]

Crisosto: I should probably introduce you to my mom.



**[01:10:25]**

Rae: Yeah! Should I go ahead and stop this? Do you feel good about that?

**[01:10:29]**

Crisosto: Sure.

**[01:10:29]**

Rae: Thank you so much!

**[01:10:30]**

Crisosto: Did that work? Okay.

**[01:10:31]**

Rae: That was wonderful, that was wonderful, thank you, thank you.