Carving out space for queer, Indigenous and two-spirited people in Ignacio and beyond

Ignacio Out and Equal Alliance working to address resource gaps across the Four Corners

By Jessie Bowman Herald Staff Writer

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Trennie Burch, center, co-founder and executive director of Ignacio Out and Equal Alliance, and Nichole Foster, board co-chair, hold the banner they will carry in the Bayfield and Ignacio Pride Parade as board member Chrystal Rizzo watches Thursday at the IOEA office in Ignacio. (Jerry McBride/Durango Herald)

In times of social and political adversity, visibility matters, Trennie Burch, co-founder and executive director of Ignacio Out and Equal Alliance, said. That's something leaders of the alliance have been learning their whole lives.

Where other queer communities have fallen upon hard times, such as Durango's community with the closure of the Starlight Lounge, the alliance in Ignacio is growing in both a physical and metaphorical sense.

About this series

Just as social norms ebb and flow over time, so do community spaces. This Pride Month series explores how queer spaces across La Plata County are changing and what those changes mean for the people who find belonging, support and identity within them.

The Ignacio Out and Equal Alliance is quickly becoming part of the community fabric. It opened a permanent office in the ELHI Community Center last fall. The Southern Ute Indian Tribe helped share the word about an upcoming Pride festival. And the next generation of the queer community is taking

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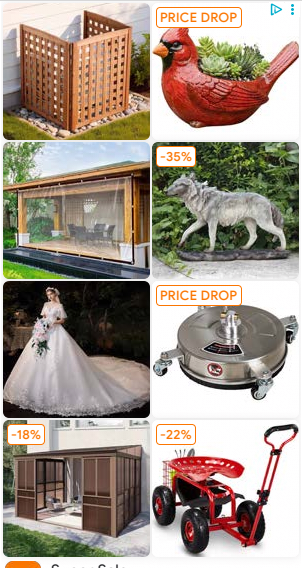

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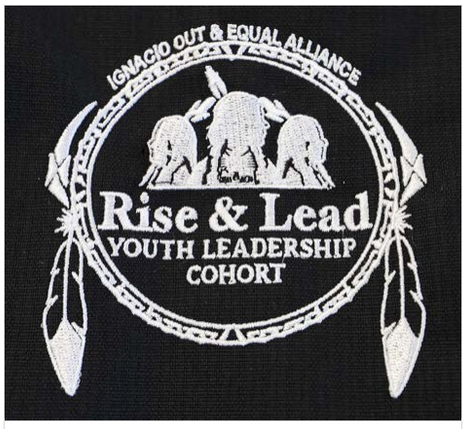
ownership of their space.

IOEA's mission is to create safe, culturally grounded spaces where Native, queer and Two-Spirit people – especially youth – can reconnect with their traditions, build leadership and access community-led support while educating the wider community and advocating for their safety and rights.

The office is being developed to serve as a drop-in safe space for kids with Wi-Fi, food and activities. IOEA is about to expand to Towaoc, a community with increasing suicide rates, Trennie Burch, alliance co-founder and executive director, said.



The logo for Ignacio Out and Equal Alliance's youth current on Thursday in Ignacio. (Jerry McBride/Durango Herald)

Following COVID-19 and the scattering of leadership members beyond Ignacio, the nonprofit dedicated to supporting the LGBTQ+ and Two-Spirit community paused a lot of in-person programming and transitioned to focus on mutual aid facilitation.

In 2025, IOEA was started up again when some leadership returned to the area, including Burch and her wife, Nichole Foster, the board co-chair.

They hit the ground running and have a packed June schedule during Pride month.

The organization is co-hosting its first Pride celebration in Bayfield alongside the nonprofit Bayfield Queers and has spent much of the month attending events across Colorado.

Earlier this month, members traveled to Denver to support the reformation of the Mile High Two-Spirit Society and help organize the Two-Spirit Pride Extravaganza before heading to Pikes Peak Pride, Burch said.

The Alliance has also hosted workshops focused on cultural reconnection – including concho belt and breastplate classes and a writing workshop led by Colorado's first Native Poet Laureate, Crisosto Apache.

For Foster, however, the most encouraging development has been watching young people take ownership of the program.

A youth leadership cohort that educates future community leaders – paying them for their work – was launched in April.

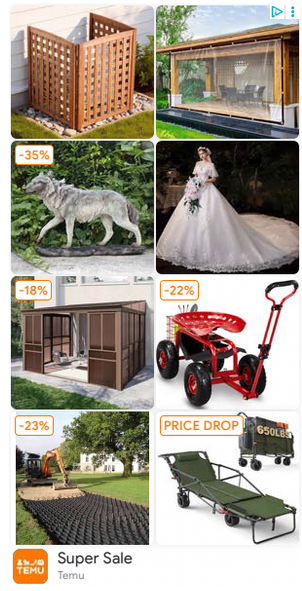
The six participants, some queer and some allies, are already asking thoughtful questions about allyship, Pride and how to support LGBTQ+ community members, Foster said.

"I used to run the shelter in Towaoc, and sometimes it would take me weeks and weeks and weeks and months to get that kind of interest and reaction," she said.

In just a few sessions, cohort members began sharing ideas for projects they wanted to lead in their communities. They turned their final project into three more: a music festival, food drive and Missing and Murdered Indigenous Relatives mural.

Watching the cohort develop confidence and leadership skills has strengthened Foster's belief in the importance of creating spaces where young people feel heard.

"It just goes to show that if people have the support, they have a safe space, they have the protections, and most importantly, a listening ear from adults around them, they could grow to be a million feet tall," she said.



Trennie Burch, center, co-founder and executive director of led Ignacio Out and Equal Alliance, on Thursday in Ignacio. (Jerry McBride/Durango Herald)

A gift to their past selves

In many ways the Ignacio Out and Equal Alliance was founded in the co-founders' deep compassion for their childhood selves.

It was started by a group of queer, Indigenous advocates in an effort to provide the safe and inclusive environment for Indigenous kids in the Four Corners that they themselves would have benefited from when they were growing up, said Edward Box III, one of the co-founders of Southwest Rainbow Youth, the initial 2019 program that led to the formation of IOEA.

Box said growing up on the Southern Ute reservation and going to school as a gay male with feminine traits was challenging, both in dealing with his peers in public school and back home in his traditional family.

He was bullied for his long hair, his feminine demeanor and his inability to fit within a constrained traditional gender role assigned to people born male at birth.

Edward Box III

Box said he often felt misunderstood, trapped between two cultures and ashamed of his identity, both as a Native American and as a gay man. At times, he contemplated suicide.

"I can remember wanting to just say, 'Screw the world, I'm done.' ... I thought about exiting, but I'm glad I didn't," he said.

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Box has come a long way. He's embraced his identity, been married for 19 years, is studying for his master's degree and is a successful advocate.

An organization like IOEA would have helped him better understand his Two-Spirit identity and provided more support for him to feel hopeful about the future, he said.

"I'm trying to be a good role model for our Native people, our youth, to be happy on how they identify, and show that they still can, they can survive and prosper, be prosperous in today's world," he said.

Burch, a member of the Southern Ute Tribe who grew up in Ignacio, said having a resource and a place like IOAE "would have changed so much."

“Having people I could trust and space I could move within and just be completely myself would have completely changed my life,” she said. “The trauma I experienced in young adulthood, in my 20s, I don’t think that would have been a part of it if I would have had this space that we are now creating.”

Burch and her wife, Foster, a member of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, met as kids.

“It was an instant connection between us, but we were young, like 13, and we didn't know what these feelings were,” Burch said. “We didn't know what (Queer love) looks like, and we knew that to our communities it wasn't widely accepted.”

It is a reason why the mission of visibility is so important. Burch believes being queer, Two-Spirit, IndigQueer or LGBTQ+ is still taboo in many Native communities, and goes unacknowledged.

Like, oh, “we're not going to talk about it, so it doesn't exist,” she said.

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Advocates say space, visibility and support for Two-Spirit people are especially important as LGBTQ+ identities face increasing political scrutiny nationwide. For Two-Spirit people, who navigate both Indigenous and gay identities, those pressures can be felt on multiple fronts.

The Indian Health Service webpage dedicated to the two-spirit identity was removed early in 2025 before a court order required the federal government to restore it.

While it remains online, President Donald Trump’s administration added a bright red banner with a notice denigrating the page’s contents as promoting “extremely inaccurate” gender ideology that harms children by “promoting their chemical and surgical mutilation.”

“This page does not reflect biological reality and therefore the Administration and this Department rejects it,” the notice reads.

The presence of IOEA appears to be combating some of that attempted erasure.

Last week, the Southern Ute tribal government reposted the alliance’s Pride announcement on its Facebook page.

For Burch, it reflected a recognition that Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ tribal members are part of the community and deserve access to information and opportunities just like everyone else, although whether it signals a broad change in attitudes is much too soon to know.

“Visibility matters. When Tribal entities acknowledge community events it helps people know they exist and can reduce some of the isolation that many Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ people have experienced,” she said in a text to *The Durango Herald*.

One puzzle piece in the resurgence of Two-Spirit Identity

One of the Alliance's central goals is to uplift and reconnect community members with the Two-Spirit identity, a role that predates colonization and has deep roots in many Indigenous cultures, including those of the Ute people.

“Two-Spirit” is a modern umbrella term used by many Indigenous people across North America to describe individuals who embody both masculine and feminine spirits or identities, though its meaning varies among tribes and communities.

Nichole Foster, board member of Ignacio Out and Equal Alliance, on Thursday in Ignacio. (Jerry McBride/Durango Herald)

"It means that the creator has given us a gift, that we can see the world through both genders," Foster, said. "We hold both pieces equally, so we're able to navigate the world and see the world through both of those energies."

Foster identifies as two-spirit, but said she did not fully understand what that meant until later in life.

As a teenager and young adult, she described herself as a "tomboy" because she lacked the language to explain her identity. It wasn't until her 40s, after connecting with two-spirit elders, that she began to feel fully comfortable in her understanding of herself.

"Getting to understand who I fully am gives me a sense of belonging; not even just belonging to my community, or not even just belonging in my family, but belonging to the land and Mother Earth," she said. "It gives me a real sense of who I am."

That search for belonging is something Burch said she is increasingly seeing in the community.

Participants in some of IOEA's classes have told her they identify as two-spirit and want to better understand what that role means and how they can contribute to their communities through it.

The organization is also seeing growing visibility for two-spirit people across Colorado. Burch pointed to the re-establishment of Denver's Two-Spirit Society and the inclusion of two-spirit performers at upcoming Pride events in Denver and Bayfield as signs of that momentum.

IOEA leaders attribute the increased visibility to community advocates and younger generations pushing for spaces where two-spirit people can be seen and celebrated.

"I don't think we've ever really tried to create space for ourselves," Burch said. "This year, more younger leaders are coming out, exploring and pushing back."

Box said he has noticed the same shift and has learned from watching younger generations navigate social structures and challenge expectations.

"Our younger generation has taught me to be more vocal and to question things," he said. "We (were) taught to just sit there, listen and don't ask questions."

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A previous version of this story incorrectly identified Edward Box III as his father, Edward Box Jr. The story has been updated to reflect that he is Edward Box III.

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