

SHERENTÉ HARRIS

NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTH LEADER

b. June 11, 2000

“... The most controversial act I ever committed was being myself.”

As an indigenous Two-Spirit youth leader, s/he broke gender barriers in tribal dance.

Sherenté Mishitashin Harris is an indigenous Two-Spirit youth leader, activist and champion powwow dancer. An advocate for Indian visibility and positive cultural change through the arts, s/he overcame discrimination to break down gender barriers in traditional dance.

Harris is a member of the Narragansett Indian Tribe and comes from a large family of champion powwow dancers. As a teenager, s/he came to understand his identity as an indigenous Two Spirit, a term used to describe nonbinary gender and sexuality in indigenous communities. “People told me that if I was transgender, I would have known

ever since I was young,” Harris noted. “But what does it mean to be a man or a woman? I identify both as a man and as a woman—but really, at the end of the day, I’m just being myself.”

Although Two Spirits were once considered sacred by the Narragansett Tribe, many Two Spirits today face numerous challenges, including exclusion from powwow circles. After coming out as Two Spirit, Harris, who had previously danced at powwows in the tradition of his father, began to embrace his identity by dancing in the tradition of his mother—a style performed by women.

To prepare for competition, Harris practiced daily for a year, despite what s/he describes as loneliness and a lack of assurance that s/he would be able to compete as his true self. When the time came to compete, s/he faced resistance from powwow officials who told the judges not to score his performance. Many judges were supportive and scored Harris anyway. Harris continued to persevere, placing fourth, then third, then second and, finally, first. S/he went on to perform as head-person dancer at the Dartmouth Powwow in 2017 and 2018.

As an artist and activist, Harris aims to “intertwine the stories of his cultural path with his Two-Spirit identity to evoke an emotion that sparks dialogue regarding ideologies that are too often silenced.” Harris’s work on indigenous language preservation was submitted as a part of a contest for the White House Tribal Youth Gathering, where s/he was invited and honored for his work in 2015. Harris also attended the United National Indian Tribal Youth (UNITY) conference, where s/he represented his tribe and sat at the first ever Two-Spirit workshop run by UNITY.

Harris studies at Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design.



© SHERENTÉ HARRIS

lgbt
HISTORY
MONTH

www.lgbtHistoryMonth.com

Copyright © 2019 – A Project of Equality Forum