



Documentary Preserves Latina LGBTQ History In New Mexico

By [MARISA DEMARCO](#) • SEP 19, 2019



Gloria Vigil in a still from the documentary "The Whistle"
COURTESY OF STORMMIGUEL FLOREZ

Before there was an internet, young lesbians in Albuquerque connected and found each other in public using a covert sonic signal. A documentary film celebrating that part of New Mexico's Latina LGBTQ culture premieres in Albuquerque on Friday, Sept. 20. The film acknowledges and preserves a mostly unknown piece of local history.

It's been a while since Gloria Vigil was a student at [Rio Grande High School](#) back in the '70s. She remembers learning the secret whistle, a way teenage LGBTQ Latinas in Albuquerque would reach out to one another in public spaces. "We could go into the cafeteria and do this whistle, and then hands would start going up," she said. "And so we could find where our friends were."

It was a time when people had to be more careful about being open in public, Vigil said.

"If you didn't train your ear to it, you didn't even hear it," she said.

She gave an example, a super high-pitched, long tone. The sound is made on an inhale, "pursing your lips, having a little small hole at the front, and just sucking in," she explained, and it travels like you wouldn't believe.

It's used by vendors in marketplaces in Mexico to communicate, Vigil said, and it came to Albuquerque by way of El Paso, Texas, where it was mostly used by gay men. Here, it spread through the high schools, passed along by young lesbian athletes.

Back in the '70s, Vigil and her friends often used other kinds of coded language in the notes they passed to each other, and hid their relationships. Once as a teen, word about her and her girlfriend got out, and she remembers being followed and threatened for a time.

Today, she's a social worker in a high school, and she said she's observed new acceptance. "Things have changed so much because sexuality is so fluid these days, especially in high school," she said. "I don't know that it's so stigmatizing anymore to come out."

Vigil said use of the whistle fell off in the '90s, but it still works, even today. "I go to games at The Pit. I still use it, just to see if I get a whistle back," she said. "And I don't think there's been a time that I have not gotten a whistle back."

[StormMiguel Florez](#) is the film's director. "A lot of us had to work to learn it," he said. "I practiced it for I think like a month before I learned it. But I was like, every day. I was obsessed."

[The Whistle \(Official Trailer\)](#) from [What Do We Want Films](#) on [Vimeo](#).

He grew up in Albuquerque and went to high school after Vigil, graduating in 1990. At the time, he identified as a lesbian, though he's since come out as transgender. Meeting Vigil through making this documentary brought a moment of realization, he said. "I got to really understand where I came from, and how I got to have the teenage years that I got to have."

The older generation—Vigil and other LTBTQ people in Albuquerque—became mentors for younger folks going through the process of coming out, Florez said. That ethic, passed down over decades, created lasting community and culture. "Her kind of way of being in the world, and the ways that she thinks about things and the things she finds she finds important, and even language that she uses, it came directly to me somehow," he said. "I see exactly where this came from. I see exactly the line, the lineage, in a way, that came to me."

He said he especially wants folks in New Mexico to see the movie, to see themselves in the movie, as a part of celebrating and recording local history.

Adrian Carver is the executive director of [Equality New Mexico](#). "Queer Latinas have always been a big part of this movement," he said. "The film celebrating queer Latinas is super important, because the LGBTQ movement has a long history of problematically being run by cisgender, gay white men."

He said this documentary is an important part of representing people who aren't usually heard—or shown on screens. "I'm really excited to see this film highlighting this population so we bring more awareness to the very important contributions this community has made to our movement here in New Mexico."

Through the documentary, he said, this secret signal becomes a publicly celebrated strategy for creating safety and community.

[The Whistle](#) premieres Friday, Sept. 20, at 7:30 p.m. at the [KiMo Theatre](#) in downtown Albuquerque.

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