

PRIDE & Equality 2019 - Featured Stories
The Special Call: The Story of The Whistle

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A call went out this year after spending an evening with youth in the LGBTQ community for National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day. I discovered that although there seems to be a fractured community here in New Mexico, the gap is even deeper when it comes to people of color. They feel they don't have a voice or opportunities to express it. While I offered everyone in the room the opportunity to share their stories, no one took the opportunity. So, the direction changed. During this time I was approached by StormMiguel Florez, a filmmaker, who remembered his moment in 1987 - coming out as lesbian before transitioning. This Hispanic, Albuquerque native took those memories, a distinct sound, and created a documentary to tell his story. The Whistle "is a documentary film that will tell the story of a secret code created by and shared among young lesbians in 1970s & 80s Albuquerque as a means of self-identification and finding community." Florez sat down with me to talk about the moment he discovered "The Whistle" and what he has witnessed during his time in New Mexico.

What do you remember most about that time when you came out - the good and the bad?

I am a queer trans man and identified as a lesbian when I came out at age 15 in 1987. The hard part about coming out in 1987 was the total lack of positive representation of LGBT people in the media, so people didn't have a reference point for us, besides what they learned in church and this inherent "knowledge" that LGBT people were sad, lonely, disturbed sinners who lived in the shadows. This meant that there was a lot of shame and fear around coming out even to ourselves, but I know that is still the case for many people coming out today. Coming out to my parents was hard. My mother was a devout Catholic, but I never heard her talk about God or sin, we just went to Church every Sunday, and Catechism during summer break when we were kids, and we were expected to fulfill the sacraments.

When I came out to my parents, she used words like “evil” and “sin” and told me that I was going to change. This made me feel really awful and really afraid. She grounded me for what seemed like the longest time, she made me go to a psychologist, and tried to make me go to modeling school. The psychologist was surprisingly cool and told me that I didn’t need to change unless I wanted to and that if I wanted to, it should only be for myself. The modeling school took one look at my butchy teenaged self and told my mother and I that they offered acting classes.

My mother never spoke of modeling school again. It was a very hard time for both of us. I know she had a lot of shame around me being gay and I don’t think she every really talked about it to anyone. She came around over the years, which I think made things a lot easier for both of us.

The lack of general awareness or reference for us in the Southwest had it’s upside. People didn’t necessarily know what they were seeing when they saw us, especially us lesbians, so we were able to duck under the radar a lot of the time. That meant we were able to be out in public with each other in groups, and no one would bother us. Either we were intimidating, or people just didn’t know what they were seeing. That said, we were bullied in school and many of us didn’t graduate high school or barely graduated because of bullying and not feeling like we could really be ourselves at school. Many of my friends were kicked out of their homes when their parents found out they were gay, so it was by no means perfect, and in fact there were a lot of hard times. But we got a lot of support from each other.

The best part about coming out as a lesbian at that time was the community. There were so many of us in Albuquerque! We were at every high school - especially from the west side up to Del Norte high school. And we would all party together and hang out at each others’ houses, and go to each others softball, basketball, and soccer games. And when we wanted to confirm that some mullet sporting girl that we had never seen before was gay, we would use this whistle. The whistle was known by what seemed to be most young lesbians in Albuquerque - especially Latina lesbians. When we used the whistle to spot someone, if they were one of us, they would whistle back or look up (maybe thinking it was their friends trying to get their attention) and give what was often a shy, but happy little nod.

I have a lot of great memories of coming out at the time and wouldn’t change it for anything.

What was New Mexico (Albuquerque) like for a person of color in the LGBTQ community?

That’s an interesting question because of the particular makeup of our ethnicity and race in this state. I believe there is a higher percentage of Latinx (or Hispanic) people in New Mexico than any other race/ethnicity. So for Latinx people, I think it’s a lot easier for us than other people of color, because we see ourselves represented more and probably have more access than other people of color do in this state. So on that front, being a young Latinx butch lesbian, I always felt like my masculinity was the thing that people noticed about me and the thing I was targeted and harassed about - not my race/ethnicity.

Despite there being more Latinx people in New Mexico, the people who owned the businesses and had the wealth and means of production were and probably still are overwhelmingly white. When you look back at the old Common Ground or Out (New Mexico) magazines that were being published in the 80s and 90s, the writers, the advertisers, the story subjects were mostly white. The owners of the bars were mostly, if not all white. The owners of the local lesbian feminist bookstore, Full Circle Books, who were wonderful, supportive women, were white. I recently spoke with a straight, cis, white elder from Albuquerque when I was doing research for this film and she used the phrase “the Hispanic people, the Native, people, and the American (white) people” when referring to a demographic of people that go to a particular establishment. She was well meaning, but it verified so much of what many of us people of color already know, that even in a place like Albuquerque, many white people think that people of color are unAmerican or not American. This makes it hard for people of color in general to even see ourselves in leadership roles, as business owners, or as people who are truly welcome wherever we go. Add being LGBTQ and we feel that within our own families and communities.

When was the first time you heard about The Whistle?

The first time I heard about the whistle was from the person who brought me out. She told me about it and might have tried to teach me. It was really hard to learn. It’s a super high-pitched sound made by sucking in. Many describe it as being like a dog whistle because it’s high-pitched and people only tend to hear it if they are tuned in to it. That made it very easy to use the whistle in a large crowd without anyone even noticing or hearing it. Anyway, I was obsessed with learning it and practiced and practiced until I finally got it. I think I annoyed all my friends who already knew it with how excited I was. I was like a little excited puppy.

There is a large Hispanic presence in this documentary. Did you seem to notice bullying for being both Hispanic and gay or was it one-sided?

To me, the bullying felt like it was specifically around being gay. Two of my biggest bullies were closeted Latina lesbians. I ran into one of them years later at a Melissa Etheridge concert.

You have some amazing interviews. What was this experience like creating this documentary?

It was a huge privilege to get to make this documentary. I was really nervous approaching participants as a trans man who they might not remember, or didn't even know at the time. I was worried that they would not trust sharing their stories with this random dude. But everyone was so wonderful and warm and really shared so much of themselves. One participant, Gloria Vigil, started doing research on her own that ended up really helping to shape the film. Gloria and I met on Facebook when I was putting the word out about the project. She said she had some stories and after we spoke on the phone, she agreed to an interview. During her interview, I really saw how her generation (she's about ten years older than I am) and those who came before her really shaped my experience coming out as a teen. The language and signals, the codes, the way she really cherished what was happening for her even at the time, those things were translated directly to me without ever having met her and her peers before. It confirmed how important our LGBTQ history is and how it shapes us and paves the way for us to get to be who we are.

What do you want viewers to take away from this documentary?

I want people to know about this really unique piece of Southwest LGBTQ history. I want people who were living these stories to see themselves reflected and celebrated. I want LGBTQ youth in the region to know who came before them. I want non-LGBTQ people to see how amazing and resourceful and resilient, and most importantly, how human we are. I want more LGBTQ people in the region to be inspired to research and document stories from their own communities.

The Whistle is supported in part by NALAC (the National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures), The San Francisco Arts Commission/Independent Artists Commission, and The Horizons Foundation. Learn more at www.stormflorez.com/the-whistle.html

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