

Forgotten Voices

INDIGENOUS
TWO-SPIRIT,
LGTB*QIA
YOUTH & HOMELESSNESS

These are their voices

Forgotten Voices hopes to start a conversation that will get the rest of Toronto listening, learning, and helping homeless Indigenous youth

THANK YOU! MIIKWEC!

Thank you to the youth who participated—you rock!
This booklet is dedicated to you and your strength.
Mel and Connor

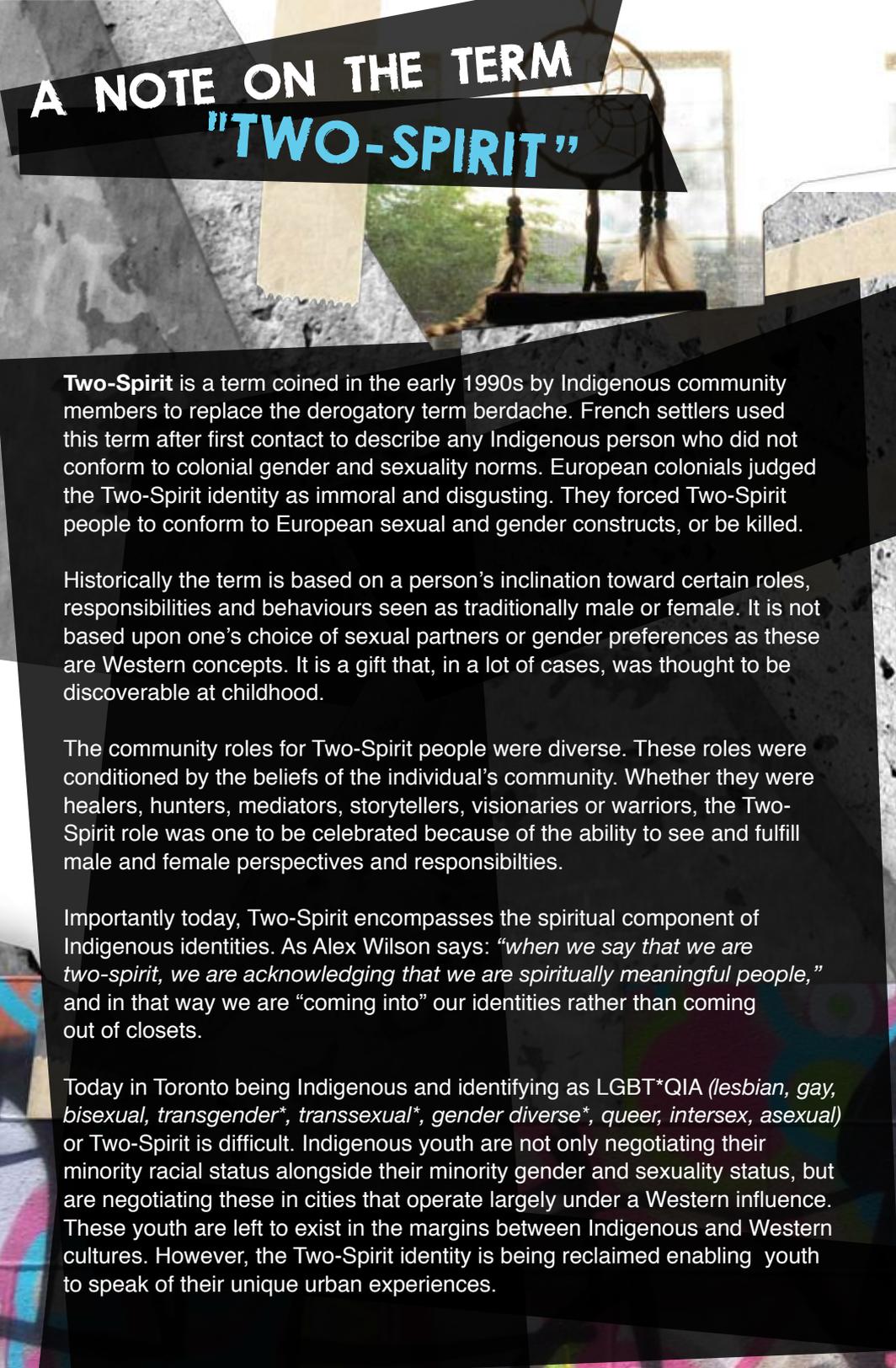
“I only have a fifth grade education. I was kicked out of school because I couldn't speak English and was Native. They believed I would never learn anything. So I left home when I was 12 years old. Over ten years later, look at me now. Getting into teaching, working 4 jobs, and fighting for LGBTQ rights in Canada. Never let anyone tell you how stupid, or worthless you are because fact is... they're wrong.”

Atlas , age 23



This project was made possible by the Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC) and through the generous support of the City of Toronto's Homelessness Prevention Initiative (HPI).

TASSC is a not-for-profit advocacy, policy and research organization that addresses social determinants to improve and enhance the social, economic and cultural health of Aboriginal peoples in the City of Toronto.



A NOTE ON THE TERM "TWO-SPIRIT"

Two-Spirit is a term coined in the early 1990s by Indigenous community members to replace the derogatory term berdache. French settlers used this term after first contact to describe any Indigenous person who did not conform to colonial gender and sexuality norms. European colonials judged the Two-Spirit identity as immoral and disgusting. They forced Two-Spirit people to conform to European sexual and gender constructs, or be killed.

Historically the term is based on a person's inclination toward certain roles, responsibilities and behaviours seen as traditionally male or female. It is not based upon one's choice of sexual partners or gender preferences as these are Western concepts. It is a gift that, in a lot of cases, was thought to be discoverable at childhood.

The community roles for Two-Spirit people were diverse. These roles were conditioned by the beliefs of the individual's community. Whether they were healers, hunters, mediators, storytellers, visionaries or warriors, the Two-Spirit role was one to be celebrated because of the ability to see and fulfill male and female perspectives and responsibilities.

Importantly today, Two-Spirit encompasses the spiritual component of Indigenous identities. As Alex Wilson says: *"when we say that we are two-spirit, we are acknowledging that we are spiritually meaningful people,"* and in that way we are "coming into" our identities rather than coming out of closets.

Today in Toronto being Indigenous and identifying as LGBT*QIA (*lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender*, transsexual*, gender diverse*, queer, intersex, asexual*) or Two-Spirit is difficult. Indigenous youth are not only negotiating their minority racial status alongside their minority gender and sexuality status, but are negotiating these in cities that operate largely under a Western influence. These youth are left to exist in the margins between Indigenous and Western cultures. However, the Two-Spirit identity is being reclaimed enabling youth to speak of their unique urban experiences.



WHAT YOU WILL FIND IN THIS FORGOTTEN VOICES BOOKLET

Forgotten Voices bridges the gap between two diverse groups: LGBT*QIA, and Two-Spirit Indigenous youth. The youth you will meet throughout this piece are statistically at the highest risk for homelessness, suicide, abuse and violence. They are not only racially and systemically oppressed, but they are also gender and sex spectrum rogues.

These youth are subjected daily to homophobia from a heterosexist culture and appropriation from an LGBT* community that doesn't understand the Two-Spirit identity. Indigenous organizations that have been subjected to homo-negativity because of Christian doctrine, residential schooling, and the many other effects of colonization are not always welcoming of these youth either.

Oppression is a residual effect—a horrible blanket that continues to proliferate Indigenous spaces. However, the youth we know and have worked with are strong, diverse, Two-Spirit warriors. They tell us constantly that for themselves and Toronto, there is hope for a better future.

Forgotten Voices was created to help Two-Spirit, LGBT*QIA Indigenous homeless youth tell their stories their way. Elder Albert Marshall argues: “the foundational basis for any relationship is an exchange of stories.” Here, these youth talk about their lived experiences with the shelter system, cultural programming, harm reduction strategies, the staff and supports that they have encountered, living on the streets, and addiction. Hearing their stories straight from their hearts and mouths is helping us all learn about living in Toronto together.

The youth here end this booklet by providing tangible, no-nonsense recommendations that will make Toronto a better place for them to live. Their lived experience and resilience is our biggest hope for change.

PREFACE:

Sometimes life doesn't become like you thought it would, so you have one of two choices: You can change it, or wait for it to change you. Ever since I was younger I was known as a runner and walker. I could walk for miles on end without much thought. Just the path of walking or running became an awe of mine. Even as an infant I didn't have first steps, I simply got up and ran. So in the year 2013 when my life slapped me across the face I knew my situation was never going to change unless I made it change. Getting out of the hospital bed, walking away, I researched my way into the city of Toronto, making a change. Arriving two days later in the middle of winter and in a hospital gown I made a promise in my heart that this would become my new life. Awaiting me were many hardships and trials. Eight months later, after unspeakable forms of abuse, neglect and battles with myself and those around me I finally found my place in this city.

Still a youth myself, with my own battles of homelessness since the young age of 13, I traveled far and long all over the northern parts and cities of Ontario forever hoping and praying that one day I could end up here and make a difference in Toronto. Bouncing between over four adult and four youth shelters throughout the city I've come to terms with the fact that not a single shelter is good, or successful. I was often scared in the shelters I stayed in that the person next to me wouldn't wake up in the morning. To be honest, most shelter staff give up after writing the report on the homeless human-being entering their building. Giving them a bed, shelter, and a meal, shelter staff leave it at that as if the dirt on



their hands is clean. It takes only half a year of schooling to work in a shelter as if any amount of someone's privileged schooling can help those who are homeless in Toronto. What do we need? What people need is their dead fire of hope lit up once more. Shelters watch those who stay go downhill and decide who will get out and who will die in that place. Have we as human beings of Canada really become this sickening? That we stare at homeless people and decide that one will live and that one will die. Can't you understand how sickening that is? Most countries do everything in their power to help those off the streets, why can't we? Why is it so hard to try and stand up for the others around us?

This is why as a youth of Toronto I fight for change. I don't want us to be trapped. It's like this forever. I believe we can change and make differences. I know as a youth who is watchful and notices more than I can carry, we are the hope. But change always starts with a first step.

Please hear our words with open hearts, minds and ears. We will prove change and hope is still a burning passion and longing lit strong within us. We just need that chance as youth. We need you all to become that kid who once believed in everyone, and believe in us, because sometimes that is all someone needs. This is my first step and my chance. With everything inside me I don't want to lose this chance... it's been over a year since my hospital stay and more than anything I'll fight to keep walking.



HOW WE GOT HERE:

Ever since I was really young I kept telling her I was a boy. I was very young. And my mom would slap me and hit me and beat me. She used to beat me with her shoe and say "you're a girl, you're a girl, you're a girl". When I was twelve I attempted suicide inside my school. They kicked me out because I tried to commit suicide. It didn't matter that there were crack dealers - they didn't kick them out. They kicked me out because I was Native. Cause when you're the Native kid - no one wants nothing to do with you.

My mother's an alcoholic and she was an abused woman from my stepfather. One day I told him I was going to kill him. I didn't even think I was serious, but I was just so mad I just wanted to say it - it felt good saying it. Ya she basically saved my life - she called the cops. I wasn't allowed to go back home. I was told by the judge to go live at Covenant House. I'm glad he picked Covenant House and not the other shelters...but I was there for three years.

I went into Foster Care when I was like 6 years old and stayed in Foster Care until I was about 19. But I was a really angry kid. I wouldn't talk to anyone. I was just angry. I wasn't really happy. I was getting charged - getting arrested.

I've lived in Toronto all my life, and I used to live with my dad who was really abusive. He's a hardcore alcoholic. He used to go into my room and steal my money. That's when he was real bad into crack. I left when I was about 15-16, I was selling drugs at the time.

People need to be more respectful of people with mental health issues. I've gone on the welfare system twice - the first time I had a worker and she was great. She helped me out with a new bed with a community start-up. Then my case got switched to someone else who made my life miserable and threatened to keep my cheque from me. My contract for my job ended and I had to go on welfare. It wasn't enough money to support myself.

ON BEING TWO-SPIRIT & HOMELESS IN TORONTO:

In terms of identity and home that's something that's really not jived for me. I came out when I was twelve. And I remember how I slept - [...] I didn't. It brought so much fear into my home. It really forced me to censor myself.

I don't necessarily know too much about Two-Spirit individuality. Some people describe me as two-spirit, but I'm still discovering myself.

I feel safer living on the streets than I do in a shelter. Being a male, but with everyone assuming I'm female. Places try to be trans positive but its not working.

I don't identify as LGBTQ2S when I go to shelters.

I've seen friends [...] here and they went through some really heavy shit in a short period of time - such as sexual assault in the shelter system [and] having trouble identifying as Two-Spirit in the shelter system. When I was in the shelter system I didn't identify mainly because I didn't want to have to deal with a whole bunch of negative crap.

I got LGBT housing and they're still terrible with pronouns.

For me the LGBT2S stuff isn't even on my radar because even the most basic shit is more of an issue. The basics of base needs are so bad - they're not being met so identity is not my priority.

I was raised with my mom telling me "no son of mine should ever be gay." But then even within the LGBT community - not everyone is accepting.

I can tell my grandparents are homophobic and transphobic. Everyone I've grown up around was. It's not something I want to share with people.

I've never been really involved in the gay community. Based on my experience as an Aboriginal gay youth, I found it very euro-centric and very cliquy.

I've tried to make friends in the community but I can't really get into it.

I keep my sexuality hidden for a reason. As far as the whole issue with being gay, the number one thing I'm worried about is safety and of course discrimination. There's a larger community than what is being presented.

SHELTERS:

Being queer matters in the shelter system.

I don't really go to shelters. For the last 7 months I've been on the streets. I refuse to go to shelters. The people - the staff and some of the clients - it's not a good environment. Some of them don't accept you. They see it everyday and they look at you - - - I'd rather just stay on the streets.

I don't know what the standards are for shelters, but the rooms, I wish that I could've taken a picture of the room that I was put in. It was disgusting. I would have rather slept outside than sleep in that shelter. The floors were disgusting. I woke up with bed bug bites. We were given lockers and the one I was given was broken, and all my stuff was stolen and they couldn't do anything for me. When I went to pick up my other possessions the staff said that it is what happens in shelters and that they are not liable. But I wasn't given something safe to put my things in.

I'd rather be in a transitional house any day over a shelter. They're a step up. They teach you how to cook and do things on your own. Independent skills. No shelters do that.

I've seen kids get kicked out of shelters that have nowhere else to go.

The shelter system is kind of crappy in a way. The whole thing about some of them is they're not very tolerant of drug and alcohol use - I think and that kind of needs to be changed. The drug and alcohol thing is the biggest thing that needs to be addressed. It could be more inclusive - they're alienating the people they're trying to help. I've been racially profiled - told to blow in their face.

I'd rather sleep on the stairwell with my friend and know that we're ok and can take care of each other than split off and go to a gendered shelter and not know where the other is or how they're doing - you have to try to stay together - there's safety in numbers.

THE STREETS:

When you're on the street nobody acknowledges you - people walk right by you they don't say anything to you - they don't care to ask... they just assume that you're a drug addict or a run-away like you have some sort of problem that put you on the street. Sometimes that's true, like there's a lot of people that are addicts and choose that path in life but you know, everyone's different, and I think that people just really need to learn to accept that kind of thing. Especially sexuality and that kind of stuff, it's something that isn't really accepted on the street.

People are on the streets because the bedding's terrible, the security scares the shit out of them, and people are just too harsh. People would go to a shelter if it was more like a home experience. They try to make it less home-like so that you get out but that's not going to help them get out - that's going to help them get kicked out - there's a difference.

THE STAFF YOU HIRE MATTERS:

It's not nice to witness how they treat you sometimes. If they took all that into account I think the experience there would be more inclusive - you'd feel like you're a part of something.

'You look really drunk right now - have you been drinking?' and I say no, and then they pull me in to smell my breath. And then every time I did go there they would smell my breath. Getting kicked out of a shelter because you're drunk - alienating the people who need it most.

I don't know how they hire the people they hire. Not everybody's a bad worker - many people in the shelter system know how to deal with people in a positive way but it'd be nice if that rubbed off on some other people.

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE? OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

For native youth there needs to be a native youth shelter. It should be more in-tune with native culture.

Aboriginal run shelters/homes are easier for me to deal with because you feel a little more a part of something - a sense of community.

I think a Person of Color (POC) Queer space would be good - but I think in the beginning - the first one - should be more general. And from there springboard to more specific needs and communities.

There's not any aboriginal shelters now - they took the youth aboriginal shelters away. That's what I would change. Make more youth Aboriginal shelters. I liked it when I was at Tumivut. They would do ceremonies there - I like being involved with the culture.

My dream shelter would be a Native Shelter - they need to bring back a Native youth shelter - non-co-ed. The environment was so good there - even the staff. They gave emotional support and most of them had been through what we are going through now. Other shelter workers don't know. If this is what we're going to call home then give us the comfort.

There needs to be a huge re-emphasis (if there isn't one already) on the way you address people. It's a rough environment and these kids are rough for a reason.

There should be a place where you can go at anytime...your own little room to just go and pass out and sleep. Then you wake up and they give you something to eat and then you go. Not make you wait outside until 10 at night just to go have someplace to sleep. There should be a centre with a detox room or something. Instead of getting rejected - you should be able to help me out. Give me a place to stay.

What if you're outside the city and trying to find shelter and you bus all the way downtown and they don't even have a place? A long-ass trip for nothing. They need to be spread out, with a number you can call to check ahead of time so you don't go all the way over and get denied.

There needs to be more referral shelters - North, South, East and West.

A Transpositive shelter or housing. I know there is housing in a sense, but more Transpositive spaces.

There needs to be transitional housing everywhere. Kids need a way to get out. They have the power to change everything. These kids have dreams and the world already gave up on them. If they helped them become successful, the entire city would benefit from them.

There needs to be more resources. I'm tired of seeing children and youth token-hunting because they're trying to find their next meal. I can't live like that. I don't want to live like that. But that's what it's come to in this city. In Toronto, children token-hunt just to eat. They travel all over the GTA just to find two tokens to cash them in to someone to get food to eat. It's not to get high - it's not for alcohol - it's to eat.

Why can't you give out more ski-pants, jackets and boots?!

I've seen terrible things in the city - and I want it to change. I want it to change.

People would go to a shelter if it was more like a home experience. You have to make it as much of a home as possible - you need actual workers and programs. There should be a shelter for people with mental health issues too.

What's problematic is that there's all different sorts of people - but I think having LGBT specific housing would be good. But even within that - the spectrum is so huge

Not just a shelter, but long-term housing.

I'm on Ontario Works and have Street Allowance. Because I don't have a bank account I go to Money Mart and so by the time I get the cash I have \$200 for the month. Then I have to get a Metropass and food and warm clothes. A space where I could get my cheque cashed where you don't get charged would be good.

All I want to do is get through school and break the cycle. I've been having a hard time - even just getting into a GED program.

There needs to be more outreach workers - that's a big thing. I remember [...] they used to have a van with food and clothes and harm reduction kits - they don't really come around anymore. I only [see them] when I go into the downtown core - they need to spread out.

To help the relationship between youth and cops there could be a conference on homeless people in general - mostly on youth for them to open up their eyes just to see what it is actually like.

Stability. Stable to me is where I'm at a better place in my life. Somewhere where I feel content with who I am and who I'm surrounded by - the people and places that are around me. Having my own place, my own roof over my head, a job that I don't have to be too scared to go to, and just to be happy. That's all I want.

A concrete second chance - that's what we need.

WHY WE DID THIS PROJECT:

In 2011, The Toronto Aboriginal Research Project (TARP) revealed there are huge gaps in knowledge about the lived experiences of Indigenous LGBT*QIA and Two-Spirit homeless youth. We already know that nationally, Indigenous people are vastly “overrepresented” throughout homelessness statistics. As Stephen Gaetz recently stated, “if you’re talking about homelessness in Canada, you’re talking about Aboriginal homelessness.”¹ But to be sure, no Indigenous population is more at risk for homelessness than sexually, sex and/or gender spectrum, Two-Spirit youth.

Often times shunned or kicked out of their families, Indigenous youth come to Toronto from the places they felt unsafe and marginalized, only to find themselves emotionally drained, financially tapped out, and forgotten in a big city that forgets easily. Some of these youth might be trans², some might be queer or lesbian, gay, intersex or gender queer. Some might be bisexual or asexual, and others might be a combination of all or any of these identities. What spectrum identified, at risk for, or homeless Indigenous youth in Toronto have in common is the fact that society knows very little about their everyday lives.

The Toronto Aboriginal Support Services Council (TASSC) decided that a community-based project needed to be done that could provide a space where Indigenous youth could tell their own stories, becoming the authorities we should all turn to for their recommendations on changes to Toronto’s homelessness initiatives. After all, they are the experts. So, *Forgotten Voices: Indigenous Two-Spirit, LGBT*QIA Youth and Homelessness*, a research project for and informed completely by Toronto’s homeless Two-Spirit and LGBT*QIA Indigenous youth was born. *Forgotten Voices* hopes to start a conversation that will get the rest of Toronto listening, learning, and helping homeless Indigenous youth.



¹ Personal Interview with Steve Gaetz, Director of The Homeless Hub, Feb. 28, 2014.

² For the purposes of this booklet trans* refers to anyone who is gender spectrum, gender queer, gender questioning, transgender, or transsexual.



 twospirityouthTO@gmail.com

 [2SForgottenVoices/info](https://www.facebook.com/2SForgottenVoices/info)

 [@2S4gottenVoices](https://twitter.com/2S4gottenVoices)

www.tassc.ca




MADE IN STOLEN LAND