

NATIVE *Love* IS . . .



ARCTIC *Village*

Native love means respect for everything in Gwich'in language and tradition, according to Sarah James, a member of the board of directors of Gwich'in Council International, and a resident of Arctic Village, Alaska.

“Love to us means sharing, giving, forgiving and teaching in a good way,” Sarah explains. “To have love, you have to work for it . . . meet it halfway. And you can’t do it all for yourself. If you love only for your benefit, then that’s not love.” Love is not limited to marital and family relationships, she explains. “You’ve got to have love beyond . . . experience love in every facet of life.”

Allan Hayton says the Gwich'in word for love “describes a sense of warmth, loving, belonging; you’re needed, you’re treasured.” For him, love was learned and experienced as a child in his village’s church. “We had our entire service and all our hymns in our language.”

Native love is more about what you do than what you say, according to Jessica Black. “Food is a very big part of my culture. One way we show that we love each other is through eating together and feeding each other.” Every step, from hunting the animal until it appears on the table, is a process of love that involves both men and women, she says.

Food is not the only way the Gwich'in feed each other, Jessica adds. “They hug each other. They laugh and joke. They pack wood for their grandparents . . . everyday acts to show someone that you truly care about them and you love and respect them.”

For Princess Lucaj, Native love is the beauty that surrounds us. “I think that in its purest form, we all have Native love . . . you’re able to just be yourself; love with that big open heart and allow yourself to be loved.”

For Sam Alexander, “Native love is understanding your role . . . and respecting your partner . . . being there for them.”

“We have to redefine love and re-educate about love,” says Sarah. We need a return to traditional Native values of respect, caring, and sharing, adds Jessica. “Even when you disagree, always take the high road. Respect one another and talk things through, because children are watching, and your elders are watching. We want to keep the legacy of respect going forward.”

Allan agrees that conversation is key to improving relationships not only between men and women, but also within entire communities. “Conversation allows things to unfold so you’re not just reacting in a violent way. We need to have conversations as a community – as a people – about how we can prevent violence from happening and how we should address it.”

ALASKA is home to 229 federally recognized tribes. Of those tribes operating within some 200 rural Alaska Native villages, only 78 are served by local state law enforcement. Native women in Alaska suffer the highest rates of sexual assault in the United States; an Alaska Native woman is sexually assaulted every 18 hours.

Six Native people living in Alaska -- Sam Alexander (Gwich'in), Princess Lucaj (Gwich'in), Allan Hayton (Gwich'in), Jessica Black (Gwich'in), Sarah James (Gwich'in), and David Farley (Omaha) -- reflect on the meaning of Native love for a joint project of the Indian Law Resource Center and the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center. The project is raising awareness about the epidemic levels of violence against Native women and aims to spur dialogue and positive change to help end this crisis and restore safety to Native women.



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