

Last Best News (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-taylor-tellez/>)

## Voices from the Valley: Taylor Tellez

By: **SHERRI CORNETT** | June 17, 2018



Ed Kemmick/Last Best News

Taylor Tellez is a graduate student at MSU Billings and a board member of Not In Our Town.

making choices about the kind of people they are hanging out with and the kind of media they are consuming ... realizing that there is so much more to learn.

**Sherrri:** How did your community focus develop?

**Taylor:** During my undergraduate degree, I got involved with [Not In Our Town Billings](http://www.niotbillings.org/) and eventually joined their board. Through this, I became more woke, which enabled me to have more conversations with my family and people who are not part of the social justice communities.

**Sherrri:** Would you talk to me about the term “woke”?

**Taylor:** I see it as part of a modern enlightenment, becoming more aware of the effect of our actions on others. “Woke” is such an urban, modern and young term.

Woke people are our most important resources. We have strong leaders like [Abena Lane](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-abena-lane/) and [Jerry Clark](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-fitzgerald-clark/) — people who are probably OK with any question you might have. I want people to feel comfortable also questioning me ... about how I identify as a queer, Latinx person ... that I am interested in men and how I use the word queer as a way to talk about the absence of heteronormativity.

An advertisement for Cape Air flights. The background is blue with white text. It says "East just got easier." and "Fast flights to eastern Montana." Below that is a "Book flights" button. To the right, there's a map showing flight routes from Billings to Havre, Glasgow, Wolf Point, Sidney, and Glendive. A price of "\$29\* from each way" is displayed. The Cape Air logo is at the bottom right.

(<https://goo.gl/mjhWkW>)

**Sherrri:** So, to keep up with our evolving language, heteronormativity is about how our culture’s overarching presumptions are based on heterosexuality and defined male/female roles, and the terms “queer” and “Latinx” move labeling beyond those defined roles?

**Taylor:** Yes. You can say gay, lesbian, or LGBTQ, but queer is so powerful. Queer was a derogatory term, but it is being reclaimed. Latinx is the gender-neutral option for Latino or Latina. My father is from Mexico. In the memoir I am writing, I describe him as Latinx and cis male, because I want to normalize current language.

**Sherrri:** While I was developing an exhibition about identity, I came across the [TSER](http://www.transstudent.org/definitions/) list of LGBTQ terminology. As I understand it, some people use the adjective cis, as in cisgender, instead of straight, to mean a person who identifies with the sex they were assigned at birth.

**Taylor:** It's tough, but labels do help people understand. People want to know your gender, your race. And, more circles are being formed in our area to help with these definitions and identities.

**Sherri:** Do you feel comfortable being out in Billings?

**Taylor:** I have been lucky. I have never had a problem standing my ground and have never experienced any violence or hatred about being a queer person here. I have never been afraid. At the same time, I have also never felt completely safe. There is always the potential to be seen as prey. But, the people I surround myself with, and how I present myself, helps.

I understand when there is a bridge to talk with someone and when there is not one. But, like you, it's about sharing stories and being fully yourself and vulnerable when you engage with others.

**Sherri:** This makes me think of the power of feeling seen. The artist [Marina Abramović](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010) ([https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010)) did a multi-day performance piece at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, during which people took turns sitting across from her. For several minutes, they looked into each other's eyes. Many people cried.

**Taylor:** I would love that ... to be seen by more people. In Billings, we seem to see the same people at each activist community event. The challenge in all of the stories you have been telling, Sherri, is how to go beyond that. Luckily, Billings does continue to grow — that's a great thing. There is [406 Pride](https://406pride.org/) (<https://406pride.org/>), the new non-profit that is embracing LGBTQ people as full members of our Billings community, and the [Rainbow Coffee House](http://www.rainbowcoffeehouse.com/) (<http://www.rainbowcoffeehouse.com/>) at Grace United Methodist, a safe space for LGBTQ high school students and allies.

**Sherri:** As is your goal in all things, Taylor, this conversation has indeed been educational. Thank you for sharing your perspectives and experiences.

**Taylor:** It has been a pleasure.



Sherri Cornett

With degrees in political science and art and a long history of advocacy work, Sherri Cornett's passion for dialogue and community has found outlets in the national and international social-justice-themed exhibitions she curates, her own art and the organizations and causes into which she contributes her energy and leadership. After 14 moves, Cornett finally found her home in Billings in 1993. [www.sherricornett.com](http://www.sherricornett.com/) (<http://www.sherricornett.com/>).

Here are the previous installments of Voices from the Valley:

- ◆ April 22, [Claudia Stevens](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-claudia-stephens/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-claudia-stephens/>).
- ◆ April 30, [Fitzgerald Clark](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-fitzgerald-clark/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-fitzgerald-clark/>).
- ◆ May 6, [Gwen Kircher](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-gwen-kircher/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-gwen-kircher/>).
- ◆ May 14, [Marci McLean](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-marci-mclean/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-marci-mclean/>).
- ◆ May 20, [Tyson Middle](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-tyson-middle/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-tyson-middle/>).
- ◆ May 27, [Patrick Scott-Wilson](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-patrick-scott-wilson/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-patrick-scott-wilson/>).
- ◆ June 3, [Abena Lane](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-abena-lane/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-abena-lane/>).
- ◆ June 10, [Sonia Davis](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-sonia-davis/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-sonia-davis/>).

## Comments

3 comments