

Honoring Larry Casuse

Written by By Molly Ann Howell Sun Correspondent
Friday, 31 March 2023 04:07



Part 2: Looking back at the story 50 years later

PART 2 OF 3

While some believe that Larry Casuse did not shoot himself, others, including the Gallup Police, stand by their opinion that he did. In 1973 the GPD officially claimed that Casuse shot himself.

In a *New York Times* article published a few days after Casuse's death, 11th District Attorney Louis DePauli said that the preliminary coroner's report showed that Casuse shot himself in the lower face and in his right side.

DePauli said the gunshot wound under Casuse's chin was "self-inflicted."

INTERVIEW WITH AN AUTHOR

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Now, over 50 years later, activists are still trying to keep Casuse's story and his message alive. One way David Correia, author and professor of American Studies at the University of New Mexico, is doing that is through his book about Casuse, published in 2022.

An Enemy Such as This: Larry Casuse and the Struggle for Native Liberation in One Family on Two Continents across Three Centuries doesn't solely focus on Casuse's final days. Only the first and last chapter focus on Feb. 28 and March 1 of 1973. Once Correia heard Casuse's story, he couldn't get it out of his head.

"At first it was just a fascinating story," Correia said. "I was struck by what I think everyone else is struck by when they hear his story: this young 19-year-old Navajo college student so moved by the plight of Navajo folks being exploited in Gallup and the deaths around the Navajo Inn ... that he devoted his life and essentially gave his life to try and help them."

After Correia met the Casuse family in 2013, he knew he had to write a book about the man who died trying to stand up for the Navajo people. He just had to figure out how to go about it.

"I couldn't walk away from that story. It only took such a long time to write because it was such a difficult thing to write, a biography of a family, many who are still alive," Correia said. "I didn't want to write a book in which I used Larry's life and death to make some argument about colonialism. That seemed like it would cheapen his memory and legacy."

Correia wanted his book to provide context for Casuse's death, and explain the complexities surrounding it.

For Correia, the main complexity is the alcohol problem in Gallup.

"The problem has always been that Gallup is just awash in alcohol," Correia explained. "When Larry was alive there were more liquor stores in Gallup than the law allowed, and the Navajo Inn Bar was the most profitable liquor store in the entire state because it was right on the edge of

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the Navajo Nation, which was dry. The law at that time actually meant the penalty for possessing alcohol was actually greater than driving drunk on the Navajo Nation.”

Correia explained that in the ‘60s and ‘70s, Navajo people weren’t allowed in bars, so they’d spend their time drinking in parking lots or alleyways since they couldn’t do it back home on the reservation. Alcohol is banned on the Navajo Nation.

According to a study done by University of Alaska Anchorage Psychology Professor Dr. Vivian M. Gonzales and Montana State University Professor Dr. Monica Skewes in November 2021, about 60% of Native Americans surveyed believed they were genetically predisposed to alcohol abuse.

The professors’ research showed that Native Americans who believed this to be true were more likely to have a drinking problem.

But rather than finding out that there was a genetic link, the researchers found that the participants’ drinking problems likely stemmed from poverty, discrimination, and historical trauma.

However, Correia doesn’t put the blame on past trauma.

“That’s just another way to blame Navajo people for being prey to the alcohol industry,” Correia said.

He places the blame on liquor establishments that break the law, and political leaders who refuse to do anything about the situation when it comes to alcohol sales.

In July 2021, the New Mexico legislature made some changes to the laws that dictate how alcohol is sold.

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Retailers were no longer allowed to sell minis – closed containers with less than three ounces – for off-site consumption.

In Gallup, city councilors amended an ordinance in May 2021 regarding Sunday alcohol sales. The change prohibited the sale of alcohol from 7 am to 9:59 am on Sundays. Before the law change, alcohol was not sold on Sundays in McKinley County at all.

When discussing alcohol laws, Sen. George Muñoz, D-Gallup, added an amendment to the legislation with McKinley County in mind. The amendment keeps anyone who sells retail gasoline from selling alcoholic beverages other than beer with less than 10% alcohol content.

However, local artist Jerry Brown said in an interview with the *Sun* that the change has led gas station owners to make a tough decision.

“I’ve had gas station owners tell me ‘I’d rather sell liquor because I can make \$4,000 a day, and selling gas I could make \$2,000 a day,’” Brown said.

Brown has lost multiple family members to alcohol abuse and adjacent issues. Two of his uncles and his grandmother froze to death after they fell asleep outside after they’d been drinking. Another uncle is a survivor of cirrhosis. His father was run over by a drunk driver.

“There’s so many traumas and people that I’ve lost ... some people in their 20s, 30s, and 40s, should’ve had their whole lives ahead of them, but they’re dead,” Brown said.

WHAT LARRY LEFT BEHIND

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Ursula Casuse Carrillo was 12 years old when her brother died. She wants people to understand how caring her brother was, and that he simply wanted the Navajo Inn to close up shop, or at least change its ways.

“Larry was just a young man who got his heart pierced when he moved to Gallup. He saw that the Native Americans needed help and that’s what he wanted to do,” Carrillo said. “He tried by every means to get help to them, to close that bar down. This mayor just didn’t listen.”

The Navajo Inn did eventually close soon after Casuse’s death. Correia noted that Mayor Emmett Garcia made a promise to shut it down, but when he didn’t win reelection, Correia said that’s when Garcia changed his mind and kept the bar open. Correia said it only stayed open for a few more months after Casuse’s death though.

When it comes to the controversial, and sometimes violent, contention of Casuse, Correia said he doesn’t want people to think of him that way.

“He was a really quiet, intelligent person who couldn’t take it anymore that people were being brutally killed and dying in great numbers every single year around these liquor stores in Gallup,” Correia said. “It’s not glamorizing violence to say he made a really courageous decision that day [he died] and he decided to sacrifice his life to try and protect other peoples’ lives, not knowing if that would really help....”

For her part, Carrillo is going to try and keep her brother’s story and what he stood for alive.

“I’m going to do what I can to make sure he’s a part of history,” she said. “He deserves it.”

Organizations around Gallup, including GallupARTS and the Octavia Fellin Public Library, are holding events to celebrate Casuse’s life for the whole month of March 50 years later. As the month winds down, there are still a few events left on the schedule.

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The second part of a “Community Conversation with Indigenous Lifeways” will focus on healing. It’s scheduled for March 25 at ART123 Gallery, 123. W. Coal Ave.

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