

Indigenous fathers take lessons from their own experience to create healthy lifestyles for their children

Exploring the joys and challenges of fatherhood, through the eyes of an Indigenous dad.

By Julian Brave Noisecat

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Josué Rivas didn't know his father well. When he was seven, his mother left Mexico to look for work in the United States, leaving her boy in the care of the man. But Rivas says his dad didn't know how to be a dad. He was a photographer who struggled with alcoholism and gave away nearly as many portraits as he sold. Under his care, Rivas quickly wound up on the streets and was homeless for four years until his mom came and brought him to America. After that, Rivas didn't hear from his father much.

But in the last year, during the pandemic, they reconnected. Rivas told his dad Arturo Rivas Gonzales how his abandonment hurt him. The man was defensive at first, but heard him out. And a month before he died of COVID-19 in February of this year, he called his Mexica and Otomi photographer son to tell him that he wanted to continue to talk about their relationship.



Photo by Josué Rivas

They never got to have those conversations. The last memories Rivas has of his father are a photo of him in the hospital and a pixelated image of his casket wrapped in plastic



Photo by Josué Rivas

to protect the men who were burying him in Guanajuato, Mexico from the novel coronavirus. "I didn't get to say goodbye to him," says Rivas, 32. "I didn't get to say: 'Hey, I hope you have a good journey.'"

As a kid, Rivas hated photography because it reminded him of his dad. But as he grew older, he embraced it, recognizing the loving, if misguided, efforts his father had made to pass on his artform to him. To work through his

grief, Rivas found himself returning to the camera, projecting images of his dad onto the walls of his house and then photographing himself next to them. He started thinking about how so many people had idolized his own father's drinking when he was growing up in Mexico and wondered what it might mean to picture healthy men and fathers. He started asking close family and friends, like the Mexica rapper Xiutezcatl, if they knew what a good Indigenous father looked like. Everyone he asked said: "No, I don't." So he started asking women in his network: "Hey, who do you think is a great father?" That's how he connected with Manny Lieras, 43, of the Navajo and Comanche and the three other Indigenous men pictured in this series: Joshua Allison-Burbank, 33, of the Navajo Nation and Acoma Pueblo, Anthony "Thosh" Collins, 39, of the Onk-Akimel O'odham/Wa-zha-zhi/Haudenosaunee and Daniel Santollo, 31, of the Purépecha and Mexica.

As I interviewed Rivas and these four men, I thought about my own father. All of us, in our own way, are working to undo cycles of trauma whipped up by colonization, and to reclaim communicative and healthy Indigenous households and identities.

'Solid, like a mountain'

Manny Lieras' eight-year-old daughter, Joni, was watering two pots of planted beans set out on her parent's Oakland, California apartment balcony with a gallon bottle of Crystal Geyser, when I came over to visit for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic. Her six-year-old little sister Lynn, who we all call "Lynnie," was playing in the living room. Bills rested on the table. The faint smell of leftover cheese pizza hung in the air. Lieras, who's 6-foot-2, 290 pounds, "solid, like a mountain," gave me a big hug when I walked in the door and then plopped himself down at the kitchen table, where he could keep his left eye on Joni and his right ear on Lynnie as we caught up.

I've known Lieras for 17 years, since I was 11 and he was 26. We met at the powwow drum and dance practice held every Thursday night at the Oakland Intertribal Friendship

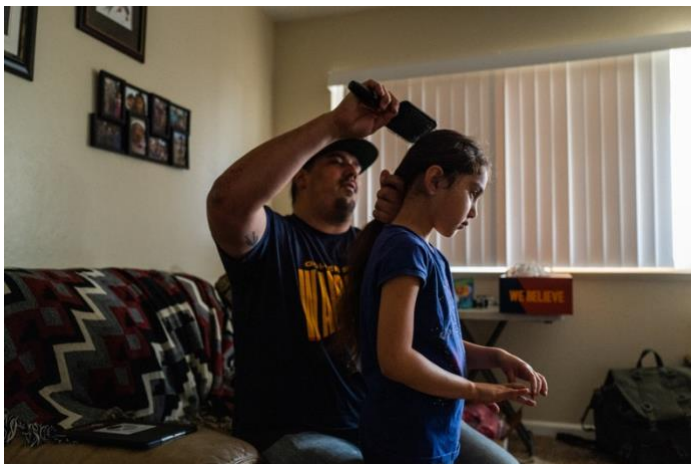


Photo by Josué Rivas

House (IFH), one of the oldest urban Indian community centers in the country. My mom, who is white, started bringing me to IFH after my father, an alcoholic artist from the Secwepemc and St'at'imc First Nations who are indigenous to what's now British Columbia, Canada, divorced her to chase drink and fame and to start a new family in New Mexico when I was a little boy. I had my "coming out"—an initiation into the powwow circle—when I was 11, the same year Lieras started showing

up at IFH on Thursday nights. He's a talker—and a singer—with a voice so booming he can drown out all the other guys sitting at the drum.



Photo by Josué Rivas



Photo by Josué Rivas

When I was a precocious teenager and Lieras was a youth worker with a lot of Indian side hustles (mostly singing gigs) we would occasionally road trip to powwows together. Back in those days, he says he had a lot of “scheming behaviors.” He’s never elaborated on what exactly he means by that. As men, we’re still not the best at that sort of communication. All he says is that whatever he was doing almost kept him from his wife Yvonne and his kids. I know that, in my own way, I was a bit of a schemer too. And for me, that looked like self-absorption. An obsession with good grades, powwow dancing championships and success. The desire for girls to like me, even if I was already with one. And various affection and praise-seeking habits intended to numb the wounds left by my father’s absence. There was also self-pitying and self-destructive tendencies designed to rub salt in those same wounds, to torture myself for his departure, which, deep down, I believed was my own fault. When your own blood—your parent—leaves you, isn’t it because, on some level, you weren’t good enough? Not deserving of their love?

We’d never talked about this either, but seated at the kitchen table, Lieras finally told me about his Mexican American dad Nayo, who, like my father, was mostly out of the picture. To explain their relationship, he tipped up his Urban Native Era snapback cap to show me the scar above his left eyebrow, received on one of his court-ordered visitation days when one of his two brothers accidentally smacked him with a baseball bat. Lieras remembers the blood pouring out of his noggin, but



Photo by Josué Rivas

even more, he remembers his father's fury. How he scolded and then beat his brother. Lieras' parents split when he was three years old but his dad didn't try to get any sort of custody or visitation rights to his boys until Lieras was eight. He always felt like his dad didn't have any follow through. And even when he did, he would mess things up. On those visitation days, for example, Nayo would bring his kids over to his parents' house, which was filled with cats. Lieras is allergic.



Photo by Josué Rivas



Photo by Josué Rivas

Lieras doesn't totally blame his father for being the way he was and sees his old man as part of a broader cycle of machismo and of fathers not knowing how to love their kids. As Lieras got older, and more physically imposing, Nayo gave him and his brothers more respect. The discipline subsided. When Lieras went off to college at San Diego State University, he learned more about his mother's Navajo and Comanche roots. He also took up singing and joined the Native student group on campus in a push to change the school's mascot from the "Aztecs." Nayo is a Chicano guy who paints and does body work on cars. Activism isn't exactly his thing. But he heard his son out, and even defended his son's perspectives to the other guys at the auto shop. Maybe Nayo, like many of our fathers, is still learning.

When his own father got old, Nayo took care for him: getting him out of bed, cleaning his sores and changing his briefs without the old man ever uttering the words "thank you," or "I love you." Lieras hasn't seen his dad since he crashed a little brotherly get together on the beach in San Diego a few years ago. But in May 29, Nayo wished his middle son a happy birthday on the right day for the first time.

Many fathers in Indian Country see a clear link between abandoned kids, absent dads and the colonization of this continent and its First Peoples. In living memory, throughout North America, Native children were kidnapped from their families and taken to schools where they were forced to convert to Christianity and assimilate into white-dominant culture. Because of this history, Lieras and his wife Yvonne homeschool their daughters. "We didn't want them to be uneducated in all the things being presented as truth in the K-12 educational system," Lieras says. Until 2017, for example, all California fourth graders were required to build models of the Spanish missions where, beginning

in 1769, California Indians were relocated, conscripted to labor and converted to Catholicism. By the time California became a state in 1848, missions had reduced the coastal Native population by 90 percent, according to the Encyclopedia of North American Indians. Few people know these histories today, and even fewer grapple with them.

The week before our chat, the bodies of 215 children, some as young as three, were found in unmarked graves at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in Canada, where my grandmother earned her nursing degree. In Canada, people wore orange T-shirts as part of a solidarity movement with the Indigenous. In the states, some Native Americans tried to get others to do the same, but it didn't go anywhere. "Here we are again,

Natives just screaming into the void," Lieras says, summarizing the conversation as he saw it on social media.



Photo by Josué Rivas

Joni had been out on the balcony watering the potted beans for a hot minute, when, out of his left eye, Lieras surmised she needed a little fatherly direction. "Did you get all the top wet?" he asked his elder daughter.

"All of it?" Joni replied.

"How come it looks dry from here? Keep going, then add the beans."



Photo by Josué Rivas



Photo by Josué Rivas

Healthy connections to fatherhood

Allison-Burbank is a licensed speech pathologist who works at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Health. He's the father of two: Kaleb, who's 10, and Kateri, who's

five and starts Kindergarten in the fall. He decided to become a speech pathologist because he believes that communication and kinship are the basis for community. He strives to provide a loving environment for his children, bringing them back from the city in Albuquerque to his Navajo family's traditional six-acre field planted with corn, beans and squash on the San Juan River in Waterflow, New Mexico. He's teaching his kids how to care for the corn and how to grind it into a meal to make offerings to the Holy People. And he's also holding space for himself to navigate the kaleidoscopic collision of traditional life with reservation hardship and the demands of a career. With Thosh Collins, he's formed Indigenous men's groups where they can talk about those experiences and challenges, as well as the traumas that boil up through the seams of those worlds and into everyday life. He thinks those men's groups are essential. "You provide a space," he says. "Equality and equitable opportunity for men trying to improve themselves and all the things that colonization has influenced and impacted."

Allison-Burbank and Collins wrote a book chapter about fatherhood, childhood and early development. But while his Navajo and Acoma friend is a doctor of speech and the mind, Collins is an expert on the body. Over the last decade he has become perhaps the most influential fit Native dude on social media, a platform he's used to inspire Indigenous peoples to lead healthy, active and spiritual lives. Collins says his father drank when he was younger, but he got sober and raised his children in men's singing and ceremonial groups. Like his dad, Collins hunts: elk, mule deer, javelina, rabbit, quail. He grows corn and squash on his family's land. And he credits these traditions—not just the cultural ones, but the dietary and athletic ones too—for preparing him for fatherhood. He has two daughters now: a three-year-old and a six-month-old. The toddler often hangs out with him in his home gym while he works



Photo by Josué Rivas



Photo by Josué Rivas

out, playing with her own toy kettle bell. And even though they're both girls, Collins intends to teach them all the things he would teach an Achimel O'odham boy, including the songs historically reserved for men. While traditions need to be restored and maintained, he believes that sometimes they might also have to adapt and change. He lives much of his life by a three-word mantra, which, I imagine might be emblazoned on the wall of his gym someday: Revitalize, Preserve, Evolve. "Parenting is an opportunity to implement

that,” he said, “an opportunity to heal the trauma that has been put upon us—not just to heal but to thrive.”



Photo by Josué Rivas



Photo by Josué Rivas

Indigenous roots

But to thrive you need to know yourself and your place. And that’s what Daniel Santollo has been working on the last five or so years, since former President Donald Trump started calling Mexicans rapists, thugs and criminals. Santollo immigrated to Oregon from a *rancho* in the Mexican state of Michoacán when he was nine. Not long after he arrived, he remembers playing outside his apartment with his brother. Some other people in the neighborhood came by and started calling them “beaners,” and telling them to “go back to Mexico.” As an adult, the experience of being labeled an unwanted “alien” renewed Santollo’s interest in a bit of family history that his aunt Lupe had maintained but that his Catholic family had shunned: their Indigenous Purépecha roots.

Over the last few years, Santollo has learned more about this inheritance. He and his wife Carina, who’s also from Michoacán, gave their third child Tahiel a second name in the Indigenous Nahuatl language: Yaotl, which means “warrior” because he survived a tough pregnancy. After Yaotl’s birth, Santollo, his wife, and his three kids joined the Aztec dancer community in Portland. “They fell in love with it just like we did,” Santollo said of his kids. “As soon as they heard the drum, it was calling to them.”

‘Like a Daddy Kangaroo’

There was a time, not so long ago, when Native men were either vilified or lionized as “warriors” or “chiefs” waging courageous, doomed and crazy insurgencies on the far side of the frontier of civilization. Sometimes we still feel like we have to embody the macho prowess of Sitting Bull, Geronimo and Tecumseh. I remember during one of his visits, when he was deep in the bottle, my dad told me the cops could never catch him speeding or slipping because he had “Crazy Horse Medicine.” After one night at the bar in Red Lodge, Montana, he took on the police with a buck knife. They tased him and charged him with a felony.

My dad's a big guy, but Lieras is so big he makes my dad look scrawny. And his take on what he calls the "leader men" in the Native pantheon is a bit different than the elder NoiseCat's: What if they ran and fought and persisted with so much ferocity because they loved their families so fiercely?

"What were the traits and characteristics and roles of fathers pre-colonization?" Lieras asks. "I don't feel like anybody's really studying that or talking about that." He continues: "I know that some of the chiefs in our tribe, like Chief Manuelito, had a bunch of kids, you know, but you never hear about the relationship between them and their kids. You only hear about the relationship between them and the United States government."

When he talks to his daughters, or to the children he mentors at the American Indian Child Resource Center, Lieras tries to get on their level, to make his enormous stature less intimidating. When Yvonne was first pregnant, and fatherhood was terrifying, he would sing to Joni in the womb. (Like Santollo's kids, Joni and Lynnne are both dancers now.)

As a parent and teacher, Lieras tries to foster a safe space for his kids to learn their language, history and culture, and to learn all sorts of practical and Indian skills, like how to cook, plant, swim, fish, horseback ride, canoe and, perhaps most importantly: communicate. He doesn't want his girls to be scared to say what they need. And he wants them to have great childhoods with a father who's present. Recently, he found himself looking at a picture taken at the San Francisco Giants Native American Heritage Night, a few years back. Yvonne and Joni were dancing. Lieras was singing with Lynnne strapped to his chest "like a Daddy Kangaroo." As he reminisced, I thought I caught the seed of a tear in his eye.



Photo by Josué Rivas

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