

# Moroni For President

## VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE



### Program Synopsis

Moroni Benally runs for the presidency of the Navajo Nation, the largest Native American nation in the U.S. Young, gay, Mormon and highly educated, he sets out to confront the political establishment in a homecoming that challenges what he imagined home, and himself, to be.

### In Their Words

"If you've been paying attention to the elections, I've been repeatedly called radical, because what I want for the Navajo Nation is to get to this good life. We're not going to get there unless we can control our own resources. "

— Moroni Benally  
(Navajo)



## Directors Statement

This film began as a student thesis project in early 2014. Little did we know that it would end up being a journey of several years in which each step would come with a new set of questions about how to best tell a story so complex and sprawling. We're very humbled and honored to have been allowed to document this moment in time and in the lives of the inspiring main characters Moroni, Zachariah, and Alray, and we're grateful to know that the film will find its way to screens, TV sets, and classrooms around the country and possibly the world. In the end we hope that you, the viewer, also walk away with more questions than answers.

## About the Filmmakers



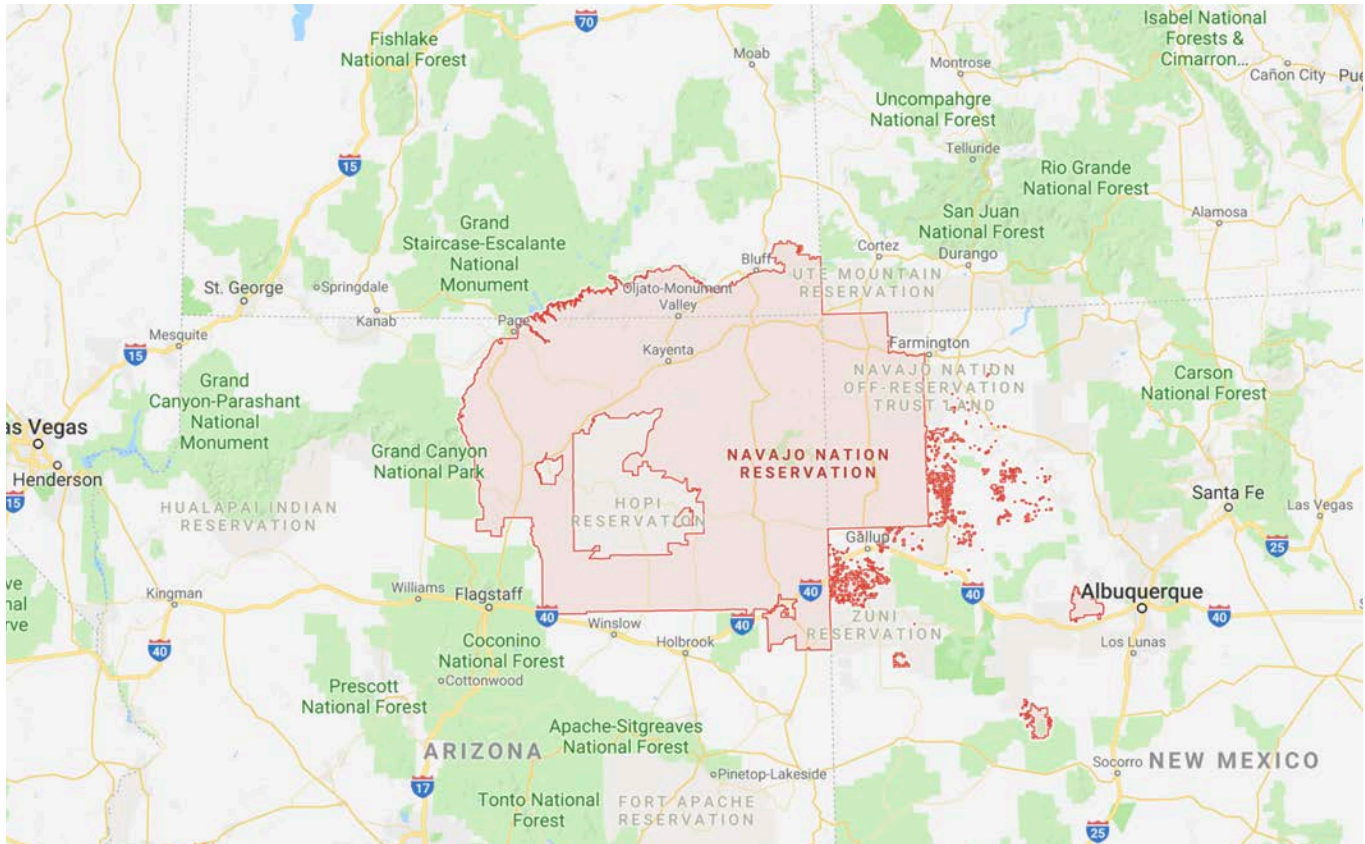
### Saila J. Huusko

Saila J Huusko is a documentary filmmaker and journalist. Her video work has appeared online at Al Jazeera America, GlobalPost, The Guardian, and The Village Voice – among others. She worked for three years as the in-house filmmaker for Crisis Management Initiative, an NGO founded by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Martti Ahtisaari. While there, she worked in several conflict zones, including in South Sudan and Afghanistan. Saila graduated with honors from the Columbia Journalism School and earned her BA magna cum laude from Middlebury College. She completed high school at the Mahindra United World College of India and later volunteered to help open a United World College in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She is the recipient of several prestigious awards, including the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation Journalism Fellowship for her studies at Columbia, the DuPont/Judy F. Crichton Prize, the Joan Konner Scholarship for Broadcast Journalism, and the Rotary Peace Fellowship for postgraduate studies in Conflict Resolution. *Moroni for President* is her first feature documentary.

### Jasper M. Rischen

Jasper M. Rischen graduated with high honors from Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, winning a Pulitzer grant awarded to top students, as well as the Henry N. Taylor Award for best foreign student and a DuPont/Judy F. Crichton Award for best thesis film. He was the recipient of a Maria Moors Cabot Prize Scholarship and was named the Paul Steiger Annual Fund Scholar. Originally from The Netherlands, he worked as the U.S. producer for leading Dutch TV news shows prior to joining Columbia. For them, he produced a wide range of stories from veterans struggling with heroin abuse to the disappearance of the middle class, in addition to booking interviews with John McCain, filming an interview with Hillary Clinton and covering the 2012 elections. Jasper is working on his first feature documentary film *Moroni for President*, which follows LGBTQ Navajos involved with their tribal presidential election.

## Map of the Navajo Nation Reservation



### Background Information - By the Numbers

1. The Navajo Nation covers over 27,000 square miles and extends into the states of Utah, Arizona and New Mexico.
2. The Navajo word for the Navajo Nation is Diné Bikéyah.
3. The tribal government of the Navajo Nation was established in 1923 as a way to allow oil companies to lease land for oil exploration and extraction.
4. Today the government of the Navajo Nation is one of the most organized forms of government in Indian Country. There are 110 Navajo Nation chapters with 88 council delegates.
5. According to the 2016 census, the population of the Navajo Nation is 356,890. Sixty percent of the population of the Navajo Nation is under the age of 28.
6. The average household income on the Navajo Nation is \$27,389. The average household income of Arizona is \$50,448.
7. Approximately 43 percent of the workforce in the Navajo Nation works for the U.S. Government.
8. In 2005, the Navajo government passed the Dinè Marriage Act which defines marriage as the legal joining of one man and one woman.

## Discussion Questions: Exploring the Facts

(Video Clip 01:15:17:07)

1. Moroni Benally leaves Seattle and his position as professor at Evergreen State College in Washington to pursue his goal to run for the presidency of the Navajo Nation. What motivates him? Why does he make this major life change? Identify a time in your life when you have made a sacrifice based on your passion and beliefs.
2. There are several factors working against Moroni in his bid for the presidency of the Navajo Nation. Identify some of these factors and explore how Moroni attempts to shift the negative aspects into positives throughout his campaign.
3. Moroni does not attempt to hide the fact that he is a gay man nor does he broadcast it publicly. Describe the ways that you think essential policy issues are sometimes lost because of a focus on an individual's personal life. To what extent do you think politicians' personal life should affect their work as politicians?

(Video Clip 001:07:51:07-01:08:49:06)

4. In his younger years, Moroni considered his homosexuality to be a "cancer of the soul." He prayed to be "healed" from this condition. The film also features Alray Nelson and Zachariah George, two other gay characters working for other candidates. Explore how each of them has come to terms with their own identity even in the face of disapproval from family and surrounding culture.

(Video Clip 01:44:52:20)

5. After the failed election, Moroni addresses a classroom full of students and asks, "How many of you have failed at something?" Ask yourself that question and then explore the ways that Moroni's failure in his bid for the presidency may be considered successful. What personal examples do you have of a failure that later proved to be a success?



## Suggested Activity- Ideas for Action

1. Review the film and compare/contrast the differences between Moroni's campaign and the campaigns of Joe Shirley, Jr. and the other candidates. Identify the key scenes that illustrate these differences.
2. In the film Moroni states that the Navajo people need to regain power over their own resources. Research the history of how the Navajo Nation government was formed and its relationship to oil companies then and now.
3. In the film Zachariah says his family has only had electricity for four years and they must drive 20-30 miles for water. We also hear from several community members who say that things are difficult for many people in the Navajo Nation. Research and identify 5-10 statistics that indicate the health and well-being of the people in the Navajo Nation.

(Rodeo Scene: 01:28:39:06)

4. Social acceptance of the LGBTQ community has changed in America over the decades. Review the rodeo scene in the film and notice the veiled reference to the men in "pink shirts." Research and see if you can find references either on the Navajo Nation or other Native Nations indicating hate crimes against LGBTQ community members. Then look for references indicating an increase of activities supportive of the LGBTQ community among Native Nations.

(LGBTQ Drag Event: 01:48:13:21)

5. Alray Nelson comments that in early Navajo culture, diverse gender and sexual identities were fully accepted and even valued. Research the traditional beliefs of both the Navajo Nation and several other tribes to discover how they understood gender and sexuality.

(Video Clip 01:28:53:10-01:29:42:05)

5. What policies do the Navajo Nation have in place concerning same sex marriage? When and how was that established?

## Resources

### Website

<https://visionmakermedia.org>

<https://www.navajo-nsn.gov/history.htm#>

[https://nptao.arizona.edu/sites/nptao/files/navajo\\_nation\\_2016\\_community\\_profile.pdf](https://nptao.arizona.edu/sites/nptao/files/navajo_nation_2016_community_profile.pdf)

### Articles

<https://www.hcn.org/articles/indian-country-news-why-marriage-equality-is-a-matter-of-tribal-sovereignty>

<https://transgendersphere.wordpress.com/2010/12/17/navajo-cultural-constructions-of-gender-and-sexuality/>



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*Moroni for President* is a production of America Reframed and Independent Television Service (ITVS), produced in association with Vision Maker Media, with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

This Viewer Discussion Guide was developed by Jamie Lee, an author and former instructor at the Oglala Lakota College, where she taught for five years. Lee has a Master's in Human Development and has been a communications trainer and an educator for the past 30 years. Her stories and articles have appeared in *The South Dakota Review*, *Winds of Change Magazine* and several other anthologies. She has published three non-fiction books along with one novel and a collection of writings from Oglala Lakota College students. Her first novel, *Washaka: The Bear Dreamer*, was a PEN USA finalist in 2007. Lee has written over 70 documentary programs including Public Radio's landmark 52-part Native music series, *Oyate Ta Olowan: The Songs of the People*.

Funding for this Viewer Discussion Guide was provided by Vision Maker Media. Vision Maker Media supports Native stories for Public Broadcasting. For more information, please visit [www.visionmakermedia.org](http://www.visionmakermedia.org).

Educational resources for this film are available at <https://www.visionmakermedia.org/films/moroni-president>

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