

experience, especially the use of contracts, which “keep it clear and clean.” OLHA established bylaws and runs by a consensus-minus-one process. Decisions are based on “triangle of interest”—how any decision will affect the individual, the community, and the land. OLHA is considered Lesbian land but not separatist. Most of the women have men in their lives, but the presence of men is restricted and subjected to member approval<sup>6</sup>. Housing and accommodations have evolved as members age and their needs change. Some live on the land, some have a space on the land but live elsewhere, and some live in town (Fayetteville). OLHA currently has about fifteen members. Membership cost is based on each woman’s share of the land payment. New members must be approved by the current members and can buy in only if another member wants to sell.

Diana is a resident at OLHA, while Brae lives on the North Forty, Lesbian land in North Central Florida [see story, p. 19].

<sup>6</sup> Groups define separatism in different ways. Some Landykes would consider the OLHA policy “separatist.” Some groups who are regarded by others as separatist, do not regard themselves as separatist.

## ARCO IRIS, RAINBOW LAND: THE VISION OF MARIA CHRISTINA MORELES

*Águila*

*Maria Christina Moreles (b. 1953), known as Sun Hawk, recently graduated to Águila (Eagle). Águila founded and has lived on the beautiful, rugged, mountainous land that is called Rancho Arco Iris for nearly forty years. In October 2014, she told her story to Rose Norman, who helped condense that long interview for this special issue.*

### In the Beginning

I came to this mountain because of a vision that began as a recurring dream that started when I was just a teenager. Several tragedies occurred during my teens: I was raped when I was twelve years old, and gave birth when I was thirteen. I gave the baby up for adoption. Also at age 13, I was brutally beaten, and I witnessed a friend’s murder. When I was around seventeen, I again became pregnant after being raped, and my brother was murdered. The dream started while I was living on the streets of Dallas after being estranged from my traditional Mexican Indian family, who lived in a barrio there. The dream would often wake me, and at first, it was very frightening. In this dream, I was on a mountaintop, standing alone, looking down into a valley. The valley was like a city, but the city was in a war; I could hear shooting, bombs exploding, and people crying out. It was a terrible scene, and I felt saddened by it, but I felt safe where I stood.

I began to dream of leaving the city and finding that mountain. When I was about nineteen, I hitchhiked to Austin, and hung out on Guadalupe Street, where there was a big street fair. It rained all weekend, and I got pretty sick. A young couple, who frequently took sandwiches to the homeless, took me in. It was they who told me about this incredibly beautiful mountain: “There’s a

community that lives way back in the mountains. You don't have to pay anything to live there. We're going to move there."

That land turned out to be Sassafras, about 500 rugged, mountainous acres near Fayetteville, Arkansas. It was a hippie commune at that time, but later, it was claimed as Lesbian land. [See "Arkansas Land and the Legacy of Sassafras," p. 36]. I began to save money and to prepare myself and my family to leave the city and find my safe dream mountain. The dream continued, and I knew that this land must be where I should go.

### **Moving to Arkansas**

We moved to Fayetteville in 1973, when my daughter was two. Sassafras was an hour and a half away. The first time I drove up to that mountain, my heart opened; I knew I was home. I had never seen anything more beautiful than that beautiful dirt road, lined with every kind of hardwood tree. I was in love! Unfortunately, the Sassafras community reminded me too much of the chaos that I had left behind in Dallas—they had just brought it out into the woods. There was an abundance of drugs and alcohol, and people playing Indians and witches, trying on all kinds of different hats. I was not interested one iota in that, and I went back to Fayetteville to cry about it.

About two years later, I got into a relationship with a woman, a dear friend, Patti Cardozo, known as Shiner. She was a member of the collective that owned Sassafras, and she told me the land had changed—it was women's land now. Again, my heart opened, and I thought I would try again. Shiner wasn't on the land when we went out. Another friend, Esther Martinez, who was staying with us, went with me. We were greeted at the gate by a couple of very hostile Lesbian women who asked who we were and what we wanted. I told them we were friends of Shiner Cardozo, and that she had invited us to come there. They said, "Well, she's not here." Once again, I saw that the land was not welcoming me. But then Berry, a young nurse from Germany, came up to me and said, "I was here when you came the first time, and I saw you leave

heartbroken. Now I see you again, and I believe you *do* belong here." We talked, and I told her my concerns and my sadness. She told me that there was land on the other side of the creek from Sassafras, land that belonged to Sassafras, and maybe we could live there, away from this community. She told me how to get there, and we decided to take that walk. It was a long journey, and I had a four-year-old with me, but I was determined. Arriving at the other side, I felt my heart opening again. Maybe this *was* the place. There was nothing there, but there was peace. I left with a possibility of what we could do.

### **My Death and Rebirth**

Back in Fayetteville, an epidemic of contagious hepatitis was sweeping through our community like wildfire. Every woman in the trucking<sup>1</sup> community got it, including me. I begged Shiner not to take me to Sassafras for healing, but she came home one day to find me passed out on the floor, burning with fever, leaving me no choice in the matter. When I woke up, I found myself in the main house at Sassafras, where Berry was caring for me. The women of Sassafras, thinking I was dying, were drumming and chanting outside the building. Indeed, although Berry provided the best care she could, the illness overcame me, and I died. Berry went outside to tell the women I was dead, and they began crying and wailing. Then she went back in the building and sat alone with my body. While mourning over me, she said that all of a sudden I took a deep breath, and a white light shone all around my body.

During my death, I had a profound vision. I was told by a saintly looking young Indian woman with braids, a woman that I named Santa Maria, that I wasn't going to die, I was just resting. When I awoke, I was to start my life anew. She gave me my life's purpose,

<sup>1</sup> Ozark Women's Trucking Collective was an all-Lesbian trucking collective for Ozark Food Coop Warehouse, based in Fayetteville. Maria, Shiner, and many Sassafras women drove long-haul trucks for it as far west as New Mexico, as far east as Alabama, as far south as New Orleans, and as far north as Wisconsin (picking up cheese).

my mission: this land was to be a sanctuary, a safe space, for women and children of color. While this is an abbreviated version of the vision it actually continued for several days. I remember being in a blissful state, where I wasn't in pain anymore. I felt good; I wanted to live.

After I regained some strength, I felt the urge to go outside. Berry dressed me in a beautiful white caftan that Shiner had left as a burial robe for me. There was snow on the ground, but it was a clear blue day, and everything looked so brilliant and beautiful to me. The yard looked over toward the mountain where I live now. It was cold, and I was barefoot, yet I felt very warm. Berry prepared a pallet for me outside, and I asked to be left alone. My vision continued, and I saw three Indians on horseback on the bluff across from me. The Indian in the center was waving to me with a staff, waving me to come. I looked into the sky, and there were buzzards flying around above me. Then out of the south a hawk came flying north, right down into the center of them, screeching loudly and scaring them away. The moment it flew above me and in front of the sun, I knew my medicine name: Sun Hawk. I had a new life, and that was my new name.

### **The Birth of Arco Iris**

After I became well enough, I came over to Rainbow Land. At first, it was just my daughter, Jennifer, and me, but later, Esther Martinez came. Members of the Sassafras collective who had been there when I died and came back to life were so impacted by my vision that they decided to give me the 120-acre piece of land, which we later called Rancho Arco Iris. Although I don't believe in owning our Mother, I put the land in Esther and my names<sup>2</sup> in

<sup>2</sup> According to the online *Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture*, the land was deeded to Maria and Esther in 1979. See "Women's Intentional Communities aka: Women's Land Communities," <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=6513>. Later, Esther's name was taken off and replaced by the woman who was then Maria's life partner and lived there twenty-eight years, leaving in 2011.

order for us to have autonomy and security in the knowledge that we would not ever be displaced.

The vision was that the land would be used to heal myself and to provide a sanctuary for women and children of color. At first many women came, women of color who had heard about us through different articles, word of mouth, and various events. We would attend the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, where I would speak at a tent intended for women of color. Women were coming, and they were all wounded. We were all so wounded. It was crazy. We didn't have any money, and I was still recovering from hepatitis. We lived in tents and teepees with no running water, surviving on food stamps.

But then, more and more women began leaving—women who had had that dream of living on land, and escaping their traumas and tragedies and the madness of the city life. But they had tried it and found that it is not easy to live in a wilderness area. Sometimes women would leave their children behind, and I would take care of them, as I was already raising my little girl.

Back then, I had a little motorcycle that I would park at Sassafras. Jennifer, then only five years old, and I would hike in our supplies from one mountain, across a creek, and up our mountain. It would be about two years before we saved enough money to rebuild our road to drive in some times of the year. Rancho Arco Iris had virtually no road, no cleared land to speak of, no water, and, of course, no electricity. About a year later, I traded my motorcycle in for a little Ford pickup. Our three-mile-long road was a washed-out, old logging road that had hardly been used in decades. It had trees growing in it and ruts deep enough to lose a child in. We often had to walk in due to mud, snow, or ice. There were two one-room unfinished cabins on the land that we worked on so that women could stay in them. One has gone back to the earth. The other one is now Jennifer's cabin, which has been completely reconstructed.

Less than a year after moving onto the land, my partner, Shiner, who had left out of fear when she thought I was dying, returned. I told her the vision, and explained that the land was intended for

community and as a sanctuary to share and hold sacred. Shiner supported my vision, and we began to work on it, as stewards.

After a while, Shiner's grandmother, who needed health care, came to live with us. We set Franny up in a small trailer, and my family lived nearby in a teepee. Her family paid us to be her caregivers and to provide for her needs. The income helped us build a house and upgrade our terrible dirt road.

Women built all the structures and orchestrated all the improvements that are here now. Over time, we rebuilt our road, and we installed a pond for fish, wildlife, irrigation, and recreation. My partner and I hand-dug and built a 900-gallon cement cistern tank into the ground next to our house to hold rainwater or springwater. Our first indoor water was a hand pump connected to the cistern. We used kerosene lamps and candles for most of thirty years and cooked all our meals over an outside fire pit for our first twenty-five years. We finally added solar electricity and got an antenna telephone when our son Mario was about four. There were no phone poles for three miles, and a pay phone was ten miles away. We hired well-drillers who drilled a 500-foot well that never worked because it requires a special water pump to run on solar power. So, instead, we developed a natural spring as our main source of water, which remains our main source of water to this day.

### **The Birth of Mario and a New Sense of Community**

After several years of living with Shiner on the land, I met a woman in Michigan and invited her to come and help work on the house we were building. She was here about six months before we ended up falling in love. Mario, our son, was born in 1988. After his birth, we could no longer go to the festival in Michigan, as male children were to be separated from their mothers and placed in a camp. We had often taken care of little boys whose mothers brought them to the land; we had never been separatist in that way. And we weren't about to be separated from our son. Once we stopped going to Michigan, where we had informed other



Courtesy of Aguilera

Mario Solano, named after his bondmother, Maria Christina Moroles (Sun Hawk), in the cradle board she made for him, 1988.

women of our existence, the flow of women to the land lessened. But with Mario's birth, our lives changed, locally. He drew our community—this Bible Belt Christian community—together around us. Everyone was so drawn to him. All the white people, who would have never spoken to us before, somehow just fell in love with him. "He's a dandy!" they would say, adoring the fat little Indian baby in a cradle board. Everybody wanted to hold him and touch him and feed him. Of course, our boys grow up into men, so the shift in our community naturally progressed.

### **The Progression of Arco Iris**

Sometime around 1984, we incorporated as a nonprofit survival camp for women and children of color. In about 1994, we gained 501(c)(3) status, and in 2000, we decided to ask for the land that had been the Sassafras community. For almost ten years, Sassafras had been mostly abandoned. Poachers were shooting the wildlife off season, digging up valuable roots, stealing and vandalizing the

property, and just hanging out partying there. Those 400 acres are now owned by Arco Iris, and we call the 120 acres I live on Rancho Arco Iris, to differentiate.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, in 2014, we became land tax exempt.

### **An Inclusive Sanctuary**

Arco Iris means rainbow in Spanish. Indigenous people believe the rainbow represents the rainbow goddess of healing. She is an aura of all colors, all the colors of all the peoples. Before we came here, long ago, this land was a healing place for all peoples to come. As an indigenous woman of North America, I know I was summoned here to this sacred land not only as a sanctuary for us survivors, but to protect this sacred mountain. As an indigenous daughter, I believed it is our inherent right and sacred responsibility to maintain the leadership and stewardship of this sacred place. Often my words have been misinterpreted as exclusive. Look around. How many native people do you see? There is your answer. I still look around and immediately miss my people that once inhabited all of North America. Will we allow ourselves to remember that many native and people of color are still disenfranchised and do not have equal privileges? My vision is to reserve space to include those less privileged that are seeking sanctuary, not to exclude anyone. I will never forget that this sacred land was returned to the hands of poor, indigenous, two-spirit women. It was placed in our trust, so that we could have sovereignty and autonomy, so that we could reclaim within ourselves our sacredness, our purpose, and our strength. I pray others who follow after me will understand our intention.

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<sup>3</sup> In the 1990s, they got LNR funding to purchase twenty or thirty adjacent acres with the spring they use for running water. This was added to the over a hundred acres deeded to Maria and Esther by the Sassafras collective in 1979. The 400 acres that had been Sassafras was deeded to Arco Iris by the two women who remained from the collective, Diana Rivers and Shiner Cardozo. Diana and her life partner Path Walker retain a life estate in about ten acres.

### **The Mission**

Our mission today is still for all this land to be a sanctuary, not only for women and children of color, but for all people who come in peace and in search of sanctuary. It is an incredible, deep hardwood forest. Because of our remoteness, some areas were never logged. This land is full of elk, deer, bear, wild turkey, and wolves. We even have panthers. We have wild, rare, and medicinal herbs, and many edible mushrooms. There is so much medicine here—even the clay is healing. We are one of the most pristine areas in the Ozarks. For me, protecting this incredibly sacred land is a major, top-of-the-list item. If the land isn't protected, then those who come here are not protected.

We want to create a stewardship agreement to hold the land in perpetuity. I've written a draft that says that indigenous women will live on the land and work on it. The draft gives guidelines for how to care for these lands for future generations. It is a very complex thing that I've taken on as a sacred responsibility. Our mission now is to heal our community—our local community, our Ozark community, and our indigenous community—and to bring all the colors into sacred union again. I know that is quite ambitious, but these ancestors who called me back have been quite insistent. They knew exactly who they were dealing with, what kind of person would persevere, despite all the obstacles we have faced. It can be very hard for me as a nonacademic woman. I went to the seventh grade, and I got my GED by going to night school when I was very young. I do not have monetary or academic credentials that are often required in this society. But I do have perseverance and vision. I believe the ancestors called me back to protect this sacred land for all of us, and I pray that I will be able to do that.

### **Today**

I have lived on this land for almost forty years now, and I have witnessed many changes. Currently, Mario lives with me here on the land, where we still live off the grid. At present, Mario and I are the only full-time resident stewards. He runs men's lodges



for men, and I do women's lodges. Jennifer, my daughter, has a cabin here, but presently resides with her partner, Lisa, in a small town thirty miles away. My children, my family/community, and this sacred land are my life. We are in search of people, especially women with skills who can help us achieve our mission.

### Giving Thanks

So many women over the years have helped build Rancho Arco Iris, but of all those women, I must especially acknowledge the woman who spent twenty-eight years with me at Arco Iris for all the years of love and care she put into both this land and into me. Her spiritual determination, her passion, her muscles, and her courage were a large part of making Arco Iris what it is today. A special thanks to all the indigenous elders who came here or sent prayers to bless us and support us. Thanks to Berry for nursing me to be here today, and to Juanita Arrega, Shiner, Marie Cavallo, Isis Brown, Marsha Gomez, Cynthia Perez, Celia Rodriguez, Eva Kulterman, Lucia Lopez, Shelby Wood, Tamara Collier, and Diana Rivers for protecting this land and supporting us and Arco Iris as we grow and change. We are also very appreciative of the many wonderful men who have worked with us, respected our ways, and been friends. Tlatzokamati to my children: Jennifer, who has weathered it all with incredible love, strength, and courage, and Mario, who is here today as my teacher, student, and steward to this land and me. Finally, I thank my partner Annais for helping me get this story ready for publication and for her love and trust over the past two years. Please forgive me if I did not put each of your names, as we have such a huge community, but know that you are in my heart of gratitude.

*To learn more about land stewardship efforts at Arco Iris, see the Arco Iris Earth Care Project, <http://earthcareproject.wordpress.com/>*

## PAGODA, TEMPLE OF LOVE: LESBIAN PARADISE (1977—PRESENT)

Merril Mushroom

*Every day there is a song, every night a gift of love,  
every moon a celebration.*

Inscribed on Pagoda letterhead

The Pagoda was not so much a community of dykes on the land as it was a community of dykes by the sea. Located on Vilano Beach, St. Augustine, Florida, it became a well-known "Lesbian paradise"<sup>1</sup> for women all over the South—indeed all over the world—and is an example of serendipity in action. It came about as the result of the vision of Rena Carney and Morgana MacVicar, Lesbian cousins, and their partners Cathy and Suzy. They had formed a women's theater and dance troupe called Terpsichore and performed throughout Florida. Their dream was to have their own theater. This dream was fulfilled beyond their wildest imaginings.

Pagoda was primarily an arts and spirituality-oriented community. In its "glory days" (about 1977–1999), Lesbian theater, dance, and music were performed in the fifty-seat Pagoda Playhouse. They also held workshops on every conceivable subject of interest to Lesbians. Through the years, many scores of Lesbians came through, stayed, visited, left, returned. The Pagoda Temple of Love was a center of women's spirituality and one of the first recognized goddess worshipping churches in the nation. Here we focus on the herstory and structure of this unique Lesbian-feminist community that has persisted for almost forty years, even through its many changes.

<sup>1</sup> Nancy Unger, "The Pagoda: 'An Island of Lesbian Paradise,'" in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 182–86.