

TEACH RESPECT



NOT RACISM

COMMON THEMES AND QUESTIONS ABOUT THE USE OF "INDIAN" LOGOS

© 1997 Barbara E. Munson, a woman of the Oneida Nation, living in Mosinee, WI

"Indian" logos and nicknames create, support and maintain stereotypes of a race of people. When such cultural abuse is supported by one or many of society's institutions, it constitutes institutional racism. **It is not conscionable that Wisconsin's Public Schools be the vehicle of institutional racism.** The logos, along with other societal abuses and stereotypes separate, marginalize, confuse, intimidate and harm Native American children and create barriers to their learning throughout their school experience. Additionally, the logos teach non-Indian children that it's all right to participate in culturally abusive behavior. Children spend a great deal of their time in school, and schools have a very significant impact on their emotional, spiritual, physical and intellectual development. As long as such logos remain, both Native American and non-Indian children are learning to tolerate racism in our schools. The following illustrate the common questions and statements that I have encountered in trying to provide education about the "Indian" logo issue.

"We have always been proud of our "Indians"." People are proud of their high school athletic teams, even in communities where the team name and symbolism does not stereotype a race of people. In developing high school athletic traditions, schools have borrowed from Native American cultures the sacred objects, ceremonial traditions and components of traditional dress that were most obvious; without understanding their deep meaning or appropriate use. High school traditions were created without in-depth knowledge of Native traditions; they are replete with inaccurate depictions of Indian people, and promote and maintain stereotypes of rich and varied cultures. High school athletic traditions have taken the trappings of Native cultures onto the playing field where young people have played at being "Indian". Over time, and with practice, generations of children in these schools have come to believe that the pretended "Indian" identity is more than what it is.

"We are honoring Indians; you should feel honored." Native people are saying that they don't feel honored by this symbolism. We experience it as no less than a mockery of our cultures. We see objects sacred to us - such as the drum, eagle feathers, face painting and traditional dress - being used, not in sacred ceremony, or in any cultural setting, but in another culture's **game**.

We are asking that the public schools stop demeaning, insulting, harassing and misrepresenting Native peoples, their cultures and religions, for the sake of school athletics. Why must some schools insist on using symbols of a **race** of people? Other schools are happy with their logos which offend no human being. Why do some schools insist on categorizing Indian people along with animals and objects? If your team name were the *Pollacks, Niggers, Gooks, Spics, Honkies or Krauts, and someone from the community found the name and symbols associated with it offensive and asked that it be changed; would you not change the name? If not, why not?

* I apologize for using this example but have found no way to get this point across without using similar derogatory names for other racial and ethnic groups.

"Why is the term "Indian" offensive?" The term "Indian" was given to indigenous people on this continent by an explorer who was looking for India, a man who was lost and who subsequently exploited the indigenous people. "Indian", is a designation we have learned to tolerate, it is not the name we call ourselves. We are known by the names of our Nations - Oneida (On[^]yote[?]a·ka), Hochunk, Stockbridge-Munsee, Menominee (Omaeqnomenew), Chippewa (Anishanabe), Potawatomi, etc. There are many different nations with different languages and different cultural practices among the Native American peoples - as in Europe there are French, Swiss, Italian, German, Polish, English, Irish, Yugoslavs, Swedes, Portuguese, Latvians etc.

"Why is an attractive depiction of an Indian warrior just as offensive as an ugly caricature?" Both depictions present and maintain stereotypes. Both firmly place Indian people in the past, separate from our contemporary cultural experience. It is difficult, at best, to be heard in the present when someone is always suggesting that your real culture only exists in museums. The logos keep us marginalized and are a barrier to our contributing here and now. Depictions of mighty warriors of the past emphasize a tragic part of our history; focusing on wartime survival, they ignore the strength and beauty of our cultures during times of peace. Many Indian cultures view life as a spiritual journey filled with lessons to be learned from every experience and from every living being. Many cultures put high value on peace, right action, and sharing.

Indian men are not limited to the role of warrior; in many of our cultures a good man is learned, gentle, patient, wise and deeply spiritual. In present time as in the past, our men are also sons and brothers, husbands, uncles, fathers and grandfathers. Contemporary Indian men work in a broad spectrum of occupations, wear contemporary clothes, and live and love just as men do from other cultural backgrounds.

The depictions of Indian "braves", "warriors" and "chiefs" also ignore the roles of women and children. Although there are patrilineal Native cultures, many Indian Nations are both matrilineal and child centered. Indian cultures identify women with the Creator because of their ability to bear children, and with the Earth which is Mother to us all. In most Indian cultures the highest value is given to children, they are closest to the Creator and they embody the future. In many Native traditions, each generation is responsible for the children of the seventh generation in the future.

"We never intended the logo to cause harm." That no harm was intended when the logos were adopted, may be true. It is also true that we Indian people are saying that the logos are harmful to our cultures, and especially to our children, in the present. When someone says you are hurting them by your action, if you persist; then the harm becomes intentional.

"We are paying tribute to Indians." Indian people do not pay tribute to one another by the use of logos, portraits or statues. The following are some ways that we exhibit honor:

- ◆ In most cultures to receive an eagle feather is a great honor, and often such a feather also carries great responsibility.
- ◆ An honor song at a Pow-Wow or other ceremony is a way of honoring a person or a group.
- ◆ We honor our elders and leaders by asking them to share knowledge and experience with us or to lead us in prayer. We defer to elders. They go first in many ways in our cultures.
- ◆ We honor our young by not doing things to them that would keep them from becoming who and what they are intended to be.
- ◆ We honor one another by listening and not interrupting.
- ◆ We honor those we love by giving them our time and attention.
- ◆ Sometimes we honor people through gentle joking.
- ◆ We honor others by giving to them freely what they need or what belongs to them already because they love it more or could use it better than we do.

"Aren't you proud of your warriors?" Yes, we are proud of the warriors who fought to protect our cultures and preserve our lands. We are proud and we don't want them demeaned by being "honored" in a sports activity on a **playing** field. Our people died tragically in wars motivated by greed for our lands. Our peoples have experienced forced removal and systematic genocide. Our warriors gave their sacred lives in often vain attempts to protect the land and preserve the culture for future generations. Football is a game.

"This is not an important issue." If it is not important, then why are school boards willing to tie up their time and risk potential law suits rather than simply change the logos. I, as an Indian person, have never said it is unimportant. Most Indian adults have lived through the pain of prejudice and harassment in schools when they were growing up, and they don't want their children to experience more of the same. The National Council of American Indians, the Great Lakes InterTribal Council, the Oneida Tribe, and the Wisconsin Indian Education Association have all adopted formal position statements because this is a very important issue to Indian people. This issue speaks to our children being able to form a positive Indian identity and to develop appropriate levels of self-esteem. In addition, it has legal ramifications in regard to pupil harassment and equal access to education. If its not important to people of differing ethnic and racial backgrounds within the community, then change the logos because they are hurting the community's Native American population.

"What if we drop derogatory comments and clip art and adopt pieces of REAL Indian culturally significant ceremony, like Pow-Wows and sacred songs?" Though well-intended, these solutions are culturally naive and would exchange one pseudo-culture for another. Pow-Wows are gatherings of Native people which give us the opportunity to express our various cultures and strengthen our sense of Native American community. Pow-Wows have religious, as well as social, significance. To parodize such ceremonial gatherings for the purpose of cheering on the team at homecoming would multiply exponentially the current pseudo cultural offensiveness. Bringing Native religions onto the playing field through songs of tribute to the "Great Spirit" or Mother Earth would increase the mockery of Native religions even more than the current use of drums and feathers. High School football games are secular; The Creator and Mother Earth are sacred.

"We are helping you preserve your culture." The responsibility for the continuance of our cultures falls to Native people. We accomplish this by surviving, living and thriving; and, in so doing, we pass on to our children our stories, traditions, religions, values, arts, and our languages. We sometimes do this important work with people from other cultural backgrounds, but they do not and cannot continue our cultures for us. Our ancestors did this work for us, and we continue to carry the culture for the generations to come. Our cultures are living cultures - they are passed on, not "preserved".

"This logo issue is just about political correctness." Using the term "political correctness" to describe the attempts of concerned Native American parents, educators and leaders to remove stereotypes from the public schools trivializes a survival issue. A history of systematic genocide has decimated over 95% of the indigenous population of the Americas. Today, the average life expectancy of Native American males is age 45. The teen suicide rate among Native people is several times higher than the national average. Stereotypes, ignorance, silent inaction and even naive innocence damage and destroy individual lives and whole cultures. Racism kills.

"What do you mean, there is hypocrisy involved in retaining an "Indian" logo?" Imagine that you are a child in a society where your people are variously depicted as stoic, brave, honest, a mighty warrior, fierce, savage, stupid, dirty, drunken, and only good when dead. Imagine going to a school where many of your classmates refer to your people as "Dirty Squaws" and "Timber Niggers". Imagine hearing your peers freely, loudly and frequently say such things as "Spear an Indian, Save a Walleye", or more picturesquely proclaim "Spear a Pregnant Squaw, Save a Walleye". Imagine that the teachers and administration do not forbid this kind of behavior. Imagine that this same school holds aloft an attractive depiction of a Plains Indian Chieftain and cheers on its "Indian" team. Imagine that in homecoming displays, cheers, and artwork you see your people depicted inaccurately in ways that demean your cultural and religious practices. Imagine that when you bring your experiences to the attention of your school board and request change, they simply ignore you and decide to continue business as usual. Imagine that the same school board states publicly that it opposes discriminatory practices, provides equal educational opportunity and supports respect for cultural differences.

"Why don't community members understand the need to change, isn't it a simple matter of respect?"

On one level, yes. But in some communities, people have bought into local myths and folklore presented as accurate historical facts. Sometimes these myths are created or preserved by local industry. Also, over the years, athletic and school traditions grow up around the logos. These athletic traditions can be hard to change when much of a community's ceremonial and ritual life, as well as its pride, becomes tied to high school athletic activities. Finally, many people find it difficult to grasp a different cultural perspective. Not being from an Indian culture, they find it hard to understand that things which are not offensive to themselves, might be offensive or even harmful to someone who is from a Native culture. Respecting a culture different from the one you were raised in requires some effort. Even if a person lives in a different culture - insight and understanding of that culture will require interaction, listening, observing and a willingness to learn.

The Native American population, in most school districts displaying "Indian" logos, is proportionally very small. When one of us confronts the logo issue, that person, his or her children and other family members, and anyone else in the district who is Native American become targets of insults and threats; we are shunned and further marginalized - our voices become even harder to hear from behind barriers of fear and anger. We appreciate the courage, support, and sometimes the sacrifice, of all who stand with us by speaking out against the continued use of "Indian" logos. When you advocate for the removal of these logos, you are strengthening the spirit of tolerance and justice in your community; you are modeling for all our children - thoughtfulness, courage and respect for self and others.

"Is there any common ground on this issue?" All of Wisconsin's public schools are required to have a non-discrimination statement and a policy to provide enforcement. Through Act 31, all schools are required to provide education, (in the classroom, not on the basketball court), about Wisconsin's Woodland Indians. Many schools have adopted strategic plans emphasizing cultural sensitivity and awareness. These measures should establish considerable common ground between Indian people requesting the removal of the logos and the public schools. Until the logos are removed, however, they are no more than broken promises and hollow, hypocritical rhetoric.