

# HUMAN BEINGS ARE NOT MASCOTS

BY BARBARA MUNSON

"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.

These logos — along with other 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.

As long as such logos remain, both Native American and non-Indian children are learning to tolerate racism in our schools. The following are some common questions and statements that I have encountered in trying to educate others about the "Indian" logo issue.

**"We have always been proud of our 'Indians'"**

People are proud of their school athletic teams even in communities where the team's name and symbolism does not stereotype a race of people. In developing 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. Such school traditions are replete with inaccurate depictions of Indian people, and promote and maintain stereotypes. Schools 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 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.

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?

**"Why is the term 'Indian' as a mascot name 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 not the name we prefer to be called. We are known by the names of our Nations — Oneida (On<sup>^</sup>yote|a<sup>^</sup>ka), Hochunk, Stockbridge-Munsee, Menominee (Omaeqnomenew), Chippewa (Anishanabe), Potawatomi, etc.

**"Why is an attractive depiction of an Indian warrior just as offensive as an ugly caricature?"**

Both depictions are stereotypes. Both firmly place Indian people in the past. The logos keep us

marginalized. Depictions of mighty warriors of the past emphasize a tragic part of our history; 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. 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.

**"We never intended the logo to cause harm."**

That no harm was intended when the logos were adopted, may be true. But 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.

**"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 don't want them demeaned by being "honored" in a sports activity on a playing field.

**"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. 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 it's not important to people of differing ethnic and racial backgrounds within the community, then change the logos. They are hurting the community's Native American population.

**"What if we drop derogatory comments and clip art, and adopt pieces of 'real' Indian ceremony, like pow-wows and sacred songs?"**

Though well-intended, these solutions are culturally naive. To make a parody of such ceremonial gatherings for the purpose of cheering on the team at homecoming would multiply exponentially the 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.

**"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 in some communities 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.

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

On one level, yes. But 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. 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.

*Barbara Munson (Oneida), is active in educating school and community groups about the insensitivity in using stereotypes as school mascots and logos. This is excerpted from an article which can be found at [www.nativeweb.org](http://www.nativeweb.org); click on Native Web Projects to get to The Line in the Sand site.*