

March 28, 2013

Last night at Reed College I attended an amazing seminar called Native American Appropriations designed to explore how popular culture has stolen sacred Native American icons. We were treated to inspiring performances by a variety of young Native Americans in full traditional regalia dancing to a drum circle. I wish everyone in this room could have experienced the pride those youth had for their cultural heritage. A tiny boy only a year and a half old joined the final group dance. Even at that young age he danced fearlessly in front of a huge crowd, imbued with the spirit of the drums and the chants. We learned that those children from the Native American Youth and Family Center in Portland are taught the respectful care of their dance regalia, the meaning of the icons and that their cultural heritage is sacred and unique. The seminar went on to feature a discussion about the horrible ways American Indian art and cultural icons have been hijacked and the hard work contemporary Native Americans are doing to regain control and respect for their culture.

I drove back to my home in rural Molalla thinking how mortified I would be if any of those committed, protective and passionate Native Americans came Molalla and saw the racist, tacky ways Molalla has appropriated Indian symbols, starting with the lurid orange clip art Indian cartoon mascot it clings to in spite of the ban. Molalla High School has rows of lockers stenciled with the heads of Indian chiefs, a giant scoreboard that is a softball with an Indian chief head on top and a soccer meet teepee ceremony. The cheap clip art Indian chief head is used all over town to advertise the local phone company. Students dance, sweat and dribble balls on the head of the Indian chief cartoon embedded on the floor of the gym. A pseudo-Indian ceremony is acted out when school starts at the High School. There is nothing honorable about the use of these symbols in Molalla. Molalla has instituted a culture that's a 1950's version of a Walt Disney summer camp for white kids. I am profoundly ashamed to be a taxpayer in the Molalla River School District.

I have spent over a year trying to inform Molalla about the need to move on and abandon the clip art cartoon Indian mascot, so I left that seminar both inspired and dismayed. I have learned how professional educators and psychologists have found Indian mascots to be destructive to the self image of Native American children because those stereotypes limit their vision of what they can become in contemporary American society. I participated in two hearings last spring before the extremely professional and patient State School Board. The April 27th hearing more than convinced me that all the districts with Indian mascots are failing to teach about the need to respect diversity and civil rights.

A racist 2006 half time display in Molalla featuring a half naked pretend Indian with a target on his chest triggered the the ODE to ask that Districts voluntarily replace Indian mascots by the end of 2011 and yet virtually none did anything to honor that ask. I begged the Molalla school superintendent, high school principal and school board well before the start of the hearings to inform the community about the issues that would surely lead to a ban and my district did nothing. I have written endless published letters

and used social media to tell all I was learning about the need to abandon the cartoon lucky charm Indian mascot.

But today, Molalla is still in full denial, not only about the Indian mascot, but also about its deeply entrenched bullying and racial harassment problems. Molalla recently refused free diversity training. The white power privilege thrust in Molalla has gone from using the excuse that it is too expensive to get a new mascot to a school board member recently circulating a poll asking how much the community would be willing to have the district spend to sue the ODE to keep the Indian mascot.

I firmly believe that only by giving the ODE the ability to impose sanctions will we eliminate these horrific racist stereotypes from our public schools. The history and professional testimony about mascots is online at the ODE site and accessible to anyone willing to learn the facts. But I am old enough to have witnessed the denial that accompanies the need for social change, including the struggle in the 60's for civil rights, the struggle for women's rights, the fight over Title 9, fights over handicapped access, mainstreaming and the current struggles for Latino rights.

The bills before you would perpetuate racism and would do a huge disservice to all students in districts that cling to racist symbols. There can be no excuse for trolling to find an acceptable level of racism in our public schools. I believe all students should by now have been taught about the contemporary Native American work to gain control and respect for their cultural icons. We should not be sending students out in the world from these isolated districts believing it is morally acceptable to use our smallest racial minority as their cartoon lucky charms. If you pass these bills, you will be trashing six years of carefully considered work produced by our excellent State DOE; they are the experts we need to trust to provide universal educational opportunities and to protect the civil rights of all students.

I am very proud that the ODE and State Board did the difficult but necessary work to protect vulnerable Native American students and that we are leading the nation in the need to respect Native American cultural icons. Please don't undue that important legacy just because a handful of districts cling to racist symbols and refuse to accept the need to address 21st Century inclusion and diversity issues.

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