

Let's be brave

by Julia Stone

Julia Stone was one of the students who led the 2010 efforts to change the mascot, and served as a student representative on the high school committee formed last spring to choose a mascot, or learn about the issue, depending on your perspective. She shared a longer version of this powerful and poignant argument about the importance of eliminating race-based mascots with the committee. They listened. Perhaps that is when perspectives changed. Some people think the mascot is a trivial issue. I have to ask if institutional or scientific racism is ever trivial, especially when aimed at children--jd

My grandmother, Kachiku Yasunaga Guinto, experienced racial profiling during WWII when she was 13. She was considered a national security threat because of her race. Even though she was born in Seattle, my grandmother did not "look" American. She "looked" Japanese. The U.S. government considered that enough evidence to disregard her civil liberties. I will never forget this injustice that happened to my family because I never want to see anything like it happen again. Our school's mascot is the head of a Native American warrior and our athletes call themselves the "Talawanda Braves." This is a race-based mascot that promotes stereotyping of Native Americans. In Wisconsin, a new state law took effect in May that allows school district residents to lodge complaints against race-based mascots. This legislation was promoted by Harvey and Carol Gunderson of the Oneida tribe. The Gundersons have been in contact with Oxford's Coalition for a New Talawanda Mascot. The purpose of the Coalition was to have the School Board set up a task force to investigate this issue and make suggestions based on research. Ideally I would like to see the school community involved not only in promoting a mascot change, but also in the selection of a new mascot for the school. Now is the time to stand up for what is right. Now is the time for change.

Our own school mascot goes against the school's non-discrimination policy. In the Talawanda High School Handbook it states, "Talawanda High School believes that every individual deserves to be able to come to school without fear of demeaning remarks or actions...This includes any speech or action that creates a hostile, intimidating, or offensive learning environment" (21, emphasis added). What our school fails to note is that its own mascot creates an environment that promotes racism and stereotyping: "...the continued use of American Indian mascots, symbols, images and personalities establishes an unwelcome and often times hostile learning environment for American Indian students that affirms negative images/stereotypes that are promoted in

mainstream society" ("American Psychological Association Resolution" 1). In 2008, a scientific journal called "Basic & Applied Social Psychology" held four studies that examined the psychological consequences of mascots like Chief Wahoo on Native American high school and college students. "These studies showed that when students are exposed to Native American mascots they report lower self-esteem, picture themselves as lower-achieving individuals, and feel less valued in their community" (Wynbrandt). And not only Native American students are hurt by the use of Native American mascots. I know from personal experience being half-Asian that other minorities are often very offended as well. When I interviewed my mother, Patty Stone, who was very active in this issue as well she said, "This issue is more emotionally charged for people of minority descent" (Stone). Those who are part of the minority can relate directly with how hurtful it is to be stereotyped because of their race. Ms. Webb, a Talawanda English teacher, said, "All races, all people are hurt by it because it makes us (perhaps unconscious) participants in said stereotyping." This is very true as well. Those who are participating in racial stereotyping are also being hurt because the stereotypes become ingrained in their brains causing them to become close-minded and ignorant.

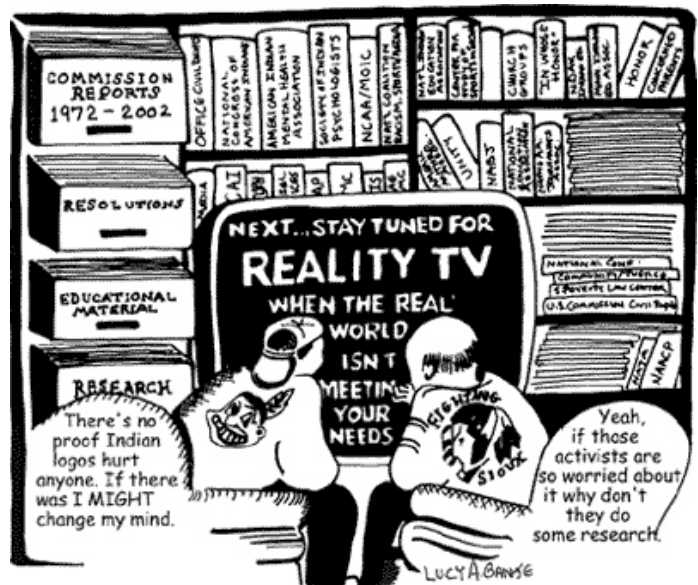
It's been said that a change in mascot in Talawanda schools would cause less athletic booster support from parents. But are we playing sports for a mascot or because we love playing sports? Would parents stop supporting their kids just because of a mascot change? We must remember that parents are there to support their student athlete, not a mascot. It's not the mascot that gives us motivation; it is ourselves, our team mates, our fans and our coaches. The director of women's studies at the University of Illinois who's in favor retiring Native American mascots said, "We're not opposed to school spirit, only it's embodiment in a racist mascot" (Spindel, 165).

It's often argued that there are no Native American people coming forth about this issue in our community, but they are mistaken. In a letter that my mother wrote to the school Board regarding the mascot issue she said, "There are coalition supporters that are American Indian. However, our community is not the only people affected by our mascot choice" (Stone). She is right. Every school that we play is affected. Every time someone sees our warrior head they are affected. I know for a fact that my own family was affected greatly by this issue. My mother received a letter from a former city council member that was very hurtful. It slandered her Asian American heritage and challenged her patriotism. He wrote, "I find it

sad and insulting you do not consider yourself an American. What makes you more or less of a person because your grandparents were Japanese?" Imagine if Native Americans did come forward. What kind of persecution would they face? Also, this issue is not just being debated locally. There are over 100 groups and organizations endorsing the retirement of Native American mascots including NAACP, the National Education Association (NEA), the U.S. Commission for Civil Rights, NCAA and several Native American tribes. There are no professional or political groups that endorse the use of Native American mascots (American Indian Sports Team Mascots).

One of the most common arguments supporting Native American mascots is that we are honoring Native Americans, but really we must recall that Native American people never asked to be honored. It is not our responsibility to "preserve" their culture. It is the responsibility of living Native Americans to pass on stories and traditions. Barbara Munson, of the Oneida Nation, says, "It is difficult at best to be heard in the present when someone is always suggesting that your real culture only exists in museums...Our cultures are living cultures-they are passed on, not 'preserved'" (Munson 2-3). The documentary *In Whose Honor?* was made by Jay Rosenstein in 1997. It shows Charlene Teters, a Spokane Indian woman, as she protests at first alone, but later with other activists (Spindel 160). In the film, Charlene makes many speeches. In one of her most powerful speeches she says, "This is not about honoring Indian people, it is about acting honorably" (Spindel 163). She speaks only the truth. In order to honor and respect Native American people we must stop using Native American mascots.

Some claim the term Braves is not derogatory. Others also claim that there is no need to change the mascot because they don't find it offensive. One Talawanda student said, "A Brave should be looked at as a hero or something, and not looked at as something derogatory." Another student said, "I don't play a sport or whatever, but when I think of 'Braves' I think of to face with courage, to not be afraid, which is what I define brave with" (Jones, Roberts, and Strecker 8). It is important to understand that the word "Braves" is a noun referring to a male Native American warrior while the second student was referring to the adjective "brave." The issue is not about whether or not Braves is a derogatory term; the issue is about using a race-based mascot that promotes stereotyping. Many stereotypes of Native Americans are seemingly positive like "they are all good fighters, spiritually enlightened and connected to nature" (Davis and Rau 234). Therefore, many people don't find these



stereotypes to be racist or offensive. However, all stereotypes are harmful as they negate the uniqueness of individuals. Often Native American students feel as though they are unseen and unheard. They feel concealed by the stereotypes. It can be hard for people to understand the perspective of another culture or the feelings of discrimination when they've never experienced it first-hand.

So why are Talawanda students so attached to this race-based mascot? In the Talawanda Tribune Brian Hollander writes, "I believe that we are not trying to offend anyone. We take pride in being called the Braves...Our parents called themselves the Braves and we as the students now want to continue to call ourselves the Braves" (9). A common phrase that came up when Talawanda students were asked what they felt about the mascot issue was, "Once a Brave always a Brave" (Jones, Roberts, and Strecker 8). In my interview with Ann Wengler, a member of the Coalition for a New Mascot, I learned that there is evidence that the Native American stereotype actually boosts the self-esteem of the majority culture students which explains why so many of them are so desperate to hold onto it. These students are so devoted and loyal to their mascot because of "tradition." But just because something is a tradition does not mean it is right. Slavery was once a tradition. We cannot hold onto hurtful traditions. A student from the University of Illinois, Durango Mendoza, who is Creek-Muskogee, responded to Rick Winkel's attempt to make Chief Illiniwek's existence a state law by saying, "What part of ouch do you not understand?" (King and Springwood 334). A change is needed. The hurt must end.

Talawanda's current Braves logo is the head of a Native American warrior all in red, white and blue with

a white earring, a mohawk, blue face paint, and two white feathers. People argue that this image is not offensive. However, do they not realize that they are stereotyping all Native Americans as warriors? Do they not realize they are completely disregarding the symbolism rooted in traditional Native American dress? "Painting without knowledge is like throwing water at people and telling them they've been baptized, although into what they do not know. Feathers are earned honors. To wear an unearned feather is like falsely parading a U.S. Medal of Honor." (Shaw). By using this logo as our mascot we are mocking Native American tradition and religion. Even though Talawanda no longer has a student dress up as a Brave for sporting events and there are no longer "scalp songs" or chants using drums, there is still the cartoonish looking image that causes racial stereotyping. If we could do away with a student dressing up as a Brave then why can't we just take the final step and retire the Braves mascot altogether?

Most importantly, we have to realize that Native Americans are a living people; not in the past and certainly not just mascots. "A human being is the result of a culture, environment, beliefs and history. Turning that human being into a mascot naturally creates a cardboard cutout..." (Shaw). We cannot assume that all Native American people are alike, just like we can't assume everyone from any other culture are all alike. Even though our first intention may have been to honor the Native Americans we cannot continue to harm them as we are now. "When someone says you are hurting them by your action, if you persist; then the harm becomes intentional" (Munson).

Native American mascots stimulate racism and stereotypes. They hurt the self-esteem of Native Americans and other minorities. According to Ann Wengler, the main focus now is education. "I am still hoping that further education and exposure to a broader perspective on the issue, for the majority of the Talawanda District staff will lead them to implementing better curriculum and providing more well-rounded information to students about Native Americans and other diversity issues." She hopes that from a very young age students will be taught about diversity so that in later generations there will be less racism. I think we should take the plunge and change our mascot to something that doesn't dehumanize a living race of people. Let's be brave and retire the "Braves" mascot. Charlene Teters summarizes this reasoning when she says, "...it's important to understand we are human beings, not mascots" (Spindel, 163). We must continue to work towards educating students more effectively about different cultures in order

to battle ignorance and promote an unprejudiced, peaceful world.

Works cited

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NOTE

The Peace and Justice Center has copies of the resources cited above and other updated materials.

We have copies of the documentaries "Precious Knowledge: Arizona's battle over Ethnic Studies," "Reel Injun" on the history of the depiction of Native Americans in Hollywood films, and "Tim Wise on White Privilege: Racism, White Denial & the Costs of Inequality." (Reel Injun is on Netflix.) Lane Library has two updated copies of the film "In Whose Honor."

We also have the expanded edition of "Rethinking Columbus" that contains teaching ideas for kindergarten through college.