

## Why Bother? The Mascot Issue

By Janis Dutton

Two years ago Oxford Citizens for Peace and Justice was asked by a group of students from Talawanda High School and the Oxford chapter of the NAACP to join a Coalition for a New Talawanda Mascot. Since the mascot was chosen in 1956 when the district built a new high school on Chestnut Avenue, it seemed reasonable to suggest it was time to choose a new mascot for the new school being built south of Oxford. Given the progress we have made as a community on racial discrimination since the 1950s, the growing body of research on the harmful effects of institutional racism on children of all races, and the increasing number of schools, districts and states that have eliminated their own race-based mascots citing civil rights concerns, it seemed reasonable to suggest that if Talawanda officials and teachers studied the psychological and educational ramifications of the Braves name and image they might change it. That was all we asked, and a petition signed by nearly 300 citizens of the district backed our request. It seemed reasonable, but identity is rarely open to reason.

I knew tackling this issue would be neither easy nor pleasant, but even I was shocked at the vicious backlash against the high school students who had led the effort from their peers in and outside of school, and from the adults in the district. Walking the gauntlet of snarling, name-calling adults through the entry of Marshall School after one Board meeting made *me*, a white woman of a certain age, uncomfortable, and made me pay particular attention to my surroundings when I walked to my car in the parking lot. Even now, as I reflect back on that meeting, and how the students of the coalition were subjected to the same treatment, I am reminded of the protests against integrating Little Rock Central High School in 1957.

This is not to suggest that the people in the community are as overtly and deliberately racist as people in the 1950s, but people don't have to be racist to

commit unintentional acts of racism. Nor am I suggesting that the children who took on leadership roles during the Civil Rights Movement, and the Talawanda students who led this cause suffered the same degree of violence or oppression. However, I do hold to the belief that no matter the degree, racism is still racism, violence is still violence, oppression is still oppression, and patriarchal white supremacy is still patriarchal white supremacy.

At the May 17, 2010 Talawanda School Board meeting, then Board President Darrell Smith read a lengthy statement that the Board would not study the mascot issue any further and the mascot would remain. One reason was that the people who chose the mascot in the 1950s did not mean "to offend, discriminate, or diminish (in any way) any member of this community or any people of any race anywhere." Moreover, the Board's position was that "the name 'Braves' generates a positive image, and is not the same as other mascot names such as Redskins, Mohawks, Indians, or Warriors." They believed that "the majority of the citizens in the Talawanda School District agree that the *Braves* mascot is not offensive and they favor its continued use."

We were told by then Superintendent Phil Cagwin that the name would remain but the Indian profile image would be phased out. It was a start, but not over, and we shifted focus to the committee that looks at the social and educational climate at the high school. Some OCPJ members serve on the committee.

Fast forward to the November 21, 2011 school Board meeting when current Board President Mark Butterfield asked why the mascot head was "not included anywhere in the new building, stadium or field house," and directed superintendent Kelly Spivey to form a committee to clarify the Braves logo. The committee was to be co-chaired by Board member Darrell Smith and then athletic director Chris Weaver. On February 28, 2012 Weaver emailed Spivey a final list of the approved committee of two students and six adults and where they stood on the issue. The student names were redacted. Of the eight people only two (both female) were identified as being against the mascot and the image, the other six (all male) were identified as being in the "middle" on the issue despite the fact the many had argued passionately to keep the mascot in 2010. The coalition members on the committee set out to educate the rest, and OCPJ's efforts were essentially put on hold until the committee

**"This wouldn't have been a problem if these people didn't raise it and cause trouble."**

--Public Comment at the March 15, 2010 Talawanda School Board Meeting.

**"We have to constantly critique imperialist white supremacist patriarchal culture because it is normalized by mass media and rendered unproblematic."**

--Bell Hooks, *Homegrown: Engaged Cultural Criticism*

made its decision. People not officially on the committee were not allowed to attend, but we were kept informed.

Despite Ohio Sunshine Laws and my public records requests, no written record seems to exist of the committee's decision. We've been told, however, due to what I consider heroic efforts by the women on the committee, and the equally important willingness of the men to listen and learn, that they decided the rest of the school needed to learn more and suggested the district hold a contest to choose a new image when the new high school opened in August. In the board minutes from June 11, 2012, Chris Weaver said that the purpose of the group had been "to put together a process for selecting a mascot with a focus on the 'educational piece' and allowing healthy discussion by all members of the community." Butterfield disagreed and said the purpose of the committee was to choose a logo. He said that he had first become aware of the issue when asked to donate money to the hockey team and was told by the coach that the Indian head image was being phased out. He remarked that that decision had not been discussed with the Board, and he wanted a Braves logo on the new field turf by the first home game in August. He then directed the superintendent to present the Board with the "4 current Braves images" at its next meeting, seemingly too impatient to allow more education and healthy discussion, or even question his own assumptions. On June 25 the Board looked at ten images, four variations of the male profile requested by Butterfield, one red letter "T," four variations of the letters THS, and the word Braves. The Board held a quick art contest buried in the summer months to review more options. On August 20, they reviewed the

eight choices you see here. They chose #5. It's more shocking in color.

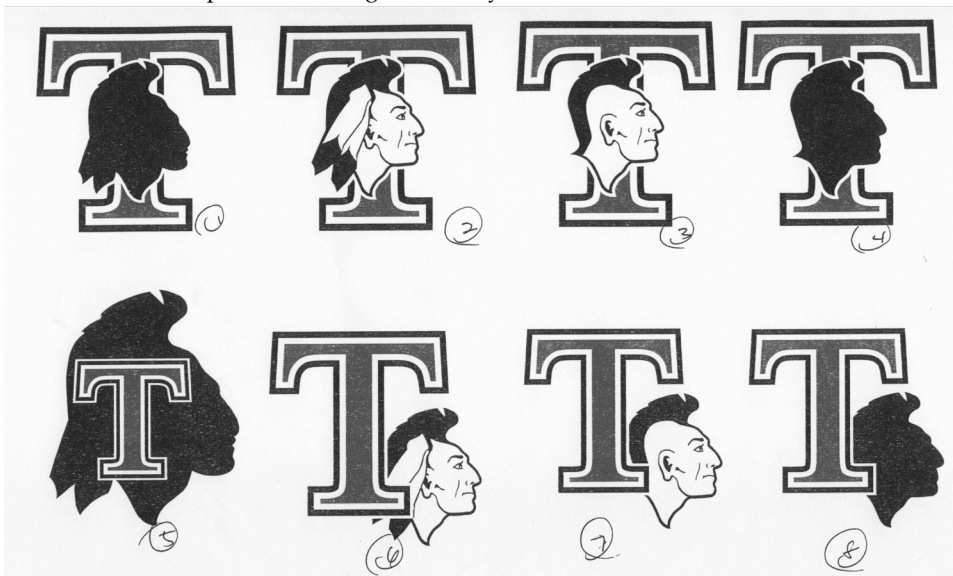
Some of Mark Butterfield's comments in the August 31 *Miami Student* following this decision were just annoying. The concern in the past about the whether the mascot was discriminatory, he declared, came from "a couple of students, a parent, and a few members of the community," conveniently ignoring the coalition and few hundred signers of the 2010 petition. Then I read his claim that the number of people who approved the image "overpowered" those who did not.

This time whiteness just didn't hold the majority, it overpowered. Again. White majority stripped indigenous people from their lands and forced their children into boarding schools in an attempt to eradicate their culture. White majority rule codified segregation and Jim Crow. Last January white majority rule at the state level eliminated ethnic studies programs in Tucson, Arizona in order to erase a history and a culture, and supplant it with another, much like the consequences of the mascot issue here.

Many of us attended that Board meeting. The Board members sat at a table on the stage in the new high school auditorium and looked at pieces of paper. No choices under consideration were included in the agenda, no visuals showed up on the screen that had just displayed a PowerPoint presentation, no one held up the sheet of paper to show us, none of us knew what the choices were. So I have to wonder whom and how many the Board polled to ascertain the number of people who approved the choice, or if any other choices, such as just the letter "T," were offered.

The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded us "In the end we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." I am less frustrated with the school Board than I am with the silence, and even indifference, on this issue by liberals and progressives in the community, and I wonder what assumptions lead to that behavior.

One assumption may be that only people with children in the school system are part of that system. This is a common assumption. Most schools narrowly define community as "parents" and only see the rest of us when they



want money, so it doesn't surprise me when the rest of us don't necessarily see the schools until there is a levy. I've spent the last twenty years as a consultant and action-researcher focused on organizational learning, especially in schools and communities, so I will admit I am biased, but our research shows when you live in a school district, you are part of that system and very much a part of complex web of influences on the system.

Twenty years ago, when Oxford Citizens for Peace and Justice was part of a coalition to change Miami University's race-based mascot, there was a groundswell of support throughout the community. Arguably, there was a similar groundswell against the change, and Redskins signs still adorn storefront windows and public school classroom walls, but the message that the identity of the community is connected to that of the university was quite clear.

Our community identity is no more separate from the Talawanda School District than it is from Miami University. If we as an organization still believe the words "Stop racism at Miami. It's as easy [?] as changing your name" or "RACISIMISRACISM" on the fliers we circulated in 1992, and the "Show Respect-Change the Name" button still pinned to my kitchen bulletin board, then we probably shouldn't have waited twenty years.

**"That's right. That's the power of privilege in this society. You don't have to think about it."**

--Glenn Morris, University of Colorado Political Science Professor and American Indian Movement activist in response to a Denver Columbus Day Parade organizer who refused to consider how the parade hurts Native Americans. From the documentary "*Columbus Day Legacy*" Available in Miami University's library.

Another assumption may be that changing the school mascot is an insurmountable task. I've been told "good luck with that" more times than I can count, but we *can* do this. Just this year the Oregon State Board of Education, citing civil rights concerns, banned the use of Native American mascots in schools, and the Washington State Board of Education passed a non-binding resolution recommending schools change their mascots. More importantly, an increasing number of civil rights claims have been settled before going to court by schools and districts simply changing the name.

Words are as important as images. Our leverage is local. It starts with organizing on our side of the bell curve of collective knowledge on this issue then moving up the curve through education. Trying to organize those on the opposite end of the bell curve is exhausting and, if you believe Saul Alinsky, not as effective. The struggle for Civil Rights is ongoing, and as a grassroots group with an espoused purpose of seeking peace and justice we will continue. But we're going to need more than luck. We're going to need more people to think about it.

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*A word is important--jd*

### **I Won't Occupy By Kim Tran**

Because occupation is what's happening in Okinawa, Guam, and Hawaii, built on brown bodies and lives. Because it's too hard to hear today's protest chants of "we are the 99" over the screaming of history's tanks and artillery. Because occupation is how I locate my body in hostile American terrain as having known hunger, poverty and alienation. No, I won't occupy. But the sound of sirens and crunch of army and police boots strike a similar note. But the sensation of hunger and joblessness are all too familiar. But the violence against bodies and livelihoods causes us to Bleed the same. While, I will not occupy, I will stand with you—use my body as a barricade in allegiance with yours. Against the violence of militarism, capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy and homophobia. Against the violence of war, the destruction of land, and the rape of bodies. No, I will not occupy, but I will stand with you. I will chant slogans and hold signs because together, if you listen and I speak, we can end occupation.

Occupy Oakland. General Strike, Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011

<http://www.occupypoetry.net>

# 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.

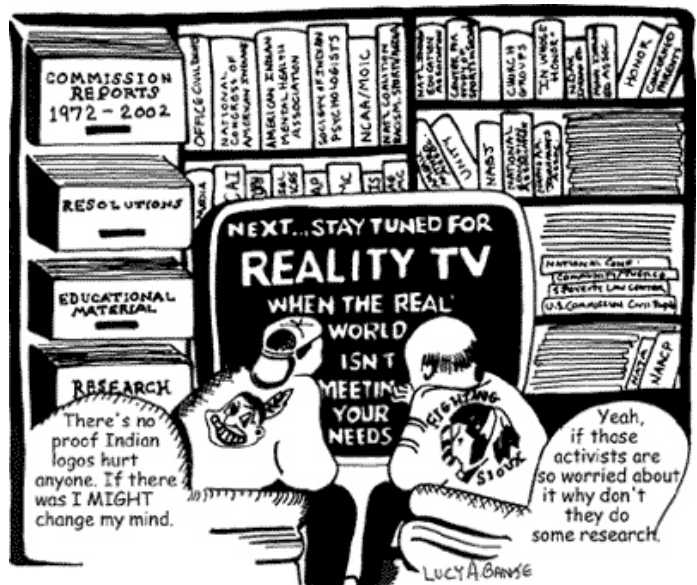
It’s been said that a change in mascot in Talawanda schools would cause less athletic booster support from parents. But are we playing sports for a mascot or because we love playing sports? Would parents stop supporting their kids just because of a mascot change? We must remember that parents are there 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 Tetters, 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.

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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.**