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THE FIGHTING SIOUX LOGO & ME

By Erich Lonjaie, Ed. D.

The last couple of months, I suddenly found myself at the forefront of the anti-Fighting Sioux nickname and logo here on Spirit Lake, which surprised me. It was not my intention to emerge as a voice or face of the anti-logo movement. However, I also refused to remain silent on something I truly believe is wrong.

I wrote a letter or two to the editor and reluctantly engaged in debates on the logo while taking classes at the University of North Dakota (UND). Occasionally, I have tried to "educate" Indians and non-Indians as to why I am morally opposed to the logo. Why? Because, many years ago, I accepted the fact that we Indians did not have the political clout to change the logo; therefore, I became patient, content in the knowledge that the logo would eventually change, if not during my lifetime then in my children's lifetime.

Following a lawsuit brought by the university, the National Collegiate Athletic Association and UND came to an agreement which mandates that UND has to obtain approval from the North Dakota tribes – the Spirit Lake Sioux and the Standing Rock Sioux – within three years (by 2011) or stop using the logo. Since that ruling the Ralph Englestad Foundation has begun subversive and

underhanded tactics to get the logo on the ballot on these two reservations.

As the controversy heated up, I wrote several pieces on the subject, which really irritated the pro-logo supporters. My latest piece, titled "Common Myths About the Logo," generated dozens of racist comments in the comment section of the Grand Forks Herald's online version. Many of those comments were directed at me.

The pro-logo supporters have not been idle either. Over the last couple of months, they stepped up their usual efforts. They continue to parrot familiar rhetoric like: The Fighting Sioux nickname and logo honors us; that "they" will help us with scholarships; and the laughable argument that there is no racism in North Dakota. Following this propaganda-filled campaign, a petition was presented to the Spirit Lake tribal council to put the issue on the ballot.

However, for me, the logo issue is much more complicated than the basic arguments of both sides. It goes to the essence of who I am. My beliefs, my

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values, my upbringing and even my spirituality all have an impact on how I view the Fighting Sioux logo issue. Let me explain:

As a 55-year-old (soon to be 56) Dakota, born and raised on the Spirit Lake Nation, the reasons for my opposition to Indian logos and mascots started in my childhood. My late mother, Mercie Jerome, was a fluent Dakota speaker who did not learn to speak English until she was nine years old. Born in 1922, when racism against Indians was rampant, she did what she had to, to survive in a "White man's world." However, she never relinquished her "Indian-ness" as some did to make it easier for them. She was happiest when she was visiting (laughing and joking) with her sisters or other tribal members in the Dakota language. In spite of the extreme poverty she lived in, she was proud of who she was.

"We're Sioux," she would proudly say. "Never be ashamed of who you are."

She could not comprehend why some Indians, for whatever reason, tried to forget they were Indian and began to act, talk, and live like the "White man." She instilled in me the pride of being Indian and, as a result, I was against the logo, even before I was aware there was a logo.

It is this pride in who I am that enabled me to obtain three degrees from the University of North Dakota despite the racism I encountered there. Contrary to what some may think encountering racist behavior spawned by the

logo made me even more determined to succeed. Furthermore, as a resident of North Dakota, I have just as much right as anyone to attend UND, and I was darned if I was going to let a few racist yahoos stop me from reaching my goals.

At what point does one realize being an Indian makes you different? For me it was when I started kindergarten in 1959, I was 5 years old. I soon noticed there were many different types of Indians. Some were dark complexioned like me, while others had varying degrees of skin and hair color. But we were all Indian while all our teachers were Caucasian, with the exception of my kindergarten teacher – an African American woman named Miss Daggs – and my six-grade teacher, a Chippewa Indian from Red Lake. We students knew we were different from them simply because of our skin color. Although we knew our teachers, we really didn't know them. They appeared to come from another world, a world so different from ours.

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In grade school, I had a friend who came from a large family. He and his brothers and sisters did not do very well in school. As we grew older, people looked down on him and his family because they were considered "backward." However, the family was unrepentant. They looked down on everyone else because they were one of the few families in which all the family members spoke the Dakota language at home. They sang "Indian" all the time often irritating their neighbors with their loud voices while singing. Many members of this family have since gone to the Spirit World, including my friend, but I still remember how sitting at the drum with them made me feel proud to be Indian.

Between my mother and my friend and his family, I became very proud of who I was. This pride led me to read everything about Indians that I could get my hands on. By the time I graduated from high school, I had read every book I could find on Indians. Back then; the only material I could find on Indians was limited mainly to famous Indians, the Indian Wars, and the treaties and reservations. Nevertheless, what I read made it really clear our ancestors were tricked, cheated, intimidated, to giving up most of their land. As I learned about our history – from the courage of our warriors and the honesty of our people to the perseverance to endure enormous hardships and the always-present generosity – my pride in who I am grew.

My stepfather worked for many of the area farmers, as did I when I became older. Many of them treated us like second-class citizens.

Because of this treatment, my mom acted "different" - quieter, less open with her true opinions - when she was around these individuals, and I did too. By this time, I was well versed in our history and being treated as second-class citizens, when I knew our proud heritage, made me determined to never let myself be treated as a second-class citizen when I grew up. It's a promise I have kept to this day.

The latest example of Indians treated as second-class citizens occurred in 2006, when UND students painted their faces and used gunnysacks to imitate loincloths and posted these disgusting pictures on the Internet. It reminded me of the same disrespect their parents showed my mother when I was a child. In many respect things haven't changed since I was a young boy, and I vowed to continue to fight against racist practices.

People may criticize me and tell me I am living in the past. "Get over it," they say.

I recall a specific instance when I was attending UND and the Fighting Sioux logo issue came up in class as it did many, many times while I was a student. There were five Indians and around 20 non-Indians in this class. The usual rhetoric was slung back and forth between my Indian companions and white students. As usual, I stayed out of the discussion until one white person said smugly, looking down his nose at us;

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“Don’t hold me accountable for something that happened 100 years ago.” I could not contain myself and told him, “Well, as long as you continue to treat me the same way Indians were treated 100 year ago, you bet I will hold you accountable.”

After more heated debate with this individual, I told him, “If you truly want to honor me, treat me the same way you want to be treated. Wait on me promptly when I am in your stores and cafes, and don’t follow me around like I am going to steal everything that isn’t nailed down.”

How many Indians who support the logo can say they sat through class after class where thinly veiled racism was the norm and still received three degrees (bachelor’s, master’s and doctorate) from the University of North Dakota? I have also been a third grade teacher, an adult basic education teacher, an Even Start Director, a tribal college academic dean, a tribal college president, and now own my own company. Anyone living in the past would have not been able to accomplish the goals I set out for myself. Finally, I spend at least 50 percent of my time off the reservation socializing with my many non-Indian friends. I am not living in the past. I

wonder if those who are content with the logo are?

A lot of people accuse me of being prejudiced against white people to which I respond by saying, just because I’m pro-Indian and fight very hard for Indian causes does not make me prejudiced. I believe most Indian people once they are educated on the history of the logo, the harm stereotypes do to our Indian children and how the logo continues to be a vehicle for racist behavior will change their minds about accepting the image.

I also realize no matter what type of evidence (testimonies, news stories, etc.) is presented that proves beyond a doubt how hateful, harmful, and degrading the logo is to Indian people, there will always be some Indians who will disregard all the evidence they hear and continue to support the logo anyway. They will continue to feel pride when they hear the Wasicu (white people) shouting "Fighting Sioux" and see them wearing clothes with the "Fighting Sioux" emblem.

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However, one thing I do not understand, why would they want to legalize a practice that brings hurt and harm to other Indians? Especially when the ones most hurt by their support of the logo will be young Indian people who attend school at UND.

For those Indians, who support the logo I have this warning, unless you tattoo "I'm a Fighting Sioux Supporter" on your forehead, there will be times when you will be mistaken as "just another Indian." You will be treated accordingly by those few fanatical non-Indian Fighting Sioux logo supporters that are left. My colleague Donna Brown experienced this discrimination firsthand. Donna had a neutral stance on "Fighting Sioux" until she made the mistake of attending a hockey game at the Ralph Engelstad Arena. The horrible treatment she received there changed her mind about the logo and she became one of its most vocal anti-logo individuals. (To read Donna's story go to this website.)

<http://www.und.nodak.edu/org/bridges/brown.html>

However, what is perhaps most interesting about this "debate" comes to light in Herald reporter Wayne Nelson's blog

(<http://www.areavoices.com/waynenelson/?blog=45768>). Nelson writes about "a new look for Sioux football," saying:

UND spring football is right around the corner. So, there is no better time to unveil what UND's new football uniforms will look

*like when the Sioux take the field Sept. 5 at Texas Tech. The changes aren't radical. But there is one noticeable difference. The Sioux logo no longer is included on either the home green or road white uniforms. **The lack of the Sioux logo and nickname will become the norm on most UND uniforms as the school continues to move forward in its Division I transition.***

Because of Ralph Engelstad Arena General Manager Jody Hodgens and the Ralph Engelstad Foundation's last desperate effort to keep a racist logo, are we Indians fighting each other over an issue that has already been decided but not officially announced?

In closing, here is what my former business partner who once lived in North Dakota and now lives in Los Angeles had to say about the logo issue,

"This whole issue and behavior makes the people of North Dakota look extremely ignorant and racist

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to those in other parts of the county. I live in Los Angeles and my daughter lives in Boston. We both read this, including the article by Donna Brown that you linked to and we were appalled. We were discussing this article and both of us agreed that those people at the hockey game may tell themselves that their behavior is acceptable and normal but I can guarantee you that, to most of America, it is definitely NOT."

NO COMMENT

Each month, we will be including quotes from the participants in the Ethics course. You can also see these posted on the

From the Tribal Leaders Council Forum: <http://www.spiritlakeconsulting.com/tribal/>

1. Alcohol & Drug abuse- when our leaders, both tribal government and community business people are using these vices themselves and making money off these "weapons against Indians". The reservation statistics of deaths related to alcohol and drug use are staggering, for example: car accidents, cirrhosis, domestic violence, murder, and crimes. We've never had so many babies being born with birth defects. How will we ever survive as a healthy tribe in the future? It is morally unforgivable that some of our leaders love the white man's money more than their own people.
2. Lack of Separation of Powers within our branches of government especially when the people have no recourse in our tribal courts against the unethical conduct of the tribal council and their program administrators.
3. Lack of respect for our Chippewa culture, tribal history, Chippewa & Cree languages, sacred traditional ceremonies because of the strong affliction of our people with mainstream Christian religions who still won't allow it in their churches and the assimilationist policies of the BIA. The past 5 generations of tribal members have long suffered humiliation and been made to feel ashamed of their 'Indianess' because of the lack of ethics of the BIA & churches.

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Introduction to Ethical Issues on Indian Reservations

The Introduction to Ethical Issues on Indian Reservations is still available on line FOR FREE for a limited time only. If you were enrolled in our first course and did not finish, we are emailing to you a username and password that will allow you to finish the course at no cost.

A few people have asked if this means that if, they don't finish the course by the end of April they will be charged. No. That would be unethical. Your password will quit working on May 1, so please do try to finish. We are very interested in your ideas.

If you want to enroll and take the on-line course while it is still available at no charge, please email :

ericstev@spiritlakeconsulting.com to be added to the course participants. It takes from 6-12 hours to complete and can be done at your convenience.

The Tribal Leaders Council Forum, with discussion on ethical issues, is available to the public here:

<http://www.spiritlakeconsulting.com/tribal/>

Post your own opinions or just read everyone else's.

New pages have been added lately, particularly on tribal government to the Tribal Leaders Wiki <http://tribal-leaders.wikispaces.com/>

Check it out. Feel free to add your own pages.