**Among Mass. Natives, Mascot Issue Reveals A Mix Of Pride And Pain**

July 13, 2017 [Max Larkin](http://www.wbur.org/inside/staff/max-larkin)

At the annual powwow of the Wollomonuppoag Inter-Tribal Council in Attleboro, dozens of native people and their guests take time to dance, buy and sell goods, and talk.

But ask about mascots, and you get steered to an elder.

Here, that's a woman named Whippoorwill. She recently turned 80. She's wearing a baseball hat that says "Native Pride."

But Whippoorwill sees no conflict between that pride and the three dozen or so Massachusetts schools that have teams called the "Redmen," the "Red Raiders" or the "Indians."

If anything, she says, it's a sign of respect. "Because of course you don't want your team to lose! So you pick on people who can stand up and be brave. I think of it as a compliment."

The older powwow attendees agree: The mascots don't offend them if they're presented respectfully.

In Massachusetts, those images are everywhere -- not just as mascots, but on [our state flag](http://www.sec.state.ma.us/pre/presea/sealhis.htm) and in public art across the commonwealth.

But as a group of citizens [propose banning such mascots at Massachusetts schools](http://www.wbur.org/edify/2017/06/06/native-american-mascots-legislation), thousands of native residents are divided — sometimes pitting the young against the elders.

Even at the Wollomonuppoag powwow, a generation gap is on display.

A group of teenagers sitting on picnic tables in the shade say they all feel wounded by the mascots.

Like 13-year-old Kateri Silva. She says she's proud to be native too, but that she doesn't feel a lot of respect coming from her classmates. She says every day on the bus people make war whoops in her direction, "or call me 'Pocahontas' if I wear my hair in braids."

Kateri and her friends agree that calling teams the "Redmen" feels like another way of singling natives out -- and ignoring their presence in today's America.

"They wouldn't be like, 'Oh, the Yellow Men, the Black Men,' " Kateri says. "It's because we've been stomped on for so many years."

The debate over native-themed mascots dates back [nearly 50 years](http://www.dartmouthsports.com/ViewArticle.dbml?ATCLID=590538), but it's come to a head this year in Massachusetts after a group of citizens introduced [a bill](https://malegislature.gov/Bills/190/SD1119) that would bar the practice at public schools statewide.

"I gotta be honest with you," says Rep. Jim Miceli, "it's political correctness gone awry." Miceli, a Democrat who represents Tewksbury, home of the so-called Redmen.

He believes the bill is "dead on arrival" — in part because of the number of natives like Whippoorwill who came forward to tell legislators that they like the mascots. "I got calls from chiefs, and the chiefs said they had no problem with the symbol. In fact, they consider it a compliment."

Among those supporting the ban is Claudia Fox Tree, an educator of Arawak descent.

If natives of different ages disagree about the meaning of the mascots, she says, it may be because young people are hit harder than older ones.

"Maybe it didn't damage us — maybe we came to understand our identity as more of an adult with an adult brain. But the research is clear about how damaging these are" to young people, Fox Tree says.

She's referring to a series of psychological studies that [suggest](https://scholarworks.iu.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2022/14627/SteinfeldtEtAlTCP.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y) that these mascots aren’t neutral symbols — they have an effect on mood and behavior.

Those studies found that young Native Americans responded to exaggerated images like Chief Wahoo — the grinning, red-faced mascot of the Cleveland Indians — with [diminished self-esteem](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01973530802375003) and less hope for the future. (Other studies suggest that those same images have the inverse effect on young Americans of European descent — they feel [greater self-esteem](http://www.indianmascots.com/ex-17---fryberg-final_disse.pdf) after seeing them, and [are more apt to use stereotypes](http://www.indianmascots.com/kim-prieto---web-etal_effec.pdf) even against other groups.)

What's more, Fox Tree says, the images force a paradoxical invisibility on natives like her — many Americans know the cartoon mascots better than the real people they represent.

So, she says, the symbols bespeak a bigger problem. "What is known about us or written about us is somebody else's story about us," Fox Tree says. "Our own narrative has been taken from us."

That's the concern among native students at UMass Amherst, too.

For decades, UMass' mascot was Chief Metawampe — and the team was known as "the Redmen" — before it was [changed in 1972](http://scua.library.umass.edu/youmass/doku.php?id=m:mascots) after a wave of activism.

Jasmine Goodspeed is a rising senior of Nipmuc heritage. Earlier this year, she [spoke](http://nipmucconnections.com/local-native-news/turners-falls-high-school-drops-native-mascot/) in favor of changing the name of the Turners Falls Indians — it's a high school nearby.

She's used to older natives' opinions on seeing, for example, the word "Indians" on jerseys. "They don't care," she says. "'There are so many other problems to worry about, so why worry about this one word?' "

But Goodspeed says that, to her and her native classmates, language matters. "I think the word is the root of the problem. It's part of the erasure of our people."

Another more recent issue involved a statue of Chief Metawampe that remains on campus.

With other native students, Andreus Ridley, of Wampanoag and Penobscot descent, considered asking administrators to have the statue removed.

But since the statue is neither inaccurate or offensive, students instead asked the university to supplement it with an educational plaque, Ridley says, "so that the statue is not just a landscape ornament but a historical figure, with a history."

In the same way, getting rid of native mascots would represent progress, Ridley says — but it's only half the battle. "What would be great is if we could follow up with that with a sincere curriculum of our history and our contemporary reality."

In Tewksbury, the Redmen may remain for now. But Rep. Miceli says school officials have worked out a deal so that native leaders will come to town and teach that history once a year.