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The Washington football mascot skews reality about the first people

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Column by Jennifer Varenchik

Until recently, I never really paid much attention to the **Native American** mascot issue. "It's not my fight," I thought.

I live in Los Angeles County, home of the largest urban **Native American** and **Alaska Native** population in the United States. When I first moved to L.A. in the 1990s, I was constantly being asked if I was Latina. Sometimes people would get upset because I wasn't able to speak Spanish.

Occasionally, I would resort to sticking two fingers behind my head to act as a feather to illustrate being **American Indian**. Unfortunately, that's all I had to reach for to explain my heritage. Thinking back on those times is what has helped push me to get involved with the campaign to change the Washington football team name.

I grew up in a small, picture-perfect **Northern California** town. I was adopted by Caucasian parents and raised in a loving family, but the one thing I didn't have was exposure to my **Native American** culture.

I remember glimpsing major sporting events on **television** and seeing fans dressed up in the stands. As a child, I wondered if that was how my people dressed. How was I to know? I didn't have any **Native American** references around me.

Sure, I learned tidbits about **Native American history** in school, but nothing about modern **Native American** life. My exposure to my culture as a child was fans on **television** pretending to be Indians and tragic **history** lessons in **school**.

And you know what? That is all most of America has been exposed to as well. Just add casinos, and that's what most non-Native people know about our culture.

In L.A., I began working for a **Native American nonprofit** organization that helps Native youth. I wanted them to be exposed to the real Native role models. We put posters of great past and modern-day Native leaders on walls. We purchased books and DVDs that positively portrayed

Native people, so the youth could see that **Native Americans** are more than **history** lessons and mascots.

A few years later, I had the privilege of being able to travel to Indian reservations around the country with another Native **nonprofit** group. I learned about different tribal traditions, met many wonderful people and grew a deeper appreciation for my culture. I was able to participate in various ceremonies and to hear speeches by some of the same people we had posters of at my first **job**. I was able to connect with many elders, tribal leaders and community organizers about what life



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was like on their reservation.

This brings me back to why I am involved with the mascot issue today. Now, I know better. Most of America doesn't.

In 2005, the **American Psychological Association** called for an end to **Native American** mascots, citing research that the presence of these mascots results in lower self-esteem among Native youth and increased negative attitudes by non-Native youth.

A lot of the low self-esteem and high levels of suicide among Native youth go back to not being able to see positive portrayals of role models in the **media**. Many Native people know that most of America doesn't really know much about us because we're not seen, especially on **mainstream media**.

With our culture being so wide and diverse, we want you to know more than the limited knowledge that comes from rooting for a team with a Native mascot.

Each area of this country has a different climate, and the first people here learned to adapt and live off the land. The Native people of the Northwest lived a very different lifestyle than the people of the Southwest. But with mascot imagery, everyone thinks all Natives are from the plains area. With more than 550 tribes in this country, these limiting images automatically leave out a large amount of **Native Americans**.

Shouldn't we get to choose how we are known? Me, I don't want to be known for feathers, tomahawks and **war** paint. I want to be able to say I'm **Native American** and the likely response is, "Oh, the first people."

Until I can tell people I am **Native American** and receive instant recognition, I will continue to do what I can to decrease negative stereotypes.

Please join me in this struggle. Let's create a new understanding of what it means to be **Native American**.

Varenchik (Tohono O'odham) is a speaker, writer and director. Her Twitter handle is @nativemuse. On July 10, the Native Voice Network launched a campaign opposing the Washington DC football team's name. The network is comprised of Native American families and organizations that work on policies that affect their communities. Her article first appeared in Equal Voice News.



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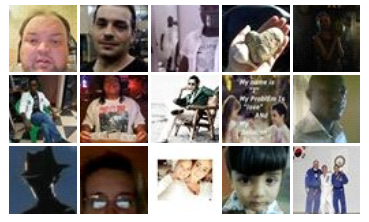
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