

DeSmet students learn about Salish tribe, discuss stereotypes in sports

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For two days this week, lessons at DeSmet School focused on learning more about the Salish tribe who led the school's namesake, a Catholic missionary, to Montana centuries earlier.

DeSmet School's third annual Salish Celebration on Thursday and Friday featured American Indian education specialists and members of the Salish tribe teaching students traditional arts and games as well as some history of the 12 tribes living in Montana today.

They used the lessons as an opportunity to discuss contemporary issues, such as the national debate about American Indian mascots, and to present diverse portraits of indigenous people.

An estimated 70,000 American Indians live in Montana, in urban areas but also on the state's seven reservations. The 1972 Montana Constitution included language to recognize "the distinct and unique cultural heritage of American Indians" and committed to include "preservation of their cultural integrity" in the state's educational goals.

In 1999, the legislature created Indian Education for All to fulfill that mandate. The program run by the Office of Public Instruction helps schools bolster teaching materials, connects them with tribal members for visits or consultations, and offers training for teachers and staff to help them better relate to American Indian families.

"The majority of teachers in Montana still can't label the reservations and tribes that live on them in Montana," said Mike Jetty, an OPI Indian Education Specialist and member of the Spirit Lake Dakota Nation. "So we've still got some work to do."

It is one of several OPI programs that could see a reduced or eliminated travel budget as state leaders seek to cut spending 10 percent in response to revenues coming in slower than expected, confirmed OPI Spokesman Dylan Klapmeier.

A driving concept behind Indian Education for All is to start early, so Montana's future generations will be rooted in cultural respect for the state's original inhabitants.

In Cynthia Randall's kindergarten class Thursday morning, Salish artist Buck Morigeau taught crayon-wielding kindergartners the shapes needed to compose traditional designs.

He drew triangles, circles, diamonds, squares and lines on the whiteboard. He asked the kids in front of him to identify the shapes, but also the images they formed: mountains, reflections in a lake and the sun, among others.

"This one, I actually have on a dancing shield," he said, pointing to a geometric pattern. "You know, we wear feathers and we dance. We do sometimes have feathers all over and our favorite colors and favorite designs. You guys got your favorite colors?"

"Yeah!" the class shouted in response.

"Do you know what a shield is?" Morigeau asked. "You ever heard of Captain America?"

Again, the class shouted, "Yeah!"

Drawing on the board, Morigeau said, "He has his favorite design. It's a star with stripes around it like that."

"I like diamonds on my shield," said one student.

"I like green."

"I like ducks."

And so they drew diamonds and green squiggles and ducks.

As they put crayons to paper, Morigeau circled the room asking the kids to name animals, teaching them the Salish words and sign language.

"Remember how my name is Buck?" he said, raising his hands to his head to form antlers. "That's how you say my name with your fingers."

Down the hall in the library, students from grades 5 through 8 gathered to discuss stereotyping and the ethics of using an ethnic group for a sports mascot.

“It’s an issue everybody can relate to. Even if you’re not a fan of sports, you know they exist, so it’s good place to start a conversation,” Jetty said.

Mascots are the theme of an ongoing unit in the World Language, Culture and Social Justice class taught by Avis Chenoweth, who is Cree.

“We started out the year with self-identity. Figuring out our own identity and what identity is,” she said. “We just started the big questions: What is a mascot? How does it affect people? Does it affect relationships? Does it affect identity?”

Only a few days in, Chenoweth said the students have largely agreed “that mascots are fun and good things.” Yet some already have started to ask tough questions for the first time. One boy, a fan of the Kansas City Chiefs football team, reported to class one day that the team now used a wolf logo in addition to its arrowhead design.

“K.C. Wolf” became the team’s mascot in 1989. Previously, a man wearing faux-Indian regalia and headdress rode into the stadium on a horse named Warpaint. A new horse of the same name was brought back in 2009, but this time carrying Susie, a cheerleader.

“Not all mascots are created equal. It’s not a black and white issue,” Jetty said.

Examples discussed by the students included a California high school that celebrates homecoming with a “spirit dance,” a South Dakota high school that held mock pipe ceremonies during homecoming coronations until last year, and the professional football team in Washington, D.C., named after a centuries-old slur for Native Americans.

They also talked about Montana schools with Indian mascots, noting that Red Lodge and Hot Springs changed their mascots. Yet, some schools in Native communities continue to use names like “Indians” or “Warriors” as a celebration of their heritage.

After showing one television clip of a town performing fake ceremonies and wearing faux regalia, Jetty said, “The people in that community, they’re not racist. They don’t know any better. They just need to be taught.”

He noted that not all American Indians agree about what is an acceptable use of their culture in sports, but encouraged students to think about the difference between honoring them and mocking their religious ceremonies or identity.

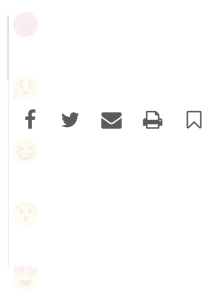
He asked the students if it would be OK for a sports team to have a Catholic priest as a mascot and to perform a fake communion ceremony for entertainment. As a chorus, they replied, “No.”

He also noted that teams that say they are honoring Native Americans can unintentionally encourage bad behavior by fans who attend games in red face, wear fake religious garb or carry an Indian head on a spike as a prop — as one fan did in 2010 to Kansas City Chiefs and Chicago Blackhawks games.

“This is about respect. And respecting everybody’s cultural traditions,” Jetty said, explaining why non-Native students should care about these issues, too.

Chenoweth said discussions like the one about the ethics of mascots challenge students to think critically and communicate respectfully.

“I’m trying to open the conversation. I tell the kids there is no right or wrong answer and you do not have to agree, but if you disagree, you do have to have a reason. Not just ‘cause,” she said. “We’re learning how to have civil discourse. How to disagree with somebody in the proper way.”



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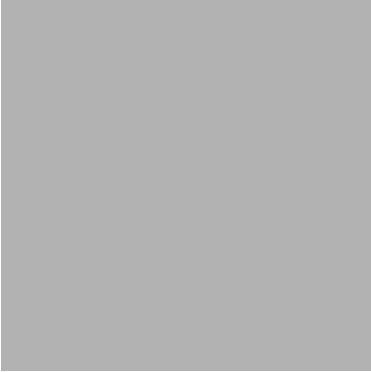
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