

From: **Sage Phillips** <sage.phillips@uconn.edu>

Date: Fri, Nov 27, 2020 at 1:12 PM

Subject: Mascot Letter

To the Watertown Board of Education,

My name is Sage Phillips and I am a member of the Penobscot Nation, one of four tribes belonging to the Wabanaki peoples with homelands located in what we now know as the State of Maine. I am a Junior double majoring in Political Science and Human Rights with a Minor in Native & Indigenous Studies at the University of Connecticut, while working extensively with our Native American Cultural Programs on campus. I write to you today asking to listen to what I have to say very carefully, and take these thoughts, traumas, and histories into great consideration upon discussion of the use of your mascot.

I attended a predominantly White high school, about two minutes away from the reservation, formerly known as the “Old Town Indians.” Although the mascot was changed to the “Coyotes” well before I arrived, I lived the aftermath of the change as I began my high school career twenty years later. I was often questioned about my identity and told I was not an “Indian” because I did not resemble the painting on the wall that was so graciously left behind. I was told that I should “get over it” whenever the old mascot was brought up because our school would have “way more school spirit” if we were still the “Indians.” Oftentimes I would bite my tongue, as I was clearly outnumbered. They did not know of the harm they were causing then, but they do now. And so should you.

What I said to my classmates then I will say to you—use of this mascot perpetuates harm to my Indigenous identity that I am still working to reclaim. We are a race, we are a people, and we are human. With that said, would you as the Board of Education be comfortable entitling your schools to the mascot of any other human race? I am more than willing to bet you would staple it unheard of to implement a mascot that resembles a Black population. I know I am right on this one.

So what should you do? Stop listening to outsiders, stop listening to your community members and start listening to us, the real Natives. The real Natives who live the intergenerational traumas rooting from issues like your mascot every day. NAGA, The Native American Guardians Association was found to have members who are not even Native. They were found to be Japanese, Black, etc., and are not to be trusted in the matter. This organization is more than likely to be rooted from the deep pockets of the Washington Football administration back when they were putting up a fight of their own. The fact that a national organization gave up their position, removed the mascot and did what was right all before your district, speaks volumes.

Maine was the first state in the nation to ban the use of Native mascots, and I am proud of that. The outcome of passing legislation on the matter has given our Wabanaki communities a voice, validation and meaning. Our youth feel more comfortable in a classroom, or on the soccer field not hearing racial slurs being spit their way. Even our non-Native youth have showed up in solidarity, as seen at Skowhegan High School, the last school in the state to hold the mascot. Students spoke at a forum in advocating on our behalf, saying they too feel uncomfortable referring to themselves as “Indians” when in fact they are not. Those students celebrated with us as their school let go of the mascot.

Connecticut has become my second home these last few years-- I just love UConn. What I do not appreciate is that I have had to put in the work outside of my studies to fight on behalf of an issue that should resolve itself. Your mascot is racist, derogatory and dehumanizing, and it must go. I hope my words here leave you with some thoughts as you move forward and ask yourselves if you really want to be accused of being racist in 2020.

Your mascot does not honor me. It does not honor my ancestors. And it certainly does not honor the Natives whose lands your schools stand upon. Stop contributing to harm and start investing in the future of Native youth. The time is now, I hope you find it in your hearts to stand with us.

Regards,

Sage Phillips

Panawáhpskewi (Penobscot)

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