

May 10, 2015

***Nicky Kay Michael, PhD***  
*927 E. Portland Ave.*  
*Dewey, OK 74029*  
[nickykaymichael@gmail.com](mailto:nickykaymichael@gmail.com)  
*(918)766-6299*

Mr. Rick Peters  
Superintendent  
Caney Valley Public Schools  
P.O. Box 410  
Remona, OK 74065

Dear Caney Valley:

As an educator and Delaware Tribal Council member, I am writing to you today to express my sincere disappointment for your decision disallowing Hayden Griffith to wear an eagle feather on her graduation cap and urge you to change this decision post haste. She has brought many blessings to your school and would continue to do so in walking down that aisle with the feather alongside her tassel.

By now, you already know that this is unlawful. Hayden has the backing of the Native American Rights Fund (NARF), which has a long history of fighting for indigenous rights in this country and they will take this decision to the United States Supreme Court if necessary. However, NARF will not have to go that far because the precedent has already been set that prohibiting a Native American student from wearing an eagle feather is against religious freedom and free speech. The only one who stands to lose is you and the injustice you are creating for your school.

As to my background, I am a PhD in History—Native American History. I teach U.S. History (pre and post 1865), Native Americans of North America, Native Americans of Oklahoma, Native American Spirituality, and Native Cultures in our colleges. The rationale stated in your press release only confirms the need for education regarding Oklahoma and American History. By relegating an eagle feather to “decoration” your rationale negates the very existence of Native peoples on this continent. An eagle feather represents the very fact that we have survived and that Hayden is alive today after multiple attempts to wipe out her very existence on this planet. This is another event in a long line of extermination and assimilation practices to make Native people and their rights invisible. If you do not understand what this means, then please allow me to explain.

From the earliest years of contact, Columbus and his Spanish explorers horrifically killed and maimed every Native person they encountered. Spanish explorers read a document called the "Requerimiento," claiming indigenous lands and enslaving survivors. The events from this duration of history is commonly termed the Doctrine of Discovery, which is code for claiming the land based on the idea that military force deemed the land appropriate to take as if it was their own. This was followed by the English, Dutch, and to a lesser extent French colonization. The Dutch waged some of the most violent attacks on Hayden's Lenape ancestors in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Over ninety percent of Hayden's people were wiped off the face of this planet in a holocaust of epic proportions. From 1776 forward, a fledgling United States followed precedent and used "extermination" practices to outright kill every Native American, often for bounty and reward. Not only did the US perpetrate massive scale murder of indigenous people, federal policy then sought to destroy the food sources and lifeways of Native people. This line of thought then gave way to what is known as the "Assimilation Campaign," in the later nineteenth century, purporting to destroy indigenous cultures but "save" the man. Essentially, this policy was meant to displace indigenous culture with Christian, Anglo-American practices. As a result of Assimilation practices, Hayden's grandmothers and grandfathers were sent to Indian Boarding schools where they were punished and flogged severely for speaking their Lenape language or practicing anything Lenape. Let's not mince words when I state that this was the worst massive scale child abuse policy this country has seen and it has almost destroyed our language and culture. Our Grandparents to this day still have trouble articulating the trauma that they endured. Moreover, Hayden's Grandparents also lost their land and livelihoods with Oklahoma statehood during the Sooner and Boomer land runs.

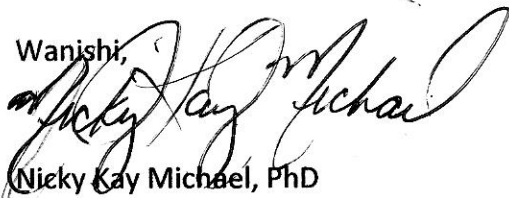
While these episodes are commonly known in history and Native American studies and should be common knowledge in most of our Oklahoma education institutions, we know that this is not the case. What is even less known is that Hayden's tribal women also experienced the trauma associated with health services that forcibly sterilized our Native women up through the 1970s. Additionally, up through the 1980s, the United States also enlisted massive scale adoption of Native babies to mainstream Americans to keep these children from perpetuating their Native cultures.

If all of this were not enough to justify Hayden's right to wear that feather, let me further explain what this means as an indigenous woman today who is now an elected official of my Tribe, the very Tribe for which Hayden is at your school representing. You see, she is not just one. Hayden is the embodiment of all our people. When she walks down that aisle, she is all of us. We therefore provide her with all the accompaniments fitting of an educated Delaware woman. She will walk out into this world with a degree to serve and protect her family and her people. More, a mother who lost her very own daughter gave this feather to Hayden asking Hayden to follow her daughter's path by wearing it. The daughter Hayden is following was one of the most beloved young women in our Tribe.

One last point I am offering; I have been blessed to graduate from some of the most prestigious Universities in this country. Not only did I wear an eagle feather while receiving the hood for my PhD, I also had one for my MA from Oklahoma State University and my BA from Stanford University. For each of these ceremonies, we were also given many other Native accolades, such as a star quilt and ribbon work sashes. Yet, the depth of our identity and the spiritual significance at graduation is most expressed in the eagle feather Hayden has been blessed to wear.

Again, I believe the only one who will lose in a decision disallowing Hayden to wear her eagle feather, is your school and the students you represent. You will be on a national stage for injustice for years to come if not forever in history books. Oklahoma is better than this. You are better than this.

Wanishi,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nicky Kay Michael". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "N" and "M".

Nicky Kay Michael, PhD

Delaware Tribe of Indians, Tribal Council Secretary  
Lenapeowski Foundation Chairwoman