

# more than a mascot

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November is Native American Heritage Month. In celebration, the Multicultural Affairs Center brought students from Washington University in St. Louis to campus last week to host a presentation called “American Indian Mascotry and the Effects of Stereotyping on AI Youth,” as well as a student panel the next day.

Truman State alumna Miquela Taffa was one of the Washington University speakers. Taffa said she is Laguna Pueblo — from New Mexico — and Quechan, from the border between California, Arizona and Mexico. She said a lot of the presentation’s focus was on the mascot of the Washington Redskins NFL team, and how Americans are consuming ideas from the media that are stereotypes about Native Americans.

“It’s creating this false image about what we are and who we are supposed to be,” Taffa said.

Taffa said this stereotyping of Native Americans can have negative impacts on Native American youth, such as effecting their self-esteem or success in school.

Taffa said Native American youths have the greatest suicide rates in the country per capita, face high alcoholism and deal with substance abuse.

“You think it’s something that’s just at the team level, but when you have people yelling ‘Kill those Indians!’ or ‘Trail of Tears round two!’ — the type of slogans that go into these games, it’s disparaging and oppressing an entire culture,” Taffa said.

Other topics discussed during the presentation included the sexualization of Native American women, especially the NFL Washington team cheerleaders, who dress up as Indians.

Taffa said student response to the presentation was positive and students asked intelligent questions afterward.

Discussing these issues is important for undergraduate college students because they are at an exploratory period of their lives, Taffa said. She said this is because college is the first time a lot of people come into contact with different cultures.

Taffa said she thinks all universities need to make sure they have an inclusive, diverse population to make sure they incorporate minority voices and listen to different perspectives.

“You’ve seen what’s going on at Mizzou this week, right?” Taffa said. “This is something that a lot of college students are angry about — not being supported. A lot of minority students are upset that they don’t feel they are supported by their institution. But it’s a movement of the students to claim what they want — they want greater diversity, they want a greater voice. The problem is minority students are often silenced, especially if you go to a predominantly white institution.”

Taffa said she thinks more can be done to solve these issues. One thing students can do is be an ally to others who are also interested in solving these issues, she said.

Taffa said students need to make sure they are standing up for the minority position, or support those who are speaking.

“Students are like shareholders in the institutions, and they have the right and responsibility to demand the changes we want from the institution — you see something you don’t like, you have the responsibility to stand up and say it,” Taffa said.

Junior Paige Howard attended Taffa’s presentation, and also is hosting events in celebration of Native American Heritage Month.

Howard said she and senior Anna Soane have teamed up with the Multicultural Affairs Center to promote events for Native American Heritage Month. Howard said she and Soane will have a table Nov. 16 in the Student Union Building where they will be handing out dream catchers and candy with facts about Native American cultures.

Howard said by handing out the dream catchers, she and Soane aim to tell the real story behind dream catchers and their significance to Native Americans.

“I have Native American roots in my family,” Howard said. “My grandpa gave me his [dream catcher] from when he was a child, and I absolutely adored the thing, but I never really understood it.”

As well as handing out the dream catchers, Soane said there will be a petition available for people to sign about changing the name of the Washington football team. She said the petition is the official national petition to change the team name, which currently has more than 7,000 signatures.

MAC Program Coordinator Jerad Green said the MAC is looking to institute a courageous conversation discussion series next year, which will include a topic related to Native American culture. He said those wanting to get involved this year can do so by spreading the word on campus.

“Letting peers know, speaking about the events in their class, and learning more about the importance of these events and these identities,” Green said. “Just being intentional about the support they show.”

Green said anyone is interested in getting involved with planning events for Native American Heritage Month next year should contact him at [jegreen@truman.edu](mailto:jegreen@truman.edu).

**Above: Washington University guest speakers answer questions after last week’s discussion about Native American stereotypes. The event was put on by the Multicultural Affairs Center as part of Native American Heritage Month. Right: Students listen to speakers at the event last week, which presented information about stereotypes. Native American Heritage Month will include other events throughout the month.**



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