

Interview: *Charlene Teters* on *Native American* *Symbols as Mascots*

In this interview by *Thought & Action* Review Panel member Rebecca Johns, Charlene Teters discusses her experience at the University of Illinois, which uses Native American symbols as college sports mascots, and how that experience led her to become a leader of the national campaign for the elimination of racism in sports.

The University of Illinois calls its athletic team the Fighting Illini and has as its symbol the face of a Native American in a full, eagle-feather headdress. The mascot for the athletic teams, acted out by a non-native person, wears a costume that includes an eagle feather headdress. Neither the mascot's name—Chief Illiniwek—nor the costume represent with any accuracy an existing native people.

Since Charlene Teters began the now national scale protests against the use of Native American symbols as mascots in 1989, the University of Illinois has been adamant in its refusal to end the use of such symbols.

This past February, the university's Board of Trustees announced

a dialogue with the public on the issue. The Board will hold a special session this fall to discuss the results of the dialogue.

Charlene Teters is internationally known for her thought-provoking and unique art creations. She has won numerous awards, including the Person of the Week Award from *ABC World News Tonight* in 1997, for her work and for her activism on behalf of Native Americans.

Her art work has been exhibited in American cities from Santa Fe to New York and abroad in nations like Ireland and Belgium. In addition, she is senior editor of *Native Artists* magazine and a published author. Teters has also been widely written about in art publications.

Thought & Action: Could you tell us how your experience as a grad student at the University of Illinois sparked this campaign against the university's Chief Illiniwek mascot?

Charlene Teters: I think it's probably important to lay the groundwork a little bit. I'm a

Rebecca Johns is an assistant professor of geography at the University of South Florida in St. Petersburg, where she teaches political and environmental geography. Her research is on labor and environmental organizing campaigns in the United States, and she works with the Native American community on a variety of projects. She has served on the *Thought & Action* Review Panel since 1998.

The campus bar has a neon sign of a falling down-drunk Indian, falling over and over and over.

Spokane. I come from Washington State, and I grew up in the city of Spokane, which is about 60 miles from the reservation. The city of Spokane is built on our old village site, so there are places within the city of Spokane that are like little ghetto areas of Spokane tribe.

I grew up in and had always lived in a community of Native people. And, as traditional people, we've been taught that to speak up or cause yourself to be a focus of attention is not something that we do.

I went to college as an adult. I was kind of a closet artist. I was doing all these paintings and drawings, but I didn't do anything with them. Nobody ever saw them.

So I went to school at the Institute of American Indian Arts, and it was a time of sort of reclaiming myself. The paintings I did at that time were largely traditional, conventional paintings—a lot of women, and children. That time was very good for me, and the transition was easy because I went from one Indian community to another.

Then I went to the College of Santa Fe, where I got my BFA. The second step in terms of life-changing experience was the University of Illinois.

Thought & Action: You went there to do graduate work?

Charlene Teters: Yes. Recruiters from the university came to Santa Fe, looking for

Native people to recruit for their program. And they came to Santa Fe because there are so many Native artists in the area. I ended up being one of the three that they recruited from this area.

The other two recruits were a Choctaw man, Marcus Amerman, and Norman Akers, who's an Osage man.

The three of us were very excited. All three of us are the first in our families to get a college degree and go on to work on our masters. So, for us, it was a dream come true.

Thought & Action: How did you first become aware of the Native symbols at the University of Illinois?

Charlene Teters: Marcus, Norman, and I began to notice that everybody had these caricatures. Everywhere you could possibly print the caricature, it was there—on posters, on Coke cans, on people's cars, on businesses, on toilet paper.

Then we'd go to the campus hangout, where all the students go. The campus bar is home of the Drinking Illini, and it has a neon sign of a falling down-drunk Indian, falling over and over and over. It's a caricature. He has a big nose, he has the crooked feather, and he has crosses in his eyes. A big cartoon dumb Indian, falling down over and over again.

***At the beginning of each school year,
the sororities have the Miss Illini
Squaw Contest.***

We said to ourselves, Where the hell did we land? Because our dream is turning into a nightmare.

Thought & Action: Were there other examples of this kind of insensitivity?

Charlene Teters: At the beginning of each school year, the sororities have the Miss Illini Squaw Contest. All the sorority members participate and try to be chosen Miss Illini Squaw. Miss Illini Squaw is then pictured on cars, at shopping malls—all over town.

All of this started to eat away at our comfort level, and we began to feel like we weren't welcome. So as we started to feel uncomfortable, we looked for our community, because we needed support.

That's something I think everybody does. If you're new to a place, you look for your community. You look for other people who are like you, who have your same interests. And so we asked, is there a Native Studies program here? No, there wasn't.

Is there some kind of support center? No. Is there a counselor? No. Is there a native community in the area? No. Is there anything? We started going down the line, looking for our community, and we found out that the only Indian community was in Chicago, two hours away.

And the community in Chicago is pretty scattered, because this is a

relocated Indian people. So we're starting to realize that we are the Indian community.

Thought & Action: Did the university not feel it had some responsibility since, after all, the university had recruited you?

Charlene Teters: We went to those people that recruited us, the two men in the art department, and they said, well, you can't do anything about it, so just keep your mouth shut, get your degree, and then get out of here.

There was no commitment to even retaining us. They went out looking for us, but there was absolutely no effort to provide a support system for us.

We decided maybe that was good advice—to keep our mouths shut and get our degrees—because the campus student population was 36,000 at that time. And it was all very, very white, very, very upper middle-class. Even the Black population was 2,000, which is just a drop in the bucket, when you consider 36,000 students.

Thought & Action: Can you describe how you viewed this world in which there seemed to be no understanding of Indian culture?

Charlene Teters: It was really frightening to find ourselves in this place where they ridiculed and humiliated Native people so openly, and so unchallenged for so many years. This prejudice seemed so

We were basically told, 'Keep your mouth shut, get your degree, and then just get out.'

invisible and unnoticed by anyone, even other people of color, that these caricatures didn't seem to be out of the norm.

Thought & Action: How do you think such a situation could arise at a major university?

Charlene Teters: Because there was no Indian population there to challenge it. Then, because we arrived on campus, just our very presence started to challenge the prejudice. Our very presence was challenging the stereotypes held by those people around us. Just our being there, and not even opening our mouths, was starting to make some people feel uncomfortable.

The first one who addressed the stereotyping and insensitivity was Marcus Amerman, who lived in one of the student housing facilities. So he had to live with it more than the other two of us who lived off campus in our own homes.

Marcus couldn't take it. He was just so angry at what was happening around him. He was attending the university to work on a masters degree, and he was confronted with these stereotypes every time he went down to eat, every time he left his room.

So he wrote a letter to the *Daily Illini*, the student newspaper, and he was targeted almost immediately.

Thought & Action: What do you mean he was targeted?

Charlene Teters: Marcus was getting hate calls. How did he dare challenge the use of this Indian mascot!

When he left his room to go wash his clothes, or go eat, people would follow him down the hallway and slap themselves in the face and yell "woo-woo-woo."

So Marcus left the masters program and the university after two months. He just left in the middle of the night, packed everything and left.

He didn't tell anybody, and as they broke the news to the two of us left, one of the men who recruited us said, "You know Marcus left last night?" And he made a joke of it. He said: "One little, two little, three little Indians."

We were stunned, and he laughed. We looked at each other and we didn't say anything.

Thought & Action: What did you think about what was happening?

Charlene Teters: We were feeling very sad and vulnerable. And once again we were basically told, "Keep your mouths shut, get your degree, and then just get out."

So we tried to tolerate what was happening around us. That's what's so dangerous about these things at an educational institution—we were being taught to tolerate racism. The man advising us was telling us—tolerate the racism and

***People from the dominant society
are being taught that it's okay
to tolerate racism.***

then get out.

And people from the dominant society are also being taught that it's okay to tolerate racism.

Thought & Action: When did you decide you could no longer tolerate the racism you were confronted with at the university?

Charlene Teters: When my children asked me to go to a basketball game. The University of Illinois basketball team that year was on its way to the Final Four. And they were really incredible young men. They were so charismatic, and they were local celebrities in the community.

My children were in junior high and high school, and they wanted to see the team play. They wanted to do the same things other kids were doing.

So I said, sure, we can go to a game. But I tried to prepare them for what would be there. I told them people will probably be wearing paint and feathers, and they would do war chants. I said you just have to ignore that stuff, and just enjoy the game.

So we went, and, of course, it was uncomfortable, but we did tolerate it, and we probably would have been fine. But when that mascot came out, he was wearing 90 real eagle feathers.

Thought & Action: Isn't that actually against the law?

Charlene Teters: Yes. I point-

ed this out to the university later. There are internal memos that went around, and the university found out I was correct. But there's loophole in the law that says educational institutions can have eagle feathers for educational purposes.

So that's how they've gotten around it. But they eventually did take that eagle feather headdress off the mascot. But the night my children and I saw him, he had 90 real eagle feathers on, and they were touching the ground.

And the mascot did this ridiculous kind of a gymnastic routine. My kids saw this, and they just sank in their seats, and were just really humiliated by what they saw.

I just couldn't be there and see my children suffer like that and not address that issue.

So when I saw my kids being impacted physically by what was happening around them, I saw clearly how damaging it is when an educational institution commits such sacrilege, and does it so publicly, and what it does to Native people who happen to be in that community.

What I saw in my children was a blow to their self-esteem. And if I didn't say anything or do anything, then how would my kids know their cultural identity is important enough to protect?

Thought & Action: So then you began to stand in front of the

Standing out there with a sign was the only way I knew to tell my children that what was happening was not okay.

stadium with a sign that read, “Native Americans are Human Beings, not Mascots”?

Charlene Teters: Yes, standing out there with a sign was the only way I knew to tell my children that what was happening was not okay.

I thought I would do it one time, and that would be it. But the same hateful people who targeted Marcus came after me. My phone would not stop ringing. It was ringing day and night.

Thought & Action: Once you began your campaign, what did you expect to happen?

Charlene Teters: I was kind of naïve. I was thinking, well, this is a progressive educational community here. They just don't know. If I tell them, they'll stop.

I laugh about it now, because I really did think that those in the university community just didn't know. I thought if they actually heard us, they would stop this disgraceful activity and find ways to change.

But this was not the case at all. What happened to us—and what's happening across the country today—is that as soon as you speak up, you become targeted by the dominant community.

Thought & Action: What is the nature of the dominant community response?

Charlene Teters: The first response is really hateful. These

people are shocked that somebody would dare say anything about these practices they've become accustomed to and they want to do everything that they can to stomp out this challenge.

So the phone calls day and night, and the hate messages, some hate messages directed specifically at me and my children.

This response was also undermining my sense of safety. My son was a high school student. He was 16. He was picked up by the police a number of times, and it was harassment. They would drive him back home. The police were saying, we know where you live, we know who your kids are.

Thought & Action: How did you cope with this intimidation?

Charlene Teters: I felt very threatened. But, in the midst of the hate calls that I was getting, I got two other phone calls.

One was from Kenneth Sterns of the American Jewish Committee, an expert on anti-Semitic hate crime.

His job at the American Jewish Committee is to help people respond to anti-Semitism on campuses, and he was doing a report called *Bigotry on Campuses*. He was monitoring student newspapers—a good measure of what's happening on campuses.

In doing this monitoring, he'd come across a whole bunch of

There was a whole bunch of articles on me in the Daily Illini, most of them trying to make me look ridiculous.

articles on me in the *Daily Illini*, most of them trying to make me look stupid and ridiculous. But, as an expert on bigotry, he recognized this treatment for what it was.

Sterns called me. I was bracing myself for another hate call as I answered the phone. When he told me who he was and what he was doing, I just broke down and cried.

I told him I really felt like I needed to leave the university because I was feeling very threatened and was afraid something might happen to my children.

His response was: If you leave, they win.

I was shocked. You want me to stay here? And take this abuse?

He said if you leave, they win because this is why they're doing this. They want you to leave because you can't really address these things from the outside.

Sterns convinced me. I decided I'm going to make these people make me leave—they'll have to physically pick me up and take me to the border. He started to write about my situation.

The other call was from Tim Giago, the founder of *Lakota Times*, which went on to become *Indian Country Today*. He'd been writing about this mascot thing at U of I for 10 years before I even got there. But nobody ever heard him, really. He asked what could he do to help me. I sent him all the articles writ-

ten about me, all the hateful news articles in the *Daily Illini*, and he wrote a national column.

Thought & Action: Is this when the campaign at the University of Illinois became national news?

Charlene Teters: My particular story became news because these two men started this national movement by writing about what was happening at the University of Illinois. It was a way of protecting me at that time. It was about just keeping me safe by letting somebody other than just this university community know what was going on.

This triggered national interest, and other people began writing about our campaign to get rid of the mascot. Writers began asking me for interviews, and things like that. So it sort of started the ball rolling.

Thought & Action: Was it at this time that a national coalition was formed?

Charlene Teters: I formed the Native American Students for Progress. The national coalition was formed after I had left the University of Illinois.

Thought & Action: What was the general reaction on campus? Did you get any support at all from other students?

Charlene Teters: As we started to demonstrate, it was really very frightening for me, to go some-

It took all the energy I had to try to get myself from the car to the demonstration.

where and then be confronted with hostility.

There were many times when I remember organizing a demonstration and then be frozen with fear, in the car. It took all the energy that I had to try to get myself from the car to the demonstration. Because we were still a drop in the bucket, even though maybe six to twelve people might be there waiting for me, to stand with me.

There were a number of Black students, some Jewish students, and the gay and lesbian organization on campus who realized they needed to be there demonstrating with us.

Thought & Action: How did the local press cover the campaign?

Charlene Teters: It took every ounce of energy I had to go and to deal with the press, which was very hostile. They would ask the same question over and over again, to try to get me to respond in a different way.

I was very quiet, and I would always be very patient. I didn't realize that what they were trying to do is get me to fly off the handle, maybe, just to say something so that they could call me crazy

I would be teaching my class, and I would walk out the front door where I'm teaching, and the press would be there.

Thought & Action: How did the faculty respond?

Charlene Teters: I was the pariah of the community. The other faculty considered me to be a problem.

Thought & Action: Did your getting involved in the mascot issue effect your teaching role at the university?

Charlene Teters: Yes, I was a teaching assistant. There was this pile of complaints against me. I was just trying to do my job. When I was teaching, I never brought up the mascot issue in class.

I was very, very careful, but still, there was this pile of complaints. And they're still anonymous to me. I don't know what they were. The chair of my department brought me into his office and said he would supervise me directly. He said maybe we can put a stop to these complaints.

Thought & Action: Was there anyone willing to stand up for your right to do what you were doing?

Charlene Teters: There was an attorney who came and stood with me at these demonstrations. But I couldn't tell, really, who was my friend and who wasn't. I was afraid of him too. He turned out to be a friend, his name is Brian Savage.

He requested internal memos from the university through the Freedom of Information Act, regarding "the chief" debate on campus. And he uncovered this

***Those institutions that have changed
didn't fall apart when they changed
from a race-based mascot.***

two-inch pile of internal memos of everybody talking to each other about my challenge to the use of eagle feathers.

This was at the upper levels of the university, the president, the chancellor, and people like that, all talking about me and about how they could get rid of me.

They were doing it on paper. Of course, my name is blacked out in everything. The memos showed how they learned it was illegal to use these eagle feathers and how they could be arrested, and it's really funny, actually.

They realized they were in trouble. So they basically then started to take a hands-off approach to me.

Thought & Action: Has the University of Illinois made any effort towards changing the mascot?

Charlene Teters: No, they're really dug in. They did everything, including going to the state legislature, to try to make the Chief Illiniwek mascot the legal symbol of the university. They've gone to incredible lengths, to make sure it's entrenched.

Thought & Action: What do you think the difference is between the situation at Illinois and, say, the situation at Stanford University, where they changed their mascot some years ago?

Charlene Teters: I think it has to do with leadership at the

top. It takes a strong leader to just make the change—because you don't put human rights up for a vote.

This is what decision makers do if they argue that people love the mascot. They want to go a long way around, like Bradley University getting rid of the mascot but keeping the name.

Those institutions that have changed, like Stanford and Dartmouth, the University of Oklahoma and Miami University, they didn't fall apart when they changed the mascot from a race-based mascot to a neutral one. People love sports, and they'll support the team no matter what the mascot is.

Thought & Action: This change from a race-based mascot must be beneficial, don't you think, for the students who are on those campuses?

Charlene Teters: Oh, yes, because then the students finally have something they can be proud of. They may not see this at first, but they have something that they can incorporate into all of their school traditions that is actually very beneficial.

The faculty council voted, finally, to get rid of the mascot after the council did a study looking at all those other universities that had changed.

Thought & Action: But even though the faculty council voted to

get rid of the mascot, the administration wouldn't go along?

Charlene Teters: The administration just blew the faculty off. It made some of the faculty really angry. For the faculty, the mascot controversy was getting in the way of their research and teaching, starting to undermine their research capability in some departments, like the anthropology department.

Some of the faculty who wanted to do research on Native communities would go to Oklahoma. But once the Native community there finds out the researchers were from the University of Illinois, the researchers are not welcome.

The reaction of the Native people is, oh, you're from that university that uses Indians as mascots. And the faculty would try to disassociate themselves, saying, well, we don't support it. But as long as the university wants to use the mascot, that reflects on all the faculty.

Thought & Action: Were faculty concerned about their own self-interest as teachers and scholars?

Charlene Teters: That was the reason the faculty voted to get rid of the mascot. This thing is getting in the way of our research, it's getting in the way of our teaching, and it's getting in the way of our recruiting.

The students would just ignore the real history of Native peoples, because it started to conflict with

the romanticized image that they wanted to hang on to, and the mascot contributed to that blindness. So the mascot becomes a thing that gets in the way of education.

Other students of color don't want to come here, because we're considered this racist institution. But the board and the president lack the leadership to do the right thing.

Thought & Action Could you just close by reiterating why you think faculty should get involved in the campaign to rid sports of race-based symbols and mascot?

Charlene Teters: When racism is being put forward by an educational institution, it really gets in the way of the true mission of the institution, which is to teach real history—and to not reinforce stereotypes.

These race-based mascots are reinforcing a stereotype. And stereotypes are never positive.

NEA Resolution I-41 provides: "The NEA deplors prejudice based on race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender, age disability, size, marital status, or economic status, and rejects the use of names, symbols, caricatures, emblems, logos, and mascots that promote such prejudice."