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Native peoples aren't dinosaurs  
By Rennard Strickland  
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On Sept. 6 The Register-Guard published a story about American Indian artist Jenny "Chapoose" Taylor and her beaded art. She grew up on the Vintah-Ovray Reservation in northeastern Utah, where at 9 years of age she learned traditional Indian beading techniques from her aunt.

Although rejected from the Eugene Mayor's Art Show, the work, titled "Nations," has become a part of the permanent collection of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. Taylor said she looked forward to going to Washington to "maybe get to meet the director."

The same morning the article appeared, that museum director was in Eugene at the University of Oregon School of Law, teaching his first class as Wayne Morse Distinguished Professor of Law and Politics.

The director, W. Richard West Jr., a Cheyenne Indian lawyer, has for the last 17 years served as the founding director and the guiding force of the National Museum of the American Indian. For the next month, West will be teaching classes, guiding a conference on museums, delivering a major public lecture and working with Oregon native people in connection with the UO's Wayne Morse Center for Law and Politics and its two-year program exploring Native American identity and representation.

West graduated from law school at Stanford University in 1971 after completing a masters in history at Harvard University. The son of Dick West, an internationally acclaimed painter and sculptor, West was in his early teens when his family traveled across country from their Oklahoma homeland to the New England summer camps where his father taught art. That summer, the West family went to see the Indian materials at the Smithsonian, called "the nation's attic."

Historically, most of the Smithsonian's Indian art and artifacts were housed in the National History Museum alongside the fossils of prehistoric plants and the skeletons of dinosaurs. Young Richard remembers asking his father why the Indians were with the dinosaurs. His father, a college art professor, replied, "I guess they think we are extinct, too."

With the creation of the NMAI, West, Congress, the Smithsonian and thousands of individual citizens and tribal groups have begun to reverse that stereotyped view of native people as dinosaurs.

I will always remember, soon after West assumed the directorship, a meeting he held with tribal people in the heart of Chickasaw Nation. He told the story of his first visit to the Smithsonian, and proclaimed "We are not dinosaurs" - affirming that the museum would be a monument to living people focusing not only upon the glory of native

history, but the achievements of contemporary Indians and the potential of an even greater Indian future.

It is my honor and privilege to team-teach a class on Native American culture and intellectual property rights with West. Our hope, and the hope of the Morse Center, is that over the next year - through courses, workshops and lectures - that citizens of our community and beyond can come to understand how and why the understanding of native life and culture is so important. Our goal is to help people look beyond the stereotype of "the Washington Redskins," "the Fighting Illini," "the vanished American," "the Last of the Mohicans," and the adventures of the Lone Ranger and Tonto - his faithful Indian companion.

This question of the Indian image is not just academic. Many of our Native American students at the UO were deeply offended at what they regarded as a disrespectful dismissal of their objections to the basketball team playing Illinois, a team with an "Indian mascot." The NCAA is working to address such issues and students retain hope that Oregon, itself, may come to terms with the racism it fosters. Two of the teams on the Duck's football schedule this year, Stanford and Oklahoma, have addressed their own misuse of such images, and many more throughout the United States are doing so.

I am frequently asked why Indian mascots are more problematic than "the fighting Irish" or "The Vikings." The answer is simple: It is the result of United States federal Indian policy. You see, there is no Bureau of Irish Affairs. No Viking agent holds "trust title" to the lands of these national descendants. There is in the case of Native Americans.

The question of mascots, movies and museums is significant for Native Americans. It transcends sports and entertainment. It influences law. It dominates resource management. It profoundly impacts every aspect of contemporary American Indian policy and shapes both the general cultural view of the Indian as well as Indian self-image.

No groups other than the Indian face the legal situation in which their land, as well as their economic, political and cultural fate, is so completely in the hands of others. That is so because of the way in which substantial tribal resources are held "in trust," with the management and regulation, if not always operation, resting with the federal government as "trustee." The result is that the non-Indian in the U.S. Congress and in the executive branch control the fate of Indian peoples and their resources when they legislate and administer practices and policies.

The Indian image is therefore an especially crucial and controlling one because it is that image which looms large as non-Indians decide the fate of Indian people. If the non-Indian decision makers continue to view native people as dinosaurs, as redskins or warriors, as happy hunters on the way to extinction, the policy will be different from what it would be if the decision-makers saw beyond the stereotype.

West will help us understand these issues when he joins Indian rights advocate Suzan Shown Harjo in a public dialogue, "Mascots, Museums and Indian Identity: A

Conversation," at 7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 14, in Room 175 of the Knight Law Center at the UO. West also will give a public lecture, "Native America in the 21st Century: Out of the Mists and Beyond Myth," at 7 p.m. Oct. 3 in Room 175 Knight Law Center.

In the real world of 21st century Native Americans, Indian people have amongst their tribal members highly educated and sophisticated doctors, lawyers, entrepreneurs, economists, technologists, teachers, forest managers, farmers and engineers. From being dinosaurs on the way to disappearance, the 2000 census reported more than 4 million native people.

This story is at the heart of what the Wayne Morse Center will be exploring over the coming year. Citizens of Eugene and Western Oregon don't have to travel to Washington to hear about it - they can join us in the law school to meet and visit with West. Perhaps next time even the mayor's art show will see the beauty of traditional Indian arts that tell an amazing modern story.