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CHAMPIONS CHOOSE LESS HARM

FOR MANY KANSAS CITIANS, ROOTING FOR THE CHIEFS ISN'T REALLY AN OPTION. HOW DOES IT EVOLVE TO A PLACE WHERE THEY ALL FEEL COMFORTABLE? BY EMILY COX

We won. What do we do now? Well, we've got some power here to make big changes. Long overdue changes. This is the time to make said changes.

"They use our people as mascots," says Gayle Crouser, Executive Director of the Kansas City Indian Center, and who is Standing Rock Sioux. "They perpetuate stereotypical negative behavior."

"People have these outdated notions of who we are as people," says Crouser. "The dehumanizing of an entire race of people. Especially here, in Kansas City, where the only exposure people have is to these kinds of negative imagery."

Wouldn't it be nice to celebrate our home team's athletic excellence without also being in the shadow of cultural appropriation? Imagine if we had a team name, mascot, and rituals that did not harm people. Imagine if each time the grand spotlight fell upon us, we didn't have to start from a place of apology.

The Chiefs have slipped largely under the radar in national conversations about racism and mascots, perhaps because the team's name isn't the most egregious slur (I'm looking at you, Washington). But with the use of things like an arrowhead symbol, drums, and the Tomahawk Chop, plus some fans choosing to adorn themselves with mock headdresses and redface, harm is still being done across the board.

This isn't up for debate. This is the situa-

tion. If you're someone who doesn't see how this is harmful, you're quite simply on the wrong side of history. Go read a book, dingus.

"If a NFL franchise today adopted anti-African American imagery or anti-Jewish imagery or anti-white imagery or anything as despicable as what is seen with the anti-Indigenous imagery, there would be an absolute uproar in this country," says Julia Good Fox, Dean of the College of Natural and Social Sciences at Haskell University. Fox is Pawnee.

"This type of imagery is basically a gateway drug to devaluing American Indians," says Good Fox. "And at what cost to those who perpetuate it? Decent folk do not treat others so callously—unless they do not see the other as a human being. And that's what this imagery is essentially about: the continued dehumanization of Indigenous Peoples."

When you've reduced entire peoples to a caricatured, jocular mascot, it is near impossible to see them in their full humanity. And in dehumanizing others, we dehumanize ourselves, too.

"At the individual level, to participate in anti-American Indianism," says Good Fox, "one has to embrace simple denial or lazy logic or go through some sort of charade of mental gymnastics to rationalize or minimize such behavior. This is where the damage becomes incalculable: the overall message for the country is that American Indians do not count. That is, we do not count as human beings."

The harm done by using Indian imagery and culture as a mascot is well documented. The American Psychological Association has called for the retirement of Indian mascots since 2005, citing studies that document the negative effects such mascots have on both Indians and non-Indians. One of the major impacts is on the wellbeing of children. According to the Center for Native American Youth at the Aspen Institute, suicide is the second leading cause of death for American Indian/Alaska Native young adults, at a staggering 2.5 times the national rate.

"I'm an adult and I've got pretty thick

skin, but what—" Crouser pauses, her voice breaking as tears well up, "what bothers me is how it affects our kids. And their self esteem and their identity. To see this ridiculousness in their face all the time, it breaks my heart for them. It's stuff that I could probably shrug off, and just roll my eyes, like, whatever y'all, but ... but our kids. It affects them, for their whole life. How they see themselves, and how they feel the world perceives them."

In 1963, Mayor Harold Roe Bartle persuaded Lamar Hunt to move the Dallas Texans to Kansas City, land originally inhabited by the Osage, Kaw, and Očeti Šakówinj (Sioux). The new team name was selected based on a fan poll that drew over 1,000 different ideas. The Chief was Bartle's nickname, and not just because he was a man in a position of power: he got the nickname as the founder of Boy Scouts' Tribe of Mic-O-Say, a fake tribe created by white men for white boys appropriating Indian customs like dance, dress, and rituals, that still continues today. That is the Chiefs' namesake. That's the "heritage" some of our fans are fighting to defend.

When Hunt and co. chose the name, they also reported that the team logo would be "the head of an Indian wearing a feathered war bonnet." Games also featured a white man wearing a mock headdress riding a horse named Warpaint. After two decades, they nixed the redface and logo. Warpaint the horse has returned in recent years, ridden by a cheerleader before the game and after touchdowns.

While the Chiefs were appropriating these aspects of Indian culture for entertainment, American Indians were still fighting for their basic human rights, including the right to vote and freedom of religion. Crouser was 4 years old when the American Indian Religious Freedom Act passed in 1978.

"There's things that were illegal that people held onto even though it could've got them killed. That we still have language, that we still have ceremonies, that we still have our indigenous songs—the people that saved those for us risked their lives to do it."

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At the same time that her ancestors were persecuted for their culture and identity, non-Indian people were playacting with pseudo-Indian war chants to celebrate touchdowns.

"It's salt in the wound," says Crouser. "It gets on my nerves when people are like, oh it's so PC, you're such a snowflake," says Crouser. "You have no idea what our people have survived."

In 2013, the Chiefs began celebrating American Indian Heritage Month each November at the stadium, featuring blessings and performances from various tribes.

Do these efforts make things any better? "No," says Crouser. "In fact, I almost feel like it has the opposite effect, in as much as it gives the appearance that Indian people are okay with it. And they're not."

While teams will always find individual American Indians to say they aren't personally offended by it, the broader consensus is that this is harmful to the community as a whole. "We have a consortium here in Kansas City of a number of Indian organizations," says Crouser, "and collectively, the Indian organizations that are serving Indian people don't agree with [the team using] any of it."

As with any group of people, American Indians have a wide variety of personal opinions about team names, mascots, and the like. By finding a few, the Chiefs give themselves a stamp of approval without making any fundamental changes to their organization. (In a similar vein, they have asked TV broadcasters to not air fans wearing redface and head-dresses, but they have not actually banned fans from wearing them in the stadium.)

"Does the Hunt family sincerely believe that such participation cancels out continued anti-American Indian practices?" says Good Fox. "If anything, I suspect these events have their roots in either cynicism or arrogance. They are offering false penance to themselves and to those who deliberately choose to engage in anti-Indigenously activity."

It is not a good sign that as recently as June 2019, in an Instagram photo, Chiefs owner Clark Hunt posed with his son while both wearing mock headdresses after the

younger was selected as "Cherokee Chief" at Bible summer camp. The post was later deleted.

What would it look like to right the wrongs that have been done? "Best case scenario," says Crouser, "they change their name and stop using a race of people as their mascot, their theme."

"It's not that we're trying to be everybody's big downer," says Crouser. "We're not trying to dim anybody's shine. I can appreciate people being proud of their team and wanting to celebrate with their community. I get that, and I understand that."

"How about the Kings?" she says. The team could continue using the Kingdom marketing that's been popular of late. (Simply calling it the Kingdom would also soothe word nerds like me, as 'Chiefs Kingdom' is utter nonsense—technically the territory a chief rules over should be called a chiefdom.) Crouser suggests they could even rebrand the arm-swinging anthem, reimagine it as a king's sword making a knighting motion.

Or perhaps we could be the Wolves and keep beloved KC Wolf around. Another fan poll is a good option—get people excited about generating new ideas (and, obviously, eliminate entries that use a race/ethnicity as mascot or are otherwise derogatory).

A shared team anthem is an engaging communal experience, an opportunity to show your support and rattle the whole stadium. Hearing the chop ring out during the Super Bowl was impressive, but wouldn't it be far more celebratory and powerful to have such a song that didn't simultaneously do harm to a whole lot of people?

I say we scrap the chop altogether and collectively adopt a new fight song, one I've already heard played a lot in recent weeks: Tech N9ne's "KCMO Anthem." Its catchy "K-C-MO, ro-oll" is easy enough for thousands to sing together, and those low O tones will feel similarly dominating to the song that accompanies the chop (but like, without the racism). Plus, we'd be repping a local artist, which is more than we can say for the Chop, which originated with Florida State's marching band.

KCMO Anthem's hook samples the tune of March of the Winkies from Wizard of Oz, so if anyone's nostalgic for a certain late 90s soccer team name, maybe the Chiefs could become the Wizards.

The point is: There's a lot of ideas, infinite possibilities. We can use our imagination to create new rituals to get excited about. It's more inspiring to think of what we could collectively imagine as a path forward than what imaginary racist history we keep rallying behind, simply because no better idea has been presented.

The team has an opportunity to do right, to be a leader in the NFL, to be a model for actually honoring Indian people by choosing to not reduce them to a costume or mascot. The team could be on the right side of history here. And it's quite possible they'd gain fans doing so.

"There'd be a lot more people who could be proud of the team," says Crouser. "They would gain fans. Ultimately some people might grumble, they might be a little mad about it, but they're not gonna stop watching football. They're gonna keep coming back. Even if they're mad for a season, they're gonna come back. Because this is Kansas City and people love their football. I don't see it having a tremendous downside for [the team]."

The players might be able to nudge the team in the right direction. "The NFL players have a tremendous amount of collective power," says Good Fox. "My dream is that they will understand what I am saying, what so many others are saying, and will work within their systems to remove derogatory imagery and practices."

Change is hard. Sports can be a sentimental thing. But change is also inevitable. So why not do the right thing, as soon as possible? What might ease the transition? "If the team were on board with it," says Crouser, "and asked some of their star players to say, hey, I need you to help me make this change ... People would do anything for Patrick Mahomes. They would do anything." (If you're reading this, Pat, it's true: We'd do anything for you.)

For those who want to root for the

hometown football team without tacitly accepting the mascot and imagery affiliated with the team, Julia Good Fox has some suggestions on how to take action:

"Start a respectful letter-writing campaign to the players, the Hunt family, and Roger Goodell. Advocating against this imagery is low-hanging fruit. It's easy to do. Make it a habit until the imagery is removed."

What's more, when you see folks protesting this imagery at the stadium or elsewhere: "Don't look away. Please join in. It may be an eye-opener to experience what these courageous individuals go through fighting for the dignity of American Indians."

Of course the issue runs deeper than just football teams or individuals in costumes. Our education system and media do not offer much substance on both the history and present experiences of American Indians.

"At a fundamental level, the imagery is the result of a lack of meaningful education," says Good Fox. "Start introducing the subjects of treaties, Tribal sovereignty and self-determination, colonialism and decolonialism in K-12, and we would see some transformative effects in this country in a generation or so."

Good Fox also encourages self-education. There is a wealth of resources available for those who look. "Partake in more Indigenous-produced media such as news outlets, films and videos, and radio and podcasts. Let's all challenge ourselves to know more truth about each other's humanity at the end of this year than we know today."

This is an issue that should concern all Chiefs fans. "I know not everyone is going in their chicken feather headdresses and painting their faces," says Crouser. "Not everybody that supports the team goes to the really egregious behavior, but we're tolerating it. That says something, the things that we will tolerate as a society, of what people do to other people, speaks to our character."

"I know we're better than that," continues Crouser. "I know we are. I live here. I love Kansas City. I've felt the love in Kansas City. I know that, as a city, we are so much better than that." So, Kansas City: let's be better. **P**

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