

Indigenous Peoples' Day as Replacement for Columbus Day

By Utah Senator Jim Dabakis and Connor Yakaitis

Each year towards the end of January as directed by the Utah Constitution, 29 senators and 75 representatives convene for the 45-day session of the Utah State Legislature. A relatively short session compared with most other states, the Utah Legislature is unique in its efficiency, accessibility and ideology. It is efficient in that the Legislature passes far more bills in 45 days than U.S. Congress often passes in an entire session. The Utah Legislature, for example, passed 528 bills in 2015, while the 113th Congress passed just 297.

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It started in fall 2015 when members of the Associated Students of the University of Utah (ASUU), the college's student government, teamed up with the Inter-Tribal Student Association (ITSA) to develop a way to increase recognition of Utah's diverse Native American culture. The group ultimately voted to replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples' Day on campus, where it is still being considered by university administrators.

The group of indigenous students and student leaders then worked to create a legislative strategy to present the same measure before the Utah Legislature to adopt the alternative celebration statewide. They spent months drafting the bill and its talking points as well as working hand in hand with the native community to gain input and spread awareness. The collaboration of students from all backgrounds dedicated to making a difference in society highlighted the amazing potential of America's future generation of leaders.

Changing Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples' Day is an important step in honoring the first inhabitants of the United States. The celebration of Christopher Columbus is the celebration of the atrocities

committed by his expeditions into an already thriving world and a reminder of the consistent maltreatment and displacement of native peoples throughout history. Replacing this would provide opportunities for education and awareness on native culture and the setbacks many native people face. It would celebrate people rather than alienate and exacerbate them. Utah's adoption of Indigenous Peoples' Day would also place the state at the forefront of a growing movement rather than be the last state to act, as was the case in adopting Martin Luther King Day. While Governor Herbert declared November as Native American Heritage Month in 2015, Indigenous Peoples' Day is not an official state holiday. Utah owes this important change to its seven tribes: Navajo Nation, Northwestern Band of Shoshone Nation, Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah, San Juan Southern Paiute, Skull Valley Band of Goshute, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, and Ute Indian Tribe.

Indigenous Peoples' Day is a movement that is gaining momentum around the country. Originating at a 1977 U.N. Conference on Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations, the movement was brought back to the United States by conference attendees from California (Sriyananda, 2009). In 1990, South Dakota changed Columbus Day to Native American Day. Two years later, the city of Berkeley, California, officially replaced Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples' Day, sparking a movement that has included nine major U.S. cities (Holley, 2015). Success in these cities highlights the growing trend to properly honor America's First People rather than celebrating a biased, euro-centric history that conceals a dark period of history.

Utah's Indigenous Peoples' Day movement took a multilateral approach, utilizing the governing bodies of the ASUU Assembly and Senate, the University of Utah's Board of Trustees and the Utah Legislature, with guidance from leadership of the Native American community. In January, as the legislative session began, both the student assembly and senate passed a joint resolution encouraging recognition of Indigenous Peoples' Day in lieu of Columbus Day on the University of Utah campus. The strong leadership of ASUU President Ambra Jackson, Vice President Anthony Fratto and ITSA President Orville Cayaditto moved the issue forward through the student government. From there it moved on to the Board of Trustees, where it is still being

discussed. Meanwhile, the students took the bill to the Utah Capitol and asked my office if I would sponsor it. From there, our ad-hoc group became fully immersed in the labyrinth of the legislative process.

On March 24, *S.B. 170 - Indigenous People's Day* was heard before the Senate Health and Human Services Committee. Many citizens attended to express support for the bill. Native Americans from each of Utah's seven tribes, as well as students from colleges and universities throughout the state, packed the committee room, the hallways, and an overflow room created at the last minute to accommodate the large group. The overwhelming support was a moving experience for the senators on the committee, – myself included. Testimonies given by members of the native community focused largely on the celebration of a culture rather than the defamation of Christopher Columbus. Despite opposition from the Eagle Forum, a powerful conservative interest group based on promoting traditional values, *S.B. 170* passed the committee 3-1-2 and moved to the second reading calendar of the full Senate.

The following week, the bill came to the Senate floor. Given that bills are read in the order they pass committee, it can be difficult to determine exactly when a specific bill will be heard if there are dozens of other bills preceding it. As a result, I asked for a motion to place a time-certain for debate on the bill, which sets an exact time and date for it to be heard so community members can gather from around the state and show up to hear the bill discussed from the Senate gallery. Motions for time-certain are almost always granted, but this one was voted down in a rare effort to avoid voting on the bill in front of the people whom this legislation affects. In a legislative body that is heavily dependent on politically engaged students as interns, it is interesting that the Senate would cower away from engaging students and the community in a key part of the legislative process. Shortly thereafter, *S.B. 170* was brought to the Senate floor where it was debated for more than 30 minutes. Ultimately the bill failed 10-15-4, bringing a momentous student-led effort to an end.

While many supporters of this legislation saw the bill's defeat as a complete failure, in many aspects it was a success. Students were able to come together with the shared goal of making a difference in society. They mobilized the community and provided emotional testimony before the Senate Health and Human Services Committee. Though the initiative was voted down, it laid the groundwork for future legislation regarding Indigenous Peoples' Day and Native Americans as a whole. Hopefully this movement inspired people of all backgrounds to stand up and make a difference. Despite the racially charged opposition to this bill, students will continue to fight the good fight, making their voices heard and letting the Utah Legislature know they can make a difference. It was an incredible opportunity to work with so many wonderful members of Utah's indigenous and student communities, and this experience reinforced my utmost confidence in the future leaders of the United States.

References

- Holley, P. (2015, October 12). "More cities celebrating 'Indigenous Peoples Day' amid effort to abolish Columbus Day." *The Washington Post*.
- Sriyananda, R. (2009, August 7). "Celebrating peoples of Yore." *Daily News- Sri Lanka*.