Inside the walls of the Lebanon High School gymnasium, students cheer loudly for the basketball team they call their own. It’s senior night, and emotions are high. Almost everyone is dressed in white, with some sporting white face paint — a reflection of a traditional school “white out” in support of their home team: The Warriors.

Most people are engrossed in the basketball game and don’t seem to notice the absence of the school’s longtime mascot — a Native American in a traditional headdress. Some do.

One parent stands alone in the lobby. His long dark hair matches his unzipped black leather jacket that reveals a white t-shirt underneath. His demeanor is calm and friendly, a sharp contrast from the wild roars from the crowd inside.

Nick Stewart lives in Lebanon, but his roots are in Northern California as a member of the Karuk tribe. As an indigenous person, Stewart says he is not offended by Lebanon’s use of the Warrior image. His daughter, Morgan, agrees. The senior is among the 1.4 percent of students at Lebanon High School who identify as Native American. She doesn’t believe the removal of the Warrior image is sign of respect to her culture.

Instead, she said the issue reflects a broader trend experienced by Native Americans: “It felt like we were being erased.”

This issue lies at the heart of a heated debate ensuing across Oregon. Fourteen schools in the state currently use Native American imagery. However, a 2012 Oregon Board of Education ruling, which gave Oregon schools five years to remove Native American imagery or risk losing funding, forced schools to rethink their branding. In the wake of subsequent protests from communities such as Lebanon, the board recently relented and opted to allow certain exceptions: Schools could keep their mascots, but only with permission from a local tribe.

Story by Forrest Welk Photos by Jessica Frink

With its longtime Native American mascot under scrutiny, a rural Oregon town tries to decide who has the right to define the Warrior image.
Students walk past the Warrior sculpture mounted in front of Lebanon High School. Because the state considers the piece art, it is allowed to remain despite new legislation restricting the use of Native imagery in schools.
Right: Yvette Meyer finishes her best seller, a sweatshirt embroidered with the Warrior. Meyer owns Meyer Embroidery, a shop in downtown Lebanon that designs apparel.
The overturn put schools like Lebanon in limbo. The Warrior logo has been phased out, replaced by a generic “LW”. While renovations were being made on the basketball court floor, administration took the opportunity to implement the new look. However, the Warrior branding still prevails in this community of 15,000. The Native American imagery can be found scattered throughout the school and the community at large. Students and fans proudly sport apparel emblazoned with the Warrior logo, and lawn signs with the mascot plastered on them dot the community. Most prominently, a large metal art piece depicting a Native American man on horseback graces the front of the high school.

The latter, considered art by the state, will remain mounted on the building. Despite the prevalence of the Warrior in the community, not everyone takes pride in the image. One such opponent, Jennifer Walter, actively works to educate people about the potential negative effects of culturally appropriating Native American imagery.

“There are older people in this community that are like, ‘You can’t take this away from us; this is our heritage,’ says Walter, a retired lawyer and teacher who formerly taught at Lebanon High School. “Which is kind of interesting because the argument on the other side is: This is our heritage that goes back hundreds of years and you’re disrespecting our heritage.”

Finding a Local Tribe

That heritage runs deep in Oregon, which has eight federally recognized tribes. Historically, the Kalapuya tribe lies closest to modern-day Lebanon. Specifically, the Santiam people were part of the larger Kalapuya tribe, and they resided near the Santiam River, which flows less than 25 miles from Lebanon High School.

Today, the Kalapuya tribe is a member of the Confederate Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon, which consists of 27 smaller bands. Tribal lobbyist Justin Martin said there is no specific representative for Kalapuya.

Grand Ronde, headquartered in Salem, is one of the federally recognized Oregon tribes.
whose official position has been supportive of the Warrior image. Grand Ronde celebrated the Oregon Board of Education decision to allow schools to keep Native American mascots with permission.

Martin said he believes the state has no right to tell tribes what is culturally appropriate or not. In addition, he said that unlike “Savages” and “Redskins,” names such as “Warriors,” “Indians,” “Braves” and “Chiefs” aren’t necessarily offensive.

“We’re proud of those names, and we want to make sure that they stay around.”

- Justin Martin

potential for compromise

That spirit of education and partnership is on display some 500 miles away, in the community of Spokane, Wash., There, the Spokane Indians minor league baseball team takes great care to depict Native American images with authenticity and has formed a unique partnership with the local tribe it takes its name from, attracting national attention. As schools look for solutions, some have pointed to Spokane as a potential model.

The Spokane Indians, a farm team for the Texas Rangers, was named after the tribe during its inception in 1958. Two years ago, the team redesigned its logo and uniforms to

*Percentage of Native American students at schools in Oregon in relation to tribal regions
Lebanon High School track athlete Elizabeth Meyr practices hurdles during track practice.
more accurately reflect the team it represents. Two versions of the logo design now exist: one in English and one in the native Salish language. The Spokane Indians and the Spokane Tribe meet twice a year to discuss how the Native American group feels about the tribe’s representation in all aspects of their portrayal.

“Indians is not just a nickname,” said Otto Klein, the Spokane Indians Senior Vice President. “The Spokane Tribe is very proud as a Native American community to have a baseball team named in their honor.”

Carol Evans, chairwoman of the Spokane Tribe, said the tribe has fully embraced the relationship with the team.

“Whenever they proposed something regarding the mascot, they always come to us to get input. Whatever input we provide, they always utilize it,” Evans said. “They have always been open and honest and really trying to please. We’re in a good relationship.”

On the Court

At Lebanon High, opinions vary on what next steps the school should take.

The student section let out a final cheer as the buzzer signified a Lebanon victory at the last home game of the season. Soon after, students and parents covered the court, conversing and congratulating the players.

Jordan Jeffers, a junior, stood out as a particularly active participant in the student section. His face was covered entirely in white paint in support of his school, topped with a backwards-facing cap. A white t-shirt, which stated “We Will Always Be Warriors” beneath the headdress logo, completed his “white out” attire.

After the game, he gathered with his friends, ecstatic at the win. He said that his face paint was not inspired by any sort of tribal war paint, but rather a generic reflection of school pride.

“I think it’s ridiculous that the Warrior head is something that’s being taken away,” Jeffers said. “It’s something that’s pridelful.”

But Misa Smith, a graduate of Lebanon High and current senior at the University of Oregon, disagrees. Now living in Eugene, Smith said she experiences a level of cultural tolerance that is missing from her hometown. Changing the namesake, she argued, would help rectify that, and spark a “discourse or dialogue of inclusiveness about what people of color go through.”

Meanwhile, Morgan Stewart said she can see both sides. Even though both of her parents are fully Native American, the high school senior said she feels “separated” from her background. Her heritage tends to fly under the radar of many of her classmates.

“They don’t believe I’m Native until they see me with my dad or grandma because they look more Native,” she said.

As Stewart’s high school career comes to a close, she savors every day, laughing with her friends in class, participating in track & field and acting in her school’s theatre program. Her heritage benefited her in her role in the production of Peter Pan, helping her authentically portray Native American Princess, Tiger Lily. While holding theatre near to her heart, she hopes to study biochemistry at her next destination, Portland State University. Reflecting on her time in Lebanon, Stewart said the mascot has not made her feel targeted or disrespected. In fact, she feels pride in being a Warrior, saying, “It made me feel more represented.”

“On the Court”

“Left: Warrior senior Isaac Garber throws t-shirts to the crowd.
Above: Students wear white to support their home team as part of the school’s “white-out” tradition.

“It felt like we were being erased.”
- Morgan Stewart

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