SPEAK NOW

Students raise their voices against racism.
So we teach them to walk proud, head held high and then someone does this.

Dee Dee Marzanares Ybarra
director of the American Indian Movement Southern California Chapter and tribal chairperson of the Ohlone tribe.

A tap through many Instagram stories throughout late October in the Riverside area had a similar theme. They displayed a thumbball of a math teacher, Candace Reed, dressed in a costume headress, frozen mid-dance in her classroom at John W. North High School. Tap into the video and the teacher begins chanting “SOICHAOTA,” a mnemonic device used to help recall trigonometry functions. For several minutes, she dances around the classroom, hollering and making chopping motions. A Native American student in the class recorded the video, which quickly went viral, garnering more than three million views and hundreds of comments on Instagram and Twitter. Community members held a protest in front of North High School the day following the release of the viral video on Oct. 21, calling for Reed’s termination and more cultural awareness in the classroom. Several activist groups attended the event, including the American Indian Movement, the Black Panthers and the Brown Berets. The Riverside Unified School District (RUSD) placed Reed on leave while it investigated the incident.

“Native Americans we are still mocked by a society that refuses to learn our true history and misuses our songs, dances and culture in a jesting, comical way that is not funny and causes deep traumas, especially to our youth, who are being taught to be proud of who they are,” wrote Dee Dee Marzanares Ybarra, director of the American Indian Movement’s Southern California Chapter and tribal chairperson of the Ohlone tribe, in a letter to North High School’s principal.

Ybarra attended the protest to support indigenous youth. She said the harm caused by incidents like these can contribute to depression, trauma, anxiety and suicide.

“When we’re trying to promote the tribe to be proud of who they are — to stand proud — and then someone comes and mocks their culture?” Ybarra says. “That just crushes them. So we teach them to walk proud, head held high and then someone does this. That’s just one step forward and three steps back. That’s not acceptable. That’s not allowed.

“We need to teach these teachers that we’re not going to just sit back and let it happen,” Ybarra says. “We’re here to be here. You do this to one kid, you do it to all of our kids. They say it takes a village to raise just one child — we’re here for all of the children.”

Lauren Manzano, sophomore photography major at California Baptist University and member of the San Manuel tribe, attended the protest as a Native American student. She said her history teachers in high school skipped over the Native American units because they said there simply was no time.

WORDS
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PHOTO
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DESIGN
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Native American
“If it’s not on the test — just know whose land you’re on. Just know there’s a tribe 35 minutes away, my own tribe,” Manzano said. “If you’re surrounded by different tribes, why skip over it in class?” We learn about the people that so-called ‘found’ America when they were just lost at sea. We deem them as important. We don’t deem the first people on this land as important.”

Manzano said she attended the protest to try to make a difference for indigenous youth and that these problems have persisted for too long. She also said Reed has a history of the behavior seen in the video, showing a 2012 yearbook page of a teacher who appears to be Reed in a paper headdress.

“I’m here for students that can’t be here,” Manzano says. “Students should not have to go through this anymore. It’s ridiculous in this day and age, as well as (for) the next generation.”

Daniel “Protector,” member of the Brown Berets, said the organization attended the protest to stand in unity with Native American groups. His last name is the word “protector” — the working class — in Spanish, an alias he uses for his safety.

“Our Chicano identity acknowledges that we have Native American ancestry,” Protector says. “We are very much in tune with our culture, our tribal affiliations. We see it as important to show solidarity with the Native students from John W. North High School. Those were affected not just by the teacher but by the curriculum shown here.”

As of the day of the protest Reed was on administrative leave. Administrative leave keeps pay intact and is often used as a temporary solution until further announcements. Both the Black Panthers and the American Indian Movement called on the RUSD to take action and be decisive.

“We are demanding is for her to be fired and to not be able to teach at all,” a representative from the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panthers said. “We also want her to give a public apology.”

Ybarra set a timeframe for further protests if action is not taken, accentuating the strength of power in numbers.

“We gave them one week to give us an answer as to what they are going to do,” Ybarra says. “There are hundreds, if not thousands, of people waiting to see how this is resolved. We’re going to get more people here if we don’t have answers that are seen as justice for what happened.”

The RUSD released a statement on Oct. 21 that said Reed’s behavior was “completely unacceptable” and “does not represent the values of our district.” In a board meeting that evening, RUSD Superintendent Renee Hill heard public comments and said the district has launched an investigation.

A later statement by RUSD on Dec. 16 gave an update on progress to establish a better learning environment for Native American students. Hill mentioned that the district met with tribal leaders on Dec. 15 to discuss experiences and commiseration of curriculum and potential policy updates.

“We have identified five key areas of focus — establishing a lead group, reviewing and updating policies, defining professional development, and reviewing curriculum with the associated materials, and the last area is actions within North High school,” according to the statement.

The RUSD Equity Board is mentioned to be further utilized in this area, as well as an establishment of an equity team at North High School. Hill emphasized a change in Thanksgiving curriculum back in November, as well as a California Native Leader speaking in 4th-grade classrooms in the district.

The latest statement released by RUSD on Jan. 14 asked for privacy as the investigation and discipline progress continue, giving no update on Reed.