

Editorial and Opinion Page

Letters to the Editor

Curator of Last Year's Art Exhibition Responds to Wilkins Letter

Dear Editor
This is in response to the letter written by Mr. D. Michael Wilkins which appeared in your newspaper on 20 Feb. 1997.

The artist wrote of his discontent over the entry rules of an upcoming juried fine art exhibition which is a part of the Indian Unity Conference (Mar. 13-15). I think it is most unfortunate that the disgruntled Lumbee artist chose to publish his announcement that he would not participate in the art event because of an eligibility ruling which states: ALL WORK SUBMITTED AS PART OF THIS SHOW WILL TRAVEL TO THE GUILFORD NATIVE AMERICAN ART GALLERY IN GREENSBORO.

The project Mr. Wilkins complained of is sponsored by United Tribes of North Carolina and is governed by an official art committee which sets policy for participation in the event. The monetary expense in implementing such an exhibition as the one connected to the Indian Unity Conference is no small amount - a fact which requires that UTNC, a non-profit organization, seek funding sources. The North Carolina Arts Council has been a major funding source in years past.

Any recipient understands the terms of such a grant award.

Any astute recipient, particularly a Native American organization, abides by the terms of the award.

It's relatively clear. The hand that holds the purse, pulls the strings.

It's about economics and accountability, people.

This is the case with the juried fine art exhibition which can only become cost-effective if it travels after its 2-day premier at the Indian Unity Conference in Fayetteville this year.

For longer than a decade I have worked professionally with reputable art institutions and organizations throughout the state of North Carolina and am yet to see one which operates without a standard of rules for exhibition, or program policies. It is baffling that a fellow tribal artist would publicly berate members of a Native American art committee for establishing rules, and whose tasks charge them with promoting the good of the state's native artists.

Guilford Native American Art Gallery enjoys a fine reputation in Greensboro, the city of its birth. It is a reputation which extends way beyond this state's borders. Hundreds of native artists owe the director and staff of GNAAG a multitude of debt for affording them an opportunity to show their work to the thousands of people who visit the gallery each year.

I was at the art exhibition site in Raleigh last year during the conference when Mr. Wilkins reclaimed his artwork. And as curator of last year's juried fine art exhibition sponsored by UTNC, I feel compelled to inform all Native American artists and the United Tribes of North Carolina Board of Directors that Mr. Wilkins was not individually banned from participating in the juried fine art exhibition as he wrote in his published letter.

In his letter to your newspaper Mr. Wilkins wrote that... "it is time we artists stop allowing ourselves to be taken advantage of." As an arts advocate and promoter of artists, I hope that other artists will come to realize after reading Mr. Wilkins's letter that the only thing being "taken advantage of" is an opportunity to have their artistic talents recognized and appreciated. I appeal to Mr. Wilkins to rethink his personal boycott of the exhibition.

The time has come for this fine Native American artist to stop throwing stones. He must instead, sculpt them.

A true native spirit would embrace the letter.

Barbara Braveboy-Locklear
Lumberton, NC

The Way I See It

by Dr. Dean Chavers, President
Native American Scholarship Fund
Albuquerque, NM



A few months ago I wrote in this column about my pet peeves. One of them was about the word "squaw." My friend Muriel Charwood-Litzau, from Cass Lake, MN, calls it the "s" word.

She and her daughter Dawn Litzau, Dawn's friend Angelene Losh, and a small handful of students at the Cass Lake-Bena High School want to have the name banned from all place names in the U.S. They have succeeded in getting it made illegal in the State of Minnesota.

The "s" word is pejorative in the extreme because it refers to a woman's vagina. It identifies an Indian woman by that part of her body alone. It is equivalent to calling her the "c" word. It is only used with Indian women, one of the few such restricted words in the world, I suppose.

The two students, with help from their two sponsors, Ms. Charwood-Litzau and Mike Schmid, bravely organized a Name Change Committee at the High School in Feb., 1994, and started writing letters. Luckily, one of their letters reached a sympathetic ear--at the State Capitol.

Before they knew what was happening, Dawn and Angelene were at the Capitol testifying in support of a

bill introduced by MN State Sen. Harold Finn. He vaguely remembers his mother being called a squaw years ago, and it did not sit right with him. He had not bothered to look up the word, but when the two teenagers defined it for him, he became upset.

His bill, S. F. No 574, states "On or before July 31, 1996, the commissioner of natural resources shall change each name of a geographic feature in the state that contains the word 'squaw' to another name that does not contain this word. The commissioner shall select the new names in cooperation with the county boards of the counties in which the feature is located and with their approval."

There were 19 such places in the State. As of now, all but three of them have agreed to change their names: Squaw Point, where Angelene lives, is now Oak Point. Squaw Lake is now Nature's Lake. Two counties have held out, and garnered some media attention, by refusing to change their names and comply with the law.

Getting there was tough on the high school girls. They had to wade through opposition from conservative residents of small towns. "There were men telling me I should be proud to be called a 'vagina' and that

it is an honor for my people." Dawn said. This happened when they met with the residents of Squaw Lake Village.

"That is not only negative comment we have received," she adds, greatly understating the case.

Yes, there is a regulatory body on such things, which surprised me. But the New York Times reported in its article on the battle by the girls that the U.S. Geological Survey's Board on Geographic Names has found 1,050 places, lakes, creeks, towns, and other things with the "s" word attached to them. This compares to only 143 places named Nigger and only 26 places named Jap, both of which were outlawed by the Board in 1967. Nigger was changed to Negro, and Jap was changed to Japanese.

To get this far, the two girls had to testify not once, but three times, in front of the Minnesota legislature. This was undoubtedly one of the best civics lessons they will ever have.

Still, Sharon Hahn, a member of the board of commissioners for Lake County in the northern part of the state, says "We find nothing derogatory in continued use of this term." She and her allies in the County do not want to rename Squaw Creek and Squaw Bay. Some of her colleagues proposed to change them to "Politically Correct Creek" and "Politically Correct Bay," but the state officials rejected their offer, according to The New York Times, and "were not amused."

It turns out that the two girls and the Name Change Committee are not the only ones in the nation to object to the "s" word. The Associated Press reported last August that State Rep. Jackson of AZ has introduced a

bill every year since 1992 to ban the use of the "s" word.

"He was called 'oversensitive' and criticized for political correctness," the AP reported. Rep. Jackson is Navajo, but one of the main places in the State which would change is not located on Navajo lands; it is the Squaw Peak Recreation Area near Phoenix.

There are 73 place names with "s" word, the AP continued, in the State of Arizona alone.

After winning the battle in Minnesota in 1996, the girls and their Name Change Committee started thinking about national places. One of the first ones they thought about was Squaw Valley, the famous ski resort in California on the shores of Lake Tahoe, the site of the 1964 Winter Olympics.

They wrote to the manager, Mr. Brent McLean, who did not respond.

They then contacted him by telephone. Their letters went to him in October and December, 1996, and the telephone call was in January, 1997. He was non-committal about changing the name, Muriel reports.

"I spent some time on the telephone educating him about the derogatory term and he mentioned that the customers had heard about the campaign and were opposed to the changing. He said that they wanted to keep the historical perspective."

Muriel and the girls have been buoyed up by the media coverage they have received. The AP, the "London Times," the "Arizona Republic," and the "New York Times," ABC Television News, "The Sheboygan Press," the CBS Radio News, Channel 11 News, the "Minneapolis Star-Tribune," "USA Today,"

"The Salt Lake Tribune," the "Duluth Tribune," and "Indian Country Today" have all carried stories about the term or their current fight to get the "s" word banned.

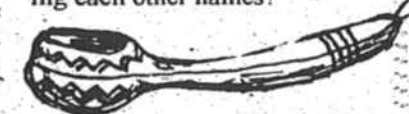
They are particularly buoyed up by an editorial in "Indian Country Today" from 1993 written by Avis Little Eagle. "I am a woman, hear me roar," Avis wrote. "I am not a squaw."

She quotes Dr. Bear Medicine, one of our most honored Indian academics, as saying about the "s" word, "It is a very derogatory term for Indian women. It equates them with sexuality and perpetuates the stereotype the Indian women are loose and promiscuous."

It turns out that at least three Native languages have words with similar sounds to "squaw," all of which have had meanings. Saxon Gouge reports it comes from the French corruption of the Iroquois word "otsiskwa," meaning "female sexual parts." Chief Tom Porter of the Mohawk Nation says in his language the word "ge-squaw" means a female reproductive organ and is very offensive.

Dr. Medicine says the word is from one of the Algonquian languages. The Random House unabridged dictionary says it is from an Algonquian language, possibly Natick, pronounced "squa."

I salute the young women of Cass Lake, and wish them well. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could quit calling each other names?



ALONG the ROBESON TRAIL

by Dr. Stan Knick, Director,
NCP Native American Resource Center

Old Grandmother stands at the beginning of her garden. Even though it is still late winter, already she is planning the placement of each seed and seedling which will become her sustenance for another year. Even though the breeze still brings a chill, the angle of the sun grows higher day by day and warms whatever side of her she turns toward it.

At about this time of year when she was a child she remembers her own grandmother walking her out to the garden plot, talking to her about where the corn and beans and squash and other good things would be placed. Old Grandmother knows that thinking these things through even before the time comes to break the soil is the Good Way, allowing the spirit of each plant and of the soil itself to get accustomed to the idea of what will happen when their two great still forces combine with the forces of sun and water.

Old Grandmother learned long ago to see the transformation coming, see it while the rate of change is still slow. She learned to recognize the first outward signs of renewing life as Spring begins to stir on the old home place. The ground moss near the creek

sends up its first fine green hairs. The dogwood trees at the edge of the forest begin to crack open their first buds. The water oak and swamp chestnut oak begin to muster sap, bringing to tips of gray-brown branches the first shades of what will become a warm glow of color even before the leaves appear.

The birds know, too. Old Grandmother remembers her grandmother saying that it was the birds who first taught the human beings to prepare for Spring. Downy woodpeckers and yellow-shafted flickers begin to pair off, to play preliminary games of chase and court. Mockingbirds begin to claim territory, swooping at other birds who dare come near what will become the nest. White-throated sparrows gather in larger and larger groups, preparing for the long journey to their beloved Canada of which they so sweetly sing all through the southern winter. Goldfinches, too, begin their travel arrangements, gradually brightening their brilliant feathers. Soon the hummingbirds will return.

And soon the rate of change will come faster. One day she will walk out and everywhere will burst with life.

Her favorite paths through winter woods will disappear again, obscured by foliage of sassafras and river cane. It is time to think of the garden.

Again she will put herself into it. Again she will receive herself out of it. All her thoughts of seeds and seedlings, roots and vines will again become the products of her labor. And as she eats them and feeds them to her family, they will become her and her family -- the tissue and strength and energy of them. Old Grandmother knows that she is gardening the Great Circle of Creation, and that the spirit and fiber of the plants she helps to grow will be forever connected to the spirit and fiber of herself and her people. She knows that even though she will not always be here to plant her garden, the essence of it will continue -- will spring again and again to life as coming seasons -- in her children and their children. She knows it is the Good Way. Old Grandmother stands at the beginning of her garden.

For more information about the stories of Native America, visit the Native American Resource Center in historic Old Main Building, on the campus of The University of North Carolina at Pembroke.

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