



We are Still Here: The Importance of Native American Heritage Month

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*"We did not disappear. We did not die out. We are survivors."
Chief Glenna Wallace, Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma*

In the Indiana State Museum, you can find the words of Chief Glenna Wallace displayed on the wall surrounded by pictures of Native Americans from present day and from the past. Present day was the focus of Native Americans: Beyond the History Book, an event held at the Indiana State Museum from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Friday, November 8, 2019.

Fifth grade students from my school were able to attend the event thanks to the Indiana Native American Indian Affairs Commission's Michael Pace Educators Grant. The purpose of this grant is to provide teachers an opportunity to educate students about Native American History in Indiana. I'm grateful my school was selected because I know educators must do a better job of telling the rich Native history of our state, myself included.

My students had a great time during the event, and they learned new knowledge and had misconceptions corrected. A student asked, "Can you show us a picture of a teepee?" Before I could interject, the speaker motioned to let me know she could address it. She went on to explain how each tribe is different. They have different houses. Most importantly, Indigenous people could live right next door to you in your neighborhood.

Most of the Indigenous people were not in traditional dress. They wore their uniforms from work or wore a shirt and slacks. A Native American firefighter said, "I'm a person just like you. I'm not stuck back in history." The stories most students learn about Native Americans are from the colonizer's perspective, and the stories are only from the past. Students do not get the opportunity to learn about what Indigenous people are doing today.

My students learned about Indigenous activism and how they have been fighting to protect the earth from generation to generation. They learned that Native Americans should not be mascots because it is offensive and demeaning. The many presenters emphasized that even though they may dress in the same clothes as my students, their culture is an integral part of their lives. We also viewed maps of what Indigenous people called different mountains and landmarks, not what colonizers renamed them.

There was so much knowledge to soak in. It was important for my students to attend this event because I wanted them to hear about Native history from Native Americans. I wanted them to hear from Indigenous people from various tribes. Most importantly, I wanted to be an educator that exposed students to a correct narrative, so they won't go around thinking Native Americans all live in teepees.

If you are an educator, I challenge you to reflect upon how you have been teaching about Native Americans. Are you only teaching about them during Native American Heritage Month? Are you providing lessons with the Native perspective or the colonizer's perspective? Are you making it clear that Native people are still here living among us? These are the questions I ask myself. We have to do a better job. This [event](#) is a good place to start. If you missed the event this school year, make sure you take your students next school year.