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Continuing the tradition of Chief Illiniwek: The story of Ivan Dozier

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Posted: Tuesday, November 5, 2013 12:00 am

By Kirsten Keller | Opinions columnist | 5 comments

Editor's note: This is part one of a two-part series based on an interview with the current Chief Illiniwek portrayer, Ivan Dozier.

It was the first time he would appear at an Illini sporting event. Even more profound, it was the first time any Chief Illiniwek portrayer would unofficially appear at an Illini sporting event.

As he descended to the lower level of Huff Hall, multiple thoughts raced across his mind. Would security let him through? How would he be received?

With help from his father, he put on the regalia and face paint. After putting on the headdress, the two walked up the stairs toward the entrance to the court.

No. 9 Illinois volleyball had just finished a set against No. 2 Penn State, a match Illinois would later win 3-2.

Two security guards stood at the top of the flight of stairs. Chief braced himself.

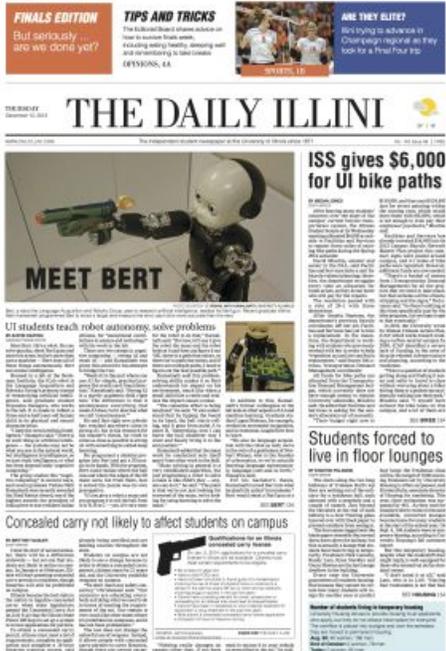
Then, something unexpected happened.

"One of the guards turned over and saw me first and folded his arms and said, 'Hail to the Chief,'" he reminisced. "And the other security guard ... bowed down and said, 'We are not worthy, we are not worthy!' And I realized, at that moment, that this isn't going to be a problem at all."



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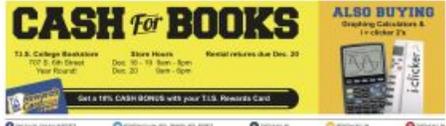
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That was Sept. 24, 2010. Fast forward to 2013, and Ivan Dozier, the current Chief Illiniwek portrayer, is in his fourth year of continuing the Chief Illiniwek tradition. Having completed his undergraduate degree at the University, he is now a first-year graduate student in crop sciences.

"I didn't go around begging people for a grad school spot so that I could stay," Ivan joked.

Ivan grew up in southern Illinois and went to high school in Monticello. Looking at his lean build, moderately pale complexion and dark hair, you may not guess Ivan's Native American heritage. But he is part Cherokee on his father's side, a culture with which he strongly identifies.

"With me, either a lot of people can't tell (my heritage), or people will only notice it when I mention something," Ivan said. "But my dad, he's got braids down to his waist. ... He's not shy about displaying his Native American heritage at all."

Ivan recalled a time when he was approached by a panhandler on Green Street who recognized that Ivan was the Chief portrayer and who also knew he was part Cherokee. The panhandler said, "I'm Cherokee too ... us Cherokee men have to stick together. I read about you; I'm glad about what you're doing!"

What Ivan is doing is carrying on an 80-year-old tradition that ended six years ago. The University Board of Trustees retired Chief Illiniwek as the symbol of the University in 2007, two years after the NCAA banned the University from hosting postseason events as long as it continued the use of the Chief. Dan Maloney, the 36th and last official Chief Illiniwek, performed the Last Dance on Feb. 21, 2007, at the men's basketball game against Michigan in then-Assembly Hall. Maloney's assistant, Logan Ponce, became the first unofficial Chief Illiniwek in 2008.

During Logan's tenure as the first Chief portrayer, Ivan arrived at the University, soon joining the registered student organization Students for Chief Illiniwek.

"Having grown up in the area, I obviously knew about the Chief tradition, but having Native ancestry myself, I also knew it offended some people," Ivan said. "So I joined the organization to learn more about the Chief traditions, so I could be well educated on both sides of the issue."

When time came for Logan to graduate, auditions needed to be held to select a new Chief.

Ivan went ahead and signed up.

When Chief Illiniwek was the official symbol of the University, he was considered part of the Marching Illini. Then, the vast majority of the audition, according to Ivan, was the dance to the Three-In-One, a compilation of three Illinois pieces played during the football halftime performance. Now, half of the audition for the Chief portrayer is the dance, but the other half is an interview that focuses on Native American culture.

"One of the things we really tried to focus on since keeping up the tradition after retirement was making sure people were still educated about Native American culture," Ivan said. "Making sure people know why the Chief was retired, and why people are offended by it."

As the current Chief portrayer, Ivan uses his position to teach other people about his culture.

"If you get rid of all Native American imagery, then people stop asking you questions ... and that's how a culture dies out," Ivan said. "And I don't want that to happen."

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Since the first appearance at the Penn State volleyball game in 2010, Ivan has appeared at two other volleyball games, eight basketball games and five football games.

He decides when to perform, and many times he does not let people know.

It is a surprise that is welcomed by many. When Chief raises his arms above his head just before the Alma Mater is played during the Three-In-One, that appreciation reverberates throughout the hall and stadium with a resounding "Chieeef."

This is a tradition that alumni remember and many current students embrace, and one whose continuation depends on the involvement of future Illini.

Kirsten is a junior in Media. She can be reached at kekellr2@dailyillini.com.

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SteveHandwerker posted at 8:47 am on Fri, Nov 8, 2013.

Posts: 1

People like CaliforniaJ just don't get it and don't want to even understand. Chief Illiniwek, for generations now, has been a performed with dignity and honor, and appreciated, encouraged and supported by Native Americans. For that matter, I seem to recall that the person to portray him had to spend time with a local tribe and learn from them. There used to be quite a few rules for the Chief's portrayer, too.

Never had the Chief "prance(d) around like a court jester" like the funny, foam-headed, goofy mascots of most school.

BTW, Kirsten Keller, keep it up, keep honing your skills! There are a lot of former DI journalists out there to connect with, we're always willing to help/network, etc.

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California J posted at 9:40 am on Thu, Nov 7, 2013.

Posts: 1

"If you get rid of all Native American imagery, then people stop asking you questions ... and that's how a culture dies out," Ivan said. "And I don't want that to happen."

Preserving Native American culture via sports mascots is not a respectful justification for perpetuating these offensive symbols of white privilege and native american subjugation. Having a half-blood cherokee prance around like a court jester at sporting events doesn't accurately represent the traditions and heritage of the first peoples. It simplifies, distorts, and decontextualizes rich cultural practices, and has been said by hundreds before me its offensive.

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benchilada posted at 2:25 pm on Wed, Nov 6, 2013.

Posts: 2

Hey, Daily Illini? Yo, Kirsten?

There is NO current "Chief Illiniwek." Allow me to cite a Daily Illini article from...oh, all of seven days ago.

http://www.dailyillini.com/opinion/editorials/article_c65fefbc-41bb-11e3-ad3e-0019bb30f31a.html

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jsiess posted at 11:51 am on Thu, Nov 7, 2013.

Posts: 3

that's what the University thinks. WE all know that the Chief lives--and will live as long as we honor him as a PROUD SYMBOL of the state.

i am a 12th generation descendant of Francois Xavier Rouensa, Chief of the Illinwek. For more on him, see <http://exhibits.museum.state.il.us/exhibits/athome/1700/voices/marie/1marie.htm> or <http://louisianalineage.com/Rouensa.htm>.

i have always been proud of the Chief, even before i found out about my link to him. the NCAA and/or the UI cannot change that.

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Keyser Soze posted at 12:31 pm on Tue, Nov 5, 2013.

Posts: 4

How refreshing; a native American portraying the spirit of a native American.

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