

November Diversity Tip Sheet

Celebrate Native American Heritage Month

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www.alanet.org/diversity



I live in Oklahoma. When I first moved to Oklahoma, I was amazed at the number of people who I met at work, school and church that were Native Americans. They are not marginalized in Oklahoma. Native American heritage is celebrated throughout the year.

However, the people don't dress in their regalia on a daily basis. They are people who live and work in all areas of life. It is important, however, to many of the people to retain the history of each of their tribes as well as preserving the individual language of their tribe so that it is not lost.

There are 39 tribes in Oklahoma alone, and there are more native languages spoken in Oklahoma than there are in Europe. Among the world linguistic family languages, there are 10 in Oklahoma: Algonquian, Athabaskan, Caddoan, Iroquoian, Kiowa-Tanoan, Muskogean, Shoshonean, Siouan, Tonkawan, Uchean. I would recommend visiting the website: www.theamericanindiancenter.org for the tribes listed in your particular state or first nations in Canada.

Okla means "people" and *humma* means "red" and was first recorded in 1542 by Spanish explorer, Coronado. The two words were symbolic of "the whole" of Native Americans as described by the Choctaws. In 1890, the name, "Red People," or Oklahoma was adopted as the territory name and then it became the state name. It seems appropriate, since so much of the earth in Oklahoma is red and we have a festival that is celebrated each year called the Red Earth Festival.

Oklahoma Native American tribes have written constitutions and established tribal governments and court systems. Additionally, tribes have provided social services which include housing, employment and health services. I married into a family where their Native American heritage was not touted but accepted. They have access to all that their tribe offers, yet they also utilize the services offered to them through their workplaces, as well as the federal and state governments.

As an adjunct professor for an Oklahoma university, I have learned that Native Americans are often misidentified with Hispanics and often by Hispanics. One such young man was a Marine stationed in California. Several Hispanics began speaking to him in their native tongue and expressed concern that he was not joining them in conversation. Eventually, one asked him in English, why don't you know your own native language?" He remarked, "I do know my native language, but it isn't Spanish." What a surprise to the group to find that they had judged the Native American by his skin color. It was, to say the least, eye awakening.

Celebrate this month by going to: www.pbs.org/race. *Race: The Power of an Illusion*. Begin with "Sorting People" and see if you can identify people by their appearance or their traits. I would highly recommend you check out the other topics available.