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NATIVE AMERICAN RIGHTS FUND

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June 5, 2008

VIA FACSIMILE AND U.S. MAIL

Principal Antonio Wilkins
Purnell Swett High School
11344 Deep Branch Rd.
Pembroke, NC 28372

Superintendent Johnny Hunt
Public Schools of Robeson County
410 Caton Road
Lumberton, NC 28358

John Campbell, Chairman of Board of Education
Public Schools of Robeson County
410 Caton Road
Lumberton, NC 28358

Re: Purnell Swett Senior's Right to Wear Eagle Feather at Graduation

Dear Principal Wilkins, Superintendent Hunt and Chairman Campbell,

The American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina Legal Foundation (ACLU-NCLF) and the Native American Rights Fund (NARF) have been contacted by the parent of a student at Purnell Swett High School in Pembroke who wishes to wear eagle feathers on either his cap or gown during his upcoming graduation ceremony on Friday, June 13, 2008. Samuel Bird, father of Corey Bird, contacted our organizations, seeking assistance after Principal Wilkins informed Corey that he could not wear his eagle feathers in light of a mandatory graduation dress code

policy that prohibits students from wearing “[m]essages, signs, markings, stringers, ribbons, etc.” on their “cap[s] or gown[s].” Corey has indicated that he wishes to wear the feathers for religious and spiritual reasons in order to honor his late mother and grandfather. Based on correspondence with Robeson County School Board Attorney Grady Hunt, it appears that school officials intend to stand by Principal Wilkins’s decision to prohibit Corey from wearing his feathers. In light of the strong religious and spiritual significance of eagle feathers in Native American culture and to Corey and his father, we strongly urge you to reconsider your decision.

From a policy standpoint, it only makes sense to permit Corey and other Lumbee students to wear eagle feathers at graduation. Both Bald and Golden Eagles (and their feathers) are highly revered and considered sacred within American Indian traditions, culture and religion. They are honored with great care and shown the deepest respect. These feathers represent honesty, truth, majesty, strength, courage, wisdom, power and freedom. Native Americans believe that as eagles roam the sky, they have a special connection to God. See Antonia M. De Meo, *Access to Eagles and Eagle Parts: Environmental Protection v. Native American Free Exercise of Religion*, 22 Hastings Const. L.Q. 771, 774-75 (1995) noting that “Native Americans hold eagle feathers sacred and equate them to the cross or the Bible in western religions.”)

In 1962, Congress enacted the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, which extended from the Bald Eagle Protection Act of 1940 the prohibition on the take, transport, sale, barter, trade, import and export, and possession of bald eagles to golden eagles as well. The government realized that the passage of this act would severely impinge on the religious practices of many Native American tribes, for whom the use of eagle parts is essential to many ceremonies. In order to allow Native Americans to be able to continue to include both bald and golden eagle parts in their religious ceremonies, the government made room for permitted exemptions. The law also permits the traditional gifting of eagle feathers. On April 29, 1994, President Clinton signed an Executive Memorandum entitled “Policy Concerning Distribution of Eagle Feathers for Native American Religious Purposes.” 59 Fed. Reg. 22953. That Executive Memorandum noted that “[e]agle feathers hold a sacred place in Native American culture and religious practices. Because of the feathers’ significance to Native American heritage and consistent with due respect for the government-to-government relationship between the Federal and Native American tribal governments, this Administration has undertaken policy and procedural changes to facilitate the collection and distribution of scarce eagle bodies and parts for this purpose.” *Id.*

Typically, an eagle feather is given only in times of great honor – for example, eagle feathers are given to mark great personal achievement. The gift of an eagle feather to a youth is a great honor and is typically given to recognize an important transition in his or her life. Many young people are given eagle feathers upon graduation from high school to signify achievement of this important educational journey and the honor the graduate brings to his or her family, community and tribe.

Corey and his father Samuel are members of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Tribe of South Dakota, a federal recognized tribe. Corey also has Lumbee heritage, from his mother. Corey’s feathers were gifted to him by his father specifically for this occasion, his graduation from high

school. They have even greater meaning to him because he wants to spiritually honor his mother and grandfather, who are both deceased.

Robeson County is approximately 40% Native American, principally Lumbee, according to the U.S. Census. Providing the Lumbee and other Indian students in Robeson County an opportunity to wear their eagle feathers would signify support for this significant portion of the population.

When asked about the rationale for prohibiting Corey to wear his feather, school officials have cited the need for the mandatory policy in order to prevent disruption and the display of gang symbols. However, it is our understanding that other Indian students have worn feathers at Purnell Swett High's graduation in the recent past without incident. Thus, there is no indication that Corey's wearing of the feather would cause any disruption whatsoever. Further, there is no evidence that Corey's eagle feathers are in any way related to gang symbols. Equating the wearing of eagle feathers with gang symbols is highly offensive to the Bird family, as well as to the Native American community generally. We offer our services to you to assist in crafting a new policy which draws a clear distinction between the two so as to protect legitimate school interests.

It is also important to note that there is legal authority in this federal district for carving out an exception to the mandatory dress code only for those students (and their parents) who demonstrate a sincerely-held religious belief. *See Hicks v. Halifax County*, 93 F.Supp.2d 649, 657, 663 (E.D.N.C. 1999) (finding that student's and his guardian's constitutional claims based on free exercise and the parental right to direct the religious upbringing of a child should go to trial where mandatory school uniform policy failed to include opt-out provision for sincerely-held religious beliefs). Consequently, Purnell Swett could carve out an exception to the graduation dress code for expression of sincerely-held religious beliefs without opening the door for all sorts of non-religious student expression.

It is our understanding that the Lumbee Tribe has recently enacted a resolution supporting Corey and asking that the policy be modified to respect his religious and traditional beliefs and practices. If necessary, we are prepared to secure support for Corey and his family from other Indian tribes in North Carolina and the southeast United States, as well as national Indian organizations. We are also attaching to this letter a sampling of media articles over the past decade or so demonstrating that most other schools, school districts, and school boards in the United States, when confronted with this issue, have respected Native American spiritual and cultural diversity by permitting the wearing of eagle feathers.

Finally, in deciding how to press forward in this matter, we ask Robeson County school officials to remember that "in our society and in our culture high school graduation is one of life's most significant occasions." *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577, 595, 112 S.Ct. 2649, 2659, 120 L.Ed.2d 467 (1992). "Graduation is a time for family and those closest to the student to celebrate success and express mutual wishes of gratitude and respect, all to the end of impressing upon the young person the role that it is his or her right and duty to assume in the community and all of its diverse parts." *Id.* In light of the significance the eagle feather has to Native American students, especially at graduation, as well as the legal authority as set forth in this letter, we urge

you to permit Native American students like Corey Bird to express their religious and spiritual beliefs by wearing eagle feathers on their cap or gown.

Thank you in advance for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,



Katherine Lewis Parker
Legal Director
ACLU of North Carolina Legal Foundation



Steven C. Moore
Senior Staff Attorney
Native American Rights Fund

cc: Grady L. Hunt, Esq., School Board Attorney, Schools of Robeson County (via electronic mail)

Allison Schafer, Legal Counsel for the North Carolina School Boards Association (via electronic mail)

Lumbee Tribe

Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians

United South and Eastern Tribes

National Congress of American Indians

Students win right to traditional dress under cap & gown

Saltzstein, Katherine. Indian Country Today. Oneida, N.Y.: May 26, 1997. pg. D1
Copyright Indian Country Today May 26, 1997

Students win right to traditional dress under cap & gown

American Indian students won a victory when the Albuquerque Public School Board voted four to three to allow graduating seniors to wear traditional dress under their caps and gowns during graduation.

The hard-fought victory came May 7 despite an earlier vote by the school board's policy committee which recommended there be no change in the what high school principals allowed students to wear. Students were prepared for defeat when the full board took up the issue.

The turning point came when board member Robert Lucero, who is not a member of the policy committee, spoke. Mr. Lucero, who is not American Indian, wore an American Indian ribbon shirt to the policy committee meeting, but dressed in a tie and jacket at the full school board meeting. He said Pueblo friends made his ribbon shirt.

Mr. Lucero told the board that American Indian students who graduate from the University of New Mexico law school wear their Native dress, adding "It's a very proud moment."

He urged the board to "take the lead and say we honor Native Americans. We have no problem with this. I've been to Native American weddings, and people address the President of the United States in Native dress. It's a very proud moment," Mr. Lucero said.

Mr. Lucero made the motion to allow American Indian graduates to wear their cultural attire under their gowns - a request from the Indian Parents Political Action Committee.

School superintendent Peter Horoschak asked for clarification of the policy change - that "full regalia" is allowed but "not below the hemline" and for American Indian students only.

The motion was quickly seconded by Aggie Lopez. Mr. Lucero and Ms. Lopez were joined by board members Richard Toledo and Henry Rodriguez, the only American Indian on the board.

Opposing the motion were Leonard DeLayo, Mary Lee Martin and Bill Rothanbarger. After the vote, the crowd erupted in cheers.

A drum group, Dancing Horse, set up outside the hall where the meeting took place and afterwards, people joined hands and danced.

The vote followed an hour of often angry testimony as speakers responded to the earlier negative vote by the policy committee. Carmelita Roybal, a teacher at Rio Grande High School who has spoken in favor of allowing students to wear traditional regalia, said she was "horrified by the policy committee vote."

"We may as well throw out the words multiculturalism and appreciation for diversity that are in my school's mission statement," she told the board.

"Denying the students' request to express their culture is a very cruel thing to do, but it is consistent with what has happened in this country for the past 500 years. The highest drop out rate is among Native American students. They have been denied their right to learn their traditional language, and wear their traditional dress," she said.

"They have been denied freedom of expression, their right to learn the history of their own people and to read their literature. Our students are dropping out of school because they feel disenfranchised, dejected and demeaned. You represent institutionalized racism," Ms. Roybal said.

Paul Frye, chairman of the American Indian law section of the New Mexico state bar, presented a letter to the board supporting the right of the students to wear their traditional dress. He compared the denial to the days when American Indian students were punished if they spoke their Native languages.

"It's the same mind set, that we need this kind of uniformity," Mr. Frye said, adding, that some people have noted that Native American students were graduating from an Anglo system, and should conform to that system.

"Every culture educates their kids. Indians often receive a better education," Mr. Frye said. Indians should not need to conform to a "white model," he said.

He told the board that some people worried that allowing American Indian students to wear traditional dress would prompt other groups to ask the same. "This year you received one request from a group with a long tradition and proper values," said Mr. Frye.

Cecilia Serna, a parent, spoke out against the proposed policy allowing American Indian students to wear traditional dress, arguing that other religious groups might object.

Wynema Chavez, a student from Santo Domingo Pueblo, was denied the chance to wear her traditional dress when she graduated last year. "This is ridiculous. You told me this last year. All we want to do is show our Native American pride," Ms. Chavez said.

"It's not an issue of racism. It's an issue of identity. We should not be put down. We should be seen as who we are.

"You don't know who we are. Last year you said you'd look into this. I'd like to see what you've done," said Ms. Chavez.

"To be Indian in the public schools is hard, and you should be proud of the students who make it through."

Lyle Jojola, a student spokesman for the fight to wear Native dress, told the board they did not understand the issue, that not allowing the change would "continue 500 years of oppression from the dominant society."

"It is because of where you come from you don't understand us as people," said Mr. Jojola, 17. "It's been the same story for 500 years. Indians fight for land, for water rights. You're still oppressing my people."

Tribal leaders showed support, including speakers from the All Indian Pueblo Council and the Albuquerque Indian Center. They cited high drop out rates among American Indian students and said allowing Native dress at graduation would foster cultural pride and would improve student test scores.

After the vote, Mr. Jojola said, "It was a small victory for Native American rights. We have to fight for everything. Tonight we won."

He said he will wear a traditional shirt, with crochet work by his great grandmother, and a belt to graduation.

Bernadette Chato, Navajo mother of a high school student, said "It's the tip of the iceberg. There are so many other issues. This is the first step. Maybe we'll see some changes toward Indian students."

Illustration (Graduation cap with feather)

Lakota graduate wins her request for eagle plume

White Shield, Rosemary. **Indian Country Today**. Oneida, N.Y.: Jun 25, 1996 Vol. 15, Iss. 52; pg. C1

Copyright Indian Country Today Jun 25, 1996

Lakota graduate wins her request for eagle plume

FONTANA, Calif. - Heather Pourier, a young Oglala Lakota woman, wore her eagle feather as she crossed the stage to receive her high school diploma.

Only hours before the ceremony last week, she was told by Fontana High School authorities she couldn't wear the eagle plume presented to her from her grandmother.

Under pressure from the American Indian community, the school authorities relented.

The directive to deny the family's request to honor Ms. Pourier, student body vice president and honor student, in a traditional way came from Roger Jacobsen, principal at Fontana High School.

"There's no 'adornment' on any cap or gown except what's been earned at Fontana High School," Mr. Jacobson said.

According to Marilyn Pourier, the girl's grandmother, Mr. Jacobson said the family could have its own special ceremony after everyone had left the graduation ceremony. He said he would have a school board member attend the special ceremony, and would even "tie the eagle plume on Heather's cap himself."

The family declined the invitation for the special arrangements.

Ms. Pourier and her mother, Lonnie Santos, live in Fontana, Calif. Heather's grandmother, who lives on Pine Ridge Reservation, went to visit her family and see her grand-daughter graduate.

"We wanted Heather to wear her eagle feather on the stage when she received her diploma," the grandmother said. "To wear her feather would be such an honor," she said.

"Our traditions are being taken away," Ms. Santos said. "My fear is that our traditions will be gone. I think about what is going to happen when Heather has children and they graduate," she said.

Ms. Santos contacted Fontana High School before the graduation ceremony to request that her daughter, a Fontana Indian Nature Center college scholarship recipient, be allowed to wear an eagle plume during the graduation ceremony. An office assistant relayed a request from assistant principal, Linda Martin, that denied the request.

Ms. Santos discussed the situation with her mother, Marilyn Pourier, and Heather, who is a traditional dancer and wears the Four Moons Pow Wow Princess banner. Ms. Pourier then contacted Mr. Jacobson.

Mr. Jacobson also denied the request. According to Ms. Santos, an assistant from the assistant principal's office said, "If we let your daughter do it, then we're going to have to let the Jews wear their Star of David."

According to Ms. Pourier, Mr. Jacobson had a similar viewpoint.

"If we do this, then we'll have to let the skinheads wear their swastikas," he told Ms. Pourier.

The policy was intended to eliminate problems the school had in the past with students wearing propellers on their heads during the ceremony and passing beach balls around, according to Ms. Pourier.

In a phone interview with Indian Country Today, Mr. Jacobson said, "No one has requested this except the grandmother. She's not the legal guardian. The contract was with the parent and student." Since the request came from the grandmother, he said, "The issue does not exist."

"This is blatant racism against American Indian people," Russell Means, actor and activist, said. "This personifies what's happening to Indian people. We're not accorded respect as human beings."

The assistant principal told the family that Heather could wear it under her hat, said Marilyn Pourier. "We left the final decision to wear the eagle plume during her graduation up to Heather. She was afraid they would not give her the diploma."

"There is a case in Oklahoma about a girl who faced the same thing. She wore her father, and they did not give her the diploma. She was afraid to come down hard about the issue, since she needs her diploma to get into college for the fall. It could have been tied up in court for a long time," she said.

"This is just one more thing they have taken away from us," she said.

"They are educators of all people. They should be sensitive to our traditions and beliefs," she said.

The Fontana School District Superintendent Karen Harshman declined to speak to Indian Country Today about the issue. Messages were relayed through the office's secretary.

"Students are not allowed to wear anything that goes over the gown," she said. "Mr. Jacobson is responsible for these decisions." The office also affirmed that students would be able to wear crosses, a Christian symbol, during the graduation ceremony.

However, hours before the graduation ceremony, Mr. Jacobson called Heather at her home and told her she would be allowed to wear her eagle feather.

"We were happy to hear of this," said Ms. Pourier. "The Indian community was very supportive. Everyone was standing by to take action if necessary.

"Heather wearing an eagle feather as she graduates is a very special thing. It is awful to have to argue about something that is so special. I think they still do not understand," she said.

Photo (Heather Pourier)

Pine Ridge graduates leave their mark

Hamilton, Candy. News from Indian Country. Hayward, Wis.: Jul 31, 1995. Vol. IX, Iss. 14; pg. 12

Copyright Indian Country Communications Jul 31, 1995

Pine Ridge graduates leave their mark.

by Candy Hamilton

News From Indian Country

Pine Ridge High School had a lot to celebrate along with its 33 graduates at this year's commencement exercises.

After waiting more than 20 years for a new school building to replace one condemned years ago and long past repairing, students, teachers, and staff moved into the modern, brightly-lit new facilities. With lots of red and yellow, Indian designs, and comfortable classrooms, the new building boosted spirits and morale.

"In our new school, we wanted students to leave their mark in a positive way (as opposed to graffiti)," said superintendent John Haas

The 33 students along with staff and teachers put their handprints and names on a tipi, with some tipi decorations already painted on by art instructor and athletic director Bryan Brewer and his art classes.

They also learned from spiritual leader Wilmer Mesteth how to put up a tipi. Besides going up every year for graduation, the school tipi will be part of other special occasions.

"We thought it was pretty cool," Melanie Two Eagle said. "We were the first students on the reservation to put up a tipi. There's a certain way to do it, and we learned to do it the right way."

Students at the senior picnic chose to eat in the tipi and wished they could camp in it. Elementary students went in the tipi to hear traditional Lakota stories, and many students just hung out in it, trying to get the feel of the tipi life their ancestors enjoyed.

Two Eagle will attend Oglala Lakota College for her freshman year and then plans to major in political science at the University of South Dakota. She wants to become a lawyer.

"The more pride in it is pride in our culture. Now they know the right way, the Lakota way, to put up a tipi," Brewer said.

The week before graduation the students and their families gathered for the tipi decorating ceremony and presentation of their eagle feathers and plumes for achieving their diplomas. With family looking on, each student came forward, dipped her or his hand in the paint and placed it on the tipi. Brewer and Warfield Moose, Lakota Studies teacher, assisted them.

At graduation the tipi became a popular place for graduation photographs with students seeking out their own handprint to stand beside as they showed off their diplomas.

For students the tipi represents a sense of continuity, part of their graduation, and a connection with future graduates. "The first thing I thought of as I put my hand on the tipi was that next year's graduating class would put their prints above ours. It will keep on going and going and someday there will be many, many tipis," said Pamela Cedar Face, class valedictorian. She will attend the University of North Dakota next year in its INMED Program and hopes to go to Penn State for medical school.

She said she felt especially proud to speak as the first valedictorian graduating from the new high school. She hopes next year's graduates will be proud of their new school.

Two Eagle said she felt good that elders would see her handprint and name on the tipi and that someday as an elder herself she would see the handprints of other students.

"I'm happy to be part of a new tradition. The first students to graduate from the new school and the tipi will carry on for later years. Maybe it will encourage others to graduate," she said.

High school principal Gerald Ray said the cooperation from the students "was fantastic. One of the parents was so impressed, he wants to donate \$100 to help keep the tipi tradition going."

Haas estimated the tipi can hold handprints from three or more classes as they graduate, and then the school will start a new tipi.

Bus drivers, cooks, dormitory supervisors and all the other staff also were enthusiastic about putting their handprints and names on the tipi. The dorms and cafeteria want their own tipis now.

Pine Ridge School, K-12, is the only school on the reservation still operated by the BIA. Efforts to change the school operation to local control under PL 93-638 failed this year.

Photo (Bryan Brewer paints Melanie Two Eagle's hand)

Indian graduates: Wear your feathers proudly

Anonymous. Indian Country Today. Oneida, N.Y.: Jun 7, 2006. Vol. 25, Iss. 52; pg. A2,
1 pgs

Copyright Indian Country Today Jun 7, 2006

Big kudos to Montana legislators and to the Indian activists who have known how to educate people in power about the importance of education that emphasizes the Indian heritage of their state. Kudos also to the National Indian Education Association and columnist Jode Rave, and all the others who are encouraging American Indian graduates this season to proudly wear their feathers and their tribal or clan insignia as they desire.

This one is important. In this age of denying the beauty and depth of all cultures, there are many people who still would erase the ancient ways and the identity of Native peoples. They would do so in the name of assimilation and Americanism, and they would call it patriotism. But they would be wrong. Culturally, at its best, America is a mosaic of diverse cultures striving freely toward universal justice, not a marching platoon of ditto heads

Some 600,000 young Indians are primary and secondary students. They know who they are and no one has the right to deny their cultural expression. Count us among those who encourage the young graduates to signal who they are, to be proud to wear their tribal colors. It not only makes the ancestors happy; it gives much-needed strength to the new generation of Native adolescents, who look to their older brothers and sisters for a path to follow.

Those who would deny or argue against the right of Indian graduates should consider that the march of graduates every season comes at both ends of Memorial Day weekend, where the many American Legions throughout Indian country parade their colors proudly and are praised and memorialized by their tribal relatives.

In Memorial Day parades this year throughout Indian country, communities came out en masse, lining up on both sides of the roads with children, grandparents and American flags to pay heartfelt and familiar respects to the community's fallen and living veterans. The annual ritual - full of laughter, thrown candy and humorous floats - evidences the strong connections to the nation's military that is uniformly valued in Indian country.

Nevertheless, among the veterans, here and there, many wore their feathers. In scenes replicated in many parts of Indian country, veterans paraded with personal feathers and feather staffs and shields and other items of specific tribal traditions and there is nothing un-American about it. It is in fact the basis for the right, not only of parading Indian veterans, but of parading Indian graduates to represent their peoples in their moment of honor

Education is key, and the best education includes a strong dose of cultural knowledge, self-awareness and critical thinking. This is the pillar upon which the future of Indian communities and nations will be built. It is the only possible dream-satisfying future for America.

Writes NIEA President Ryan Wilson: "My excitement and pride in honoring our graduates is tempered by the reality that, once again, our graduates will encounter

misguided administrators who will confront expressions of cultural identity over the issue of wearing eagle feathers and plumes in their caps or mortarboards.

"Our use of eagle feathers and plumes as sacred articles of honor and accomplishment predate the use of cap/mortarboard and gown by thousands of years. We must continue to wear our feathers; as original inhabitants of these lands, we must continue to express ourselves in this manner. We need to do so without fear, but with conviction. We should do so without having to hide our articles of tradition and without anxiety about wearing them. Our First Amendment rights will continue to be violated so long as we allow others to do so. To all Native students and families I implore you: Do Not Ask For Permission Wear your plumes. Wear your feathers on graduation day. This is your day, your time and you need to express yourself and honor your family, your elders, and your ancestors by carrying on our way of life."

In a similar current, Indian Country Today's David Melmer reports [in "Montana prepares to implement unique 'Indian Education for all' law," Vol 25, Iss. 49] on a meaningful and, hopefully, replicable Montana law designed to tackle the problems that interracial and intercultural ignorance can cause. Called the "Indian Education for All" law, it mandates the integration of materials on Indian history and culture into other disciplines of Montana schools, from kindergarten through the 12th grade. As Melmer reminds us, even today, Montana's seven reservations and 12 tribal nations are a mystery to most state residents, who can hardly identify, much less understand, their Indian neighbors.

The Montana Legislature passed the "Indian Education for All" law in 1999 to encourage its citizens to recognize the distinct and unique cultural heritage of American Indian nations. The law commits the state's education system to assist the preservation of that heritage and to teach all children in Montana about it. But it was finally late last year that the state Legislature appropriated \$4.4 million in funding to implement the law. (The core funding is likely to attract as much as \$20 million more in grant incentives.) As Melmer reports, under the direction of the state's Office of Public Instruction, the full-scale Indian education program will be integrated into public instruction in the 2006 - '07 school year.

"Ready-to-Go" grants from the OPI have begun funding numerous teachers to attend workshops and seminars on Indian culture, history and government. Forty teachers from the Billings School District, the state's largest and located close to the Crow and Northern Cheyenne reservations, participated in professional training arranged with the Little Big Horn, the Crow and Dull Knife tribal colleges on the Northern Cheyenne reservation and with the Western Heritage Center in Billings.

The new program, hailed as a first of its kind in the nation, has Indian educators and many others excited. There are large gaps of basic knowledge about American Indian culture among teachers generally and many, though not all, are enthusiastic in learning and teaching from a stronger context. While the new law does not mandate a specific curriculum, it does set standards. Most schools are planning some American Indian themes in their programs and the state has prepared a five-year plan for implementation.

The goal is to integrate American Indian education into all curricula, from reading, art, music, science and physical education to the social sciences and other aspects of school life.

Denise Juneau, director of Indian education for the state of Montana, recognizes that a lot of painstaking education of non-Native teachers will be required. Indian people, particularly Indian educators and culture-bearing elders, will be much needed. While the initiative has the force of the state constitution, a court case and now a state mandate, it will take the art of persuasion and large doses of good-minded creativity to implement it most fully and with the most positive results.

Sisters work to bring Native traditions to graduations

Petten, Cheryl. Saskatchewan Sage. Edmonton: Apr 30, 2002. Vol. 6, Iss. 7

Copyright Aboriginal Multi-Media Society Apr 30, 2002

You could say Adele Pete's company, Muskwa Designs, is a dream come true. Through Muskwa Designs, Adele creates Native design graduation gowns, featuring appliqués of feathers, eagles, bears, buffalo, or whatever the customer requests.

The company is a family affair, with Adele's two sisters - Yvonne Pete, who also lives on Little Pine, and Loretta Hall, who lives in Saskatoon - also taking part in the business. Yvonne helps with the designing and sewing, while Loretta, the computer whiz of the group, designed the company's Web site, and keeps it up and running.

Adele and Yvonne designed their first Native graduation gown a few years back, when Adele was an administrator at the Chief Little Pine school.

"And when we got in there, being a Native person, I thought we should be doing things the Native way, the traditional way, even having a traditional graduation, with drumming, and giving away feathers, and so forth. Sort of dressing in traditional style graduation designed gowns. So we made the first one."

Although the two women got a positive response from those gowns, it wasn't something Adele had planned on pursuing seriously until a couple of years ago, after she became ill.

"I had a dream about this one graduation gown that I was to make, with an eagle design in the back, with the feathers," Adele said.

"During my sickness and my illness, in attending sweats and ceremonies and so forth, I began having these dreams. And I thought, ah, okay. That's something for me to do. Maybe that's my fate, to go in that direction.

"And that's how it got started, and then I thought, this must be my calling. I've dreamt about it twice. Okay, I'm going to go for it. So I designed the gown."

Once the gown from her dream was designed and completed, the women began publicizing the company, both through the Web site, and by sending faxes to schools letting them know Native grad gowns were available. And things haven't slowed down much since.

"We got good raves from last year. Surrounding reserves here ordered gowns, and also kindergrad gowns as well, we did," Adele said.

Why does Adele think there's been so much interest from schools in having her create Native design graduation gowns?

"Because of the traditional, getting back to the roots of who we are as First Nations people. Being proud of our heritage and culture, and our traditions. And I believe more and more people are geared towards having a Native grad, and having Native grad design gowns," she said.

Customers interested in having a Native design graduation gown can either chose from one of the designs that have already been created, or a gown can be custom designed.

"It depends also what the customer wants, and we design that. They could be designed with feathers, eagles, buffalo, bears, bear claws. It all depends on the person. And we don't have an inventory. It's just custom-make how they want it. Because if we were to design them and have them on hand, I don't think we could be able to fit the sizings and whatever to people's needs."

The price range for the graduation gown varies, depending on the material used, and how many designs are added. Gowns start at about \$35, and can go up to \$75 for a satin gown, Adele said. The amount of time it takes to fill an order for graduation gowns depends on the number required. For an order of around 50 gowns, at least a couple of months notice would be required. For around 30 gowns, at least a month's notice would be needed, Adel said.

As more and more people learn about Muskwa Designs, the demand for graduation gowns continues to grow. Requests for information about the gowns have come in from as far away as Ohio. Adele is currently working on filling an order of graduation gowns for the school in Loon Lake.

And the women have already filled gown orders for schools from Thunderchild, Little Red River, Sturgeon Lake, and three separate orders from Chief Little Pine school. And one girl from Fort McMurray, Alta. wore one of their creations when she graduated from university.

"So it's getting out there. People are hearing about us, so that's good," Adele said. "It can be anywhere from one gown to, like I say, 50 gowns. Which is neat. And I love doing that anyway." That love of sewing is something instilled in all three women by their mother while they were growing up, Adele explained.

"That's how we grew up. Our mother taught us to sew, to knit, to quilt, to crochet. We made our own socks, our own mittens, our own scarves. We made our blankets. So thank you to my mom, who is no longer with us. She taught us a lot of things."

Although the graduation gowns make up a big part of the orders the women receive, they are far from being the only thing Adele creates.

"I do wedding dresses, traditional dance outfits, jingle dresses, ribbon shirts. At the moment, I'm beading. I'm making a cape for myself. I make a lot of my own dresses. And also I've been asked to make jumpers and dresses with feathers and bears, and things like

that, through some of my teacher friends and so forth. And then they tell their friends, and then they want some shirts made," she said.

"And I also do shawls as well . . . I designed a butterfly shawl for my niece when she graduated last year, and I guess she got good rave reviews about that as well. That's nice to hear, when people are satisfied and happy about the product."

One of the most challenging orders the women have had to fill so far involved creation of four formal gowns for a wedding.

"And that was quite a challenge, because the people lived in the north, and we had no contact with them, we don't know who they are, and we had to do phoning for sizing, things like that. It was quite a challenge," she said.

"As a matter of fact, one of those gowns showed up in the Aboriginal Achievement Awards on TV last year, and I was just shocked. I said to my husband, 'That's one of the gowns we designed. Awesome.'"

For more information about the graduation gowns or any of the other products being created by Muskwa Designs, visit the company Web site at <http://www.muskwaholdings.com> or fax your requests to 398-2022







