

Support for LD 179, An Act to Replace Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day by
Representative Benjamin Collins of Portland

Respectfully Submitted by Maulian Dana, Penobscot Nation Tribal Ambassador

February 11, 2019

Senator Claxton, Representative Martin, and honorable members of the Committee on Local and State Government,

Thank you for your time to listen to testimony and public comment on this important piece of legislation. It is my honor to be here today on behalf of the Penobscot Nation Chief, Vice Chief, and Council to support this legislation to change Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples Day in our great state of Maine.

Indigenous Peoples Day started as a grassroots effort to give a peaceful yet defiant response to the Columbus Day holiday which is a painful reminder to Indigenous People of the attempted genocide our ancestors endured and the effects of which we still suffer from. Through this work towards truth and correcting the historical narrative and false pretenses surrounding the Columbus legacy the movement caught on in upwards of 50 cities and towns around the country. Many towns in Maine have made this change including Starks, Orono, Bangor, Portland, Gouldsboro, Belfast, and Brunswick. Vermont, Minnesota, Alaska, and South Dakota have made the change on a state level. There are also bills of this nature this session in the state governments of Massachusetts and Kansas. There are many more places in Maine that are looking to make the change this year and a virtue of having this done at a state level, besides the other benefits I will go further into, is that it will ease a lot of local burden of carrying out this change individually.

We have established that this change is growing in momentum and that there are many positive benefits that communities have seen since making the change. Let's explore why this is deeper than the name of a holiday and why this has impact and potential to better the lives of all people of Maine.

A big push back we see when we approach this discussion is the idea that we are trying to rewrite history. The truth is by celebrating this man with a holiday the country has been candy coating and falsifying history and this change corrects that. Columbus did not actually step foot in North America and should not be credited with "discovery" of any lands he did land on because there were already societies and Nations of people there. He also was a war criminal for his torture, enslavement, and genocidal assault on the Indigenous people he encountered. He is often credited with the false notion that Indigenous People are in the way of progress, less than human, and need to be destroyed in order for colonization. This was carried out in the generations that followed him by the settlers of North America under the English and United States government. As I previously stated, by celebrating him with a holiday it serves as a painful reminder for those of us who are descendants of the Indigenous Nations who were targeted for genocide of what our ancestors endured and it disrespects their legacy. It also sends a message that our survival as a people is less significant than the false narrative created and taught in schools that Columbus was a hero and founded our country. We can still teach about him as a historical figure who made contributions but also had deep flaws. We all learn about Adolf Hitler in school and the impact he had on the history of the world. However, nobody would celebrate "Hitler Day". Sometimes people say that he was just doing what was acceptable

for that time period. I can think of no time it should be considered acceptable to feed babies to dogs and cut limbs off human beings for sport.

I know that some see this as an insult to Italian Americans and that by changing this day we disrespect their rich heritage and contributions to this country as immigrants and the descendants of immigrants. Believe me, I can sympathize with feeling like your heritage is disrespected. My answer to this is that they should absolutely be celebrated and why would they want their ethnicity symbolically tied to a man who casts such a dark cloud? I would support an Italian American Day. However, Columbus Day is what Americans have credited with the "founding" of our country and Italians nor anyone else founded this place, it was already here. Indigenous Peoples Day is the proper thing to call this day because it places the appropriate credit to the people who are the original stewards of the land and their resilience and sacrifices. Those of us who count them as our ancestors are fortunate to have culture, traditions, and values that they protected even as they were target for extermination. It is a miracle we are still here, we were not supposed to be. We are their dream come true and for every time they were silenced through murder, abuse, intentional infliction of disease, theft of land and resources, etc; we find it in the legacy of their bravery and perseverance to raise our voices and honor them by speaking truth to power and shining a light to guide us all back to an honest account of history so that we can unite as Mainers and Americans in mutual respect of our realities and the bonds of humanity we share.

In the past few years making this change at local levels I have seen amazing discussions and increased understanding occur. There is an elevated sense of respect and compassion between surrounding communities and the Wabanaki Nations when we make this change. I have seen many people who didn't agree with the change, or thought it was just some silly political correctness monster eating up their time and resources, listen to our words and our hearts and ended up believing in what we stand for. If you think to yourself "well I don't celebrate Columbus Day anyway" then good, here is a chance to celebrate something and understand your Indigenous neighbors better.

We are at a time in society where differences can serve to divide us. Scare us. Silence us. Oppress us. Threaten to make the world we want to leave to our children a segregated and terrifying place. We see the reemergence of white supremacy, which has operated behind closed doors for decades, out in the open. We see rampant hate of those we don't understand. We see hate crimes and public displays of racism and bigotry. Symbols, statues, names, mascots, and what we validate with institutions and governments all matter because it is how we shape the views that dictate the behavior and actions. If you fight to keep a holiday that celebrates the attempted ethnic cleansing of my ancestors what does that tell me about how you think of me as a human?

History has not always been kind to my people and by teaching a watered down version, glossing over the reality, and celebrating cruelty and genocide it makes the stings of intergenerational trauma all the more real. Genocide was not just something of hundreds of years ago, it continued in a second wave when Indigenous children were removed from their homes and families and taken to government run institutions to have their language and culture erased from their existence often through force and abuse. An assault has occurred on all fronts to try to make us extinct. I use my time here today to honor all those who have not had the chance to have their voices heard. I stand on their shoulders and I humbly use my voice for justice and truth. Columbus was not a hero, he didn't discover us, and it is time to be on the right side of history for all of Maine. Thank you Representative Collins, thank you to the towns

that have bravely taken the lead on this, and thank you to all the Wabanaki people and allies that have been doing the hard work of truth telling on this for years.

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Maulian Dana