

The undying hope of Indigenous communities in South Jersey

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Beneath American soil and American pride, haunting pictures of violence, genocide and oppression remain stagnant. Ignored and disregarded by few and unknown to many, the Indigenous peoples of America remain a distant memory and a diminishing thought. Hounded and harassed for centuries at the hands of European colonizers for their sacred practices, customs and way of life, the Indigenous community nationwide has been subject to desecration and ill will. From historical events like the Trail of Tears to blood quantum practices, employed to this day, the United States government has not honored the sanctity of Indigenous people or their identities.

According to the United States Census administered in 2022, the estimated American Indian and Alaska Native population alone was 4.3 million and the in combination population of 7.1 million dispersed throughout the United States. Here in New Jersey, the American Indian and Alaska Native population is 0.07% and at East less than 0.01% of the student body and faculty identifies as such.

As the years have progressed, the United States government has pushed assimilation policies. Perhaps the most harmful of such practices is blood quantum laws, imposed by federal and state governments to legally define Native American status, leaving Indigenous people across the nation in a state of uncertainty and confusion regarding their identity. Upon its inception, the blood quantum system aimed to restrict the citizenship of Indigenous populations. The federal government first utilized blood quantum in the allotment period, splitting large chunks of reservation land into individual allotments between 1887 and 1934 under the Dawes Act of 1887. The vast majority of native tribes set hard cutoffs by percentage of Indigenous blood. The Navajo tribe, for example, necessitates 25% “Native blood” for membership. This prohibits certain individuals from membership, regardless of their community involvement or generational ties to their tribe, merely

on the basis of their blood composition. During the allotment period, blood quantum provided a convenient method by which the federal government could deprive natives of their land; all they needed to do was cite an inadequate quantity of Indigenous blood to strip Native Americans of land ownership.

As governments and tribes use blood quantum to track an individual’s percentage of Indigenous blood, they use these arbitrary cutoffs to determine tribal membership eligibility. Beyond dispossession of land and citizenship for Native Americans, the long-term implications of blood quantum laws are far more insid-

ious: slow-burning erasure of Indigenous people. Clearly, through the blood quantum system, the federal government has racialized and politicized Native American identities. But this isn’t the first time the American government has weaponized race to stratify Americans. Under Jim Crow laws during the 20th century, the “one-drop rule” imposed by the federal government considered individuals Black if their blood contained even a single drop of Black ancestry. This classification made it easy for the government to ensure every person with any trace of Black lineage would be subjected to discriminatory laws and practices. Similarly, blood quantum requirements benefit the U.S. government in their own twisted way, using a construct of the “Native American race” to inevitably breed Indigenous people out of existence. Without any Native Americans, the federal government would no longer be

obligated to uphold treaty provisions with tribes.

But the blood quantum system isn’t the only answer. The alternative, “lineal descent,” expands tribal enrollment to more people -- the sole eligibility requirement is having ancestors who were members of a tribe. The racialized existence of Native Americans continues to prompt tribes to resort to the lineal descent system, citing the formidability of decreasing populations. While lineal descent poses its own issues, like the deluge of members hoping to join the tribe under looser eligibility requirements, it can be a viable choice for Indig-

there remains no federally recognized tribes. However, non-recognized Indian bands include the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Indian of NJ, the Powhatan Renape nation, the Ramapough Mountain Indians and the Southern New Jersey Taino Tribe. *Eastside* requested an interview with each of these tribal bands, but at the time of writing, a correspondence has not taken place. To learn more about Native American culture and history, *Eastside* editors looked to Congressman Donald Norcross’s office to gain insight into tribal paperwork and Indigenous reserves in New Jersey. *Eastside* also contacted Governor Murphy’s office for a comment regarding Native American reserves, rules and regula-

ans, Powhatan Renape Indians, Ramapough Lenape Indian Nation and Inter-Tribal People. Inter-Tribal People refers to those who reside in New Jersey, but are members of federally and/or state-recognized tribes in other states.

*Eastside* editors attempted to call local and state government representatives multiple times for a comment on the issue but received no response. The process of getting in touch with the eight public members of the commission was arduous and unfulfilled; on the Secretary of State’s website, no contact information was listed for the eight public officials representing the tribes. The minimal information written on the matter, the lack of support in questioning and the navigation to find what little is published are concerning since such information should be made available to the public with ease. The lack of response from Congressman Norcross’s office and Governor Murphy’s office at the time of writing has further aggravated the issue, reinforcing the difficulty for the community to learn about Native American history and culture.

At East and the broader South Jersey community there is little to no emphasis on Indigenous preservation, Indigenous policies or tribal qualifications.

The general public knows much about sporting events, but nothing of the impact the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape tribe had on the vitality of this community a few years ago.

Considering the leisurely approach the community has taken, it is not surprising that the history and legacy of the tribes are not celebrated and there is no push for federal recognition in New Jersey. Passivity only exacerbates the quickly diminishing identity of Indigenous peoples.

Do we shape our identities?

Do our cumulative experiences — our formative years, likes and dislikes, friends and families, hobbies and self-expression, cultures and ethnicities — determine who we are?

Or does the federal government?

tions. However, both offices have not provided *Eastside* with any information on Native American policy at this time; considering the slow and leisurely approach to such an essential matter, the preservation of Indigenous culture in South Jersey, a more proactive approach would be favorable.

Since 1997, the Secretary of State and the Governor’s office have committed “to promote understanding and knowledge about the history and culture of the American Indian communities of the State.”

This commitment comes from the New Jersey Commission for American Indian Affairs, which has nine members, including the Secretary of State, serving ex officio, and eight public members. The public members, recommended by their tribes and organizations and appointed by the Governor, consist of two members from each: Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Indi-

Art by Athira Kathhuri (‘27)/ Eastside Staff

