

P R E S S   K I T



**IMAGINING**  
T H E I N D I A N

T H E F I G H T A G A I N S T

N A T I V E A M E R I C A N

M A S C O T I N G

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THE CIESLA FOUNDATION PRESENTS

## IMAGINING THE INDIAN

THE FIGHT AGAINST NATIVE  
AMERICAN MASCOTING

[www.imaginingtheindianfilm.org](http://www.imaginingtheindianfilm.org)

### FROM THE DIRECTOR OF

The Spy Behind Home Plate, Rosenwald and  
The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg

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## LOG LINE

*Imagining the Indian* examines the ongoing movement surrounding the use of Native American names, logos, and mascots in the world of sports and beyond.

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## SHORT SYNOPSIS

*Imagining the Indian* is a comprehensive examination of the movement to eliminate the words, images and gestures that many Native Americans and their allies find demeaning and offensive, giving voice to both supporters and detractors of the cause. The film takes a deep-dive into the issues through archival footage and interviews with those involved in the fight.

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## LONG SYNOPSIS

*Imagining the Indian: The Fight Against Native American Mascoting* is a feature-length documentary film that examines the movement to eliminate the use of Native American slurs, names, logos, images and gestures that many Native Americans and their allies find demeaning and offensive.

The film investigates the impact that caricatures like Chief Wahoo -- the cartoonish logo of the Cleveland Indians -- gestures like the Atlanta Braves' "tomahawk chop" and epithets like the Washington "Redskins" have on the Native community, the sports community and society in general.

*Imagining the Indian* explores the genesis of the exploitation of Native American culture in competitive sports, including the use of names and logos featuring Indians that have been adopted by teams and franchises with no apparent connection to the tribes and peoples whose cultures they are appropriating. It introduces the audience to Suzan Shown Harjo, President of the Morning Star Institute and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, whose 50-year fight against the exploitation of American Indians in the sports world is used as a lens through which to investigate the history of this issue. The film provides an account of

the genocidal history of Native peoples on this continent, and its role in proliferating negative stereotyping in sports, movies and television.

A range of opinions are explored among Natives and non-Natives, including the staunch and steadfast opposition exhibited by Harjo and her contemporaries in advocacy over the years, including National Museum of the American Indian director Kevin Gover (Pawnee), elected Tribal Council of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation chairman Marshall McKay and Autry National Center of the American West CEO W. Richard West, Jr (Southern Cheyenne). The film also includes the opinions of those who do not consider the use of names, logos, mascots or gestures a concern and examines their justification of those views.

The documentary surveys the legal history of the movement, including multiple lawsuits filed by Harjo and others over decades of activism, most notably a case involving the "Redskins" that has made headlines over the last 30 years.

*Imagining the Indian* delves into the contentious battle over that National Football League team's nickname in the nation's capital that has long been at the epicenter of this issue, and

## LONG SYNOPSIS **CONTINUED**

been a flashpoint for Native advocacy on the matter. In a changing cultural climate, NFL commissioner Roger Goodell and Washington owner Snyder have faced mounting pressure to establish a dialogue with Indian activists and communities and ultimately find an alternative name for the team.

The film answers why the NFL has not changed its stance on this topic while electing to take on other issues of social justice, such as domestic violence, criminal justice and LGBT rights.

*Imagining the Indian* also examines Washington owner Dan Snyder's outreach to American Indians as supporters, which includes building playgrounds for economically disadvantaged tribes and recognizing members before football game crowds.

The film traces the etymology of "redskin" from its birth in 19th century newspaper advertisements -- specifying the reward money for every "redskin sent to purgatory," which differed depending on the county or territory in which the Indian had been murdered, and traditionally scalped -- to the launch of Washington's franchise in the 1930s. It will examine the story of William "Lone Star" Dietz, the team's second coach, a German man who claimed to be Sioux and prompted the franchise to change its name from the Boston Braves to the Redskins in 1937.

The film shows the viewer what motivates those who fight to erase depictions of Native Americans in sports, as well as those who are determined to hold onto such names and images as sports fans. It details name and mascot-change campaigns that have been successful at high school and collegiate levels, including Stanford, Dartmouth, North Dakota and Miami of Ohio. Conversely, the film looks into movements like the Honor the Chief Society, an organization of University of Illinois students and alumni who

object to the university's retirement of former mascot "Chief Illiniwek" and seek to keep its memory alive.

*Imagining the Indian* investigates why the erasure of Native names from collegiate athletics has not translated to professional sports. It answers how a defined epithet became the name of one of the most recognizable, beloved and financially successful sports franchises in the world. It explores whether brand recognition is more important than cultural sensitivity in the halls and offices of the world's highest-grossing professional sports organization. It asks how the NFL states a moral and ethical obligation to ban a slur for African-Americans on the field, but refuses to extend that belief to the nickname of its Washington franchise defined as a racial epithet.

The film assesses the position of the American Indian community in moving this cause forward by answering: Does there need to be a moral consensus among Native peoples before the majority of American citizens consider this an actionable cause, as a lack of consensus is an oft-cited argument by dissenters? Is the Indian community at all complicit in the slow progress of this movement? How does the lack of Indian representation in sports and entertainment, both in front of and behind the camera, skew the perception of this controversy as an issue of social justice? How has the historical marginalization of this small segment of the American population influenced the opinions of both Natives and non-Natives on this matter?

Critically, *Imagining the Indian* reviews what is at stake for the people and communities who are demeaned by imagery considered offensive, which is born out in research by academics in the film like Dr. Amy West that finds such imagery creates negative psychological effects on American Indian people, particularly youth.

## LONG SYNOPSIS **CONTINUED**

The film also looks at why D.C.'s large African-American fan base, which includes highly visible and influential fans like award-winning actors and native Washingtonians Jeffrey Wright and Taraji P. Henson, hasn't allied with Native American protestors. It will address academic literature that suggests the proliferation of stereotypical Native American imagery in sports promulgates stereotyping and derogatory labeling of other minority cultures, particularly those of color. Cultural leaders in the D.C. African American community, like poet Ethelbert Miller and hip-hop artist Head-Roc, address the phenomenon.

In addition, *Imagining the Indian* chronicles what is a misunderstood momentum to end to Native American mascot with interviews of people from myriad backgrounds, including Congresspersons Eleanor Holmes-Norton and Deb Haaland, professional Native athletes Bronson Koenig and Ryan

Helsley, and national sportswriters including Christine Brennan.

Lastly, the film looks forward at political activism among Generation Z, which appears to have a new worldview not only about issues including gun control and climate change, but stereotyping in sports as well. It is with this idea in mind that the documentary will express optimism that as these younger people become the policy makers of the future, the fight against mascot in sports, entertainment, and beyond, may be won once and for all.

The goal of *Imagining the Indian* is to provide answers to the aforementioned questions in a fair manner, and provide the viewer with a better understanding of the history and significance of this movement in today's social and political landscape.

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## IMAGINING THE INDIAN INTERVIEWEES

- » Amanda Blackhorse (Diné) – Activist, lead plaintiff Blackhorse v. Pro Football, Inc.
- » Christine Brennan – Columnist, USA Today; Contributor, CNN & ABC
- » Joey Clift (Cowlitz) – Comedian, performer and television writer
- » Former State Rep. Eric Descheenie (D-AZ) (Diné) – Director of Tribal Government
- » Relations for the Navajo County Board of Supervisors
- » Kevin Gover, Esq. (Pawnee) – Director, National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution
- » David Grosso – At-large member, DC City Council
- » Rep. Deborah Haaland (D-NM) (Laguna)
- » Duke Harjo, Jr. (Cheyenne/Hodulgee Muscogee) – Political Activist and speaker
- » Dr. Suzan Harjo (Cheyenne/Hodulgee Muscogee) – Native American activist, author and scholar; lead plaintiff Harjo v. Pro Football, Inc.
- » Head Roc – DC-based Activist and Hip-Hop Musician

## IMAGINING THE INDIAN INTERVIEWEES CONTINUED

- » Bronson Koenig (Ho-Chunk) – Basketball player, NBA G-League’s Erie BayHawks
- » Marshall McKay (Yocha Dehe) – Chairman Emeritus & Ambassador, Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation
- » E. Ethelbert Miller – Poet and Activist
- » Mary Kathryn Nagle (Cherokee) – Playwright; Executive Director, Yale Indigenous Performing Arts Program; Partner, Pipestem Law
- » Dr. Joely Proudfit (Luiseño/Payomkovichum) – Chair, American Indian Studies, California State San Marcos; Director, California Indian Culture & Sovereignty Center
- » Rep. Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-DC)
- » Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-MD)
- » Prof. James Riding In (Pawnee) – American Indian Studies, Arizona State University
- » Deborah Simmons – Op-ed journalist, The Washington Times
- » DeLanna Studi (Cherokee) – Actress and storyteller; Co-Artistic Director, Native Voices series, Autry Museum of the American West
- » Dr. Amy West (Cheyenne) – Professor of Psychology, University of Southern California and specialist in Native youth psychology
- » W. Richard West Jr. (Southern Cheyenne) – President and CEO, Autry Museum; founding Director, National Museum of the American Indian
- » Jesse Witten – Attorney, Drinker Biddle & Reath, representing the plaintiffs in Blackhorse v. Pro Football, Inc.
- » Fan/Person-on-the street interviews
- » On-site interviews at RFK Stadium with Sam Bardley, Kevin Blackstone and Ben West

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## ARTISTIC STATEMENT

The Ciesla Foundation and co-director Aviva Kempner’s style and approach to documentary filmmaking is to combine interviews with knowledgeable sources, engaging original footage and compelling archival material, not only to inform an audience, but to tell an affecting story. In a similar vein, *Imagining the Indian* will utilize content from historic feature films that relate to the documentary substance to achieve dramatic and historical storytelling. Highlighting the convergence of multiple art forms, the film will include an original score to accompany the rich visuals.

In addition, as in previous Ciesla films, the directors will strive to present a non-stereotypical portrayal of subjects with first-hand testimonies, historical fiction and nonfiction footage, stills and music, as well as interviews with scholars and historians who are experts on the topics. Thus, *Imagining the Indian* will employ these approaches to impart a vision to change the trajectory around negative stereotypes and counter outdated and psychologically damaging practices associated with the use of Native American imagery and symbolism.

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## ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

**Sam Bardley (Producer)** is a documentary filmmaker with a passionate interest in telling stories rooted in his home of Washington, D.C. He was a writer and producer for the Emmy-nominated film *Without Bias*, which was included in ESPN's inaugural 30 for 30 documentary series. He has assisted the development of projects for TV One and BET, including the true-crime documentary series *American Gangster*, as well as written, produced and directed several short films and college-level educational videos. Bardley is a graduate of Howard University and Boston University's Center for Digital Arts.

**Kevin Blackistone (Producer)** is a longtime national sports columnist now at The Washington Post, a panelist on *ESPN's Around the Horn*, a contributor to National Public Radio and co-author of *A Gift for Ron*, a memoir by former NFL star Everson Walls published in November 2009 about his kidney donation to one-time teammate Ron Springs.

Blackistone has covered the Olympics, Super Bowl, Wimbledon, the World Cup, the Tour de France, the British Open, the NBA Finals, Final Four, national college football championship, NFL playoffs, Major League Baseball playoffs, world championship boxing matches and other events on multiple occasions.

Prior to its last issue in 2000, Blackistone also wrote the sports column at *Emerge*, a monthly review of politics and culture that *Time magazine* hailed as an "uncompromising voice that made [it] the nation's best Black news magazine."

Blackistone is a recipient of numerous awards, including awards for sports column writing from the Texas Associated Press Managing Editors, for investigative reporting from the Chicago Newspaper Guild, and for enterprise reporting from the National Association of Black Journalists. He was a Martin Luther King Fellow at Boston University as a graduate student.

He has authored academic journal articles on diversity in sports media and hagiography in sports film documentary. He was a visiting lecturer at Beijing Sport University in summer 2014.

Blackistone is currently a Professor of Practice at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland in College Park, Maryland.

**Aviva Kempner (Director, Producer)**, a Washington, D.C.-based filmmaker, creates successful and critically acclaimed documentaries about under-known Jewish heroes and

social justice. In 2019, she premiered her fifth commercially-released film, *The Spy Behind Home Plate*. Her other films include *Rosenwald*, a documentary about how Chicago businessman and philanthropist Julius Rosenwald partnered with Booker T. Washington in establishing over 5,000 schools for African Americans in the Jim Crow South, which she dedicated to the Black Lives Matter movement; *Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg*, about Gertrude Berg, who created the first television sitcom; and the Emmy-nominated and Peabody-awarded *The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg*, about the Hall of Famer who faced anti-Semitism during the '30s. Both *Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg* and *Hank Greenberg* grossed over a million dollars at the box office and are highly ranked, along with *Rosenwald*, on Rotten Tomatoes. She also produced the award-winning documentary *Partisans of Vilna*, about Jews fighting the Nazis.

Kempner also co-wrote and is co-producing the dramatic script *Casuse* with fellow *Imagining the Indian* producer Ben West. The project is about the Navajo activist Larry Casuse, who Kempner knew while a VISTA volunteer in New Mexico in the early '70s. While attending the Antioch School of Law in Washington, D.C., Kempner interned at the Office of the Solicitor at the Department of Interior's Indian Affairs. Upon graduation she worked at the National

## ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS **CONTINUED**

Tribal Chairman's Association and the National Conference of American Indians. Kempner graduated from the University of Michigan in 1969 with a bachelor's degree in psychology and in 1971 earned her master's in urban planning. In 1976, she earned her law degree from the Antioch School of Law.

### **Ben West (Director, Producer) (Cheyenne)**

is a freelance writer/producer, filmmaker and a consultant with the Ciesla Foundation. He spent many years in television production at Carsey-Werner Mandabach LLC, and has worked on feature films for companies like Telenova Productions, and outlets such as the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian. He is currently developing content for television and film. In addition to his endeavors in entertainment, he is Cheyenne and an advocate for Native American rights. West was born and raised in Washington, D.C. and is a graduate of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Southern California.

**Barbara Ballow (Editor)** is an Emmy award-winning editor who has been telling compelling stories for over thirty years. She has edited films and videos on topics as diverse as

tango dancing to PTSD. Her films have appeared in movie theatres, on network television, cable television, streaming platforms and in film festivals around the world. Her current films explored the life of baseball player and spy Moe Berg, the legacy of Justice John Marshall, the Right to Die Movement, oil spills, and autism.

**Yancey Burns (Associate Producer)** is a 2019 graduate of the George Washington University Documentary Film Center. He wrote and directed the award-winning documentary short, *One Fall*, which explores the return of independent professional wrestling to the District of Columbia. Prior to filmmaking, he was a practicing attorney, most recently with the Board of Ethics and Government Accountability, where he prosecuted ethical misconduct in DC government. He also owns and manages his family farm in Lincoln County, West Virginia, which produces 100% grass-fed Hereford beef. Burns holds a BS in Journalism from West Virginia University, a JD from the University of the District of Columbia David A. Clarke School of Law, and is currently pursuing an MA in Strategic Communication at the GWU School of Media and Public Affairs.



## ABOUT THE CIESLA FOUNDATION

Imagining the Indian is produced by the Ciesla Foundation. Based in Washington, D.C., the Ciesla Foundation is a 501(c)(3) public, tax-exempt educational organization. For forty years, Ciesla (pronounced CHESH-lä) has produced documentaries that investigate non-stereotypical images of Jews in history and celebrated the untold stories of Jewish heroes. *Imagining the Indian* will further Ciesla's mission of bringing important stories to the forefront, this time focusing on the movement to eliminate Native American mascot.

Ciesla's films include *Yoo-Hoo, Mrs. Goldberg*, which details the accomplishments of pioneer Gertrude Berg and her media empire, the Peabody award-winning *The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg*, the story of a Jewish baseball slugger who faced anti-Semitism in the '30s and '40s, *Partisans of Vilna*, a film about Jewish resistance against the Nazis, and *Rosenwald*, a documentary on Sears head and philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, who joined with Southern African American communities during the Jim Crow years to build 5,000 schools and supported major African American artists and intellectuals. The Foundation recently released *The Spy Behind Home Plate*, a documentary about Morris "Moe" Berg, an enigmatic Jewish catcher during baseball's Golden Age who joined the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) to spy for the U.S. on the Nazis' atomic bomb program.

Ciesla was founded in 1979 by filmmaker Aviva Kempner, who serves as the executive director. Ciesla's films have received numerous honors and awards including top honors from the National Society of Film Critics, the New York Film Critics Circle, the Broadcast Film Critics Association, a George Foster Peabody Award, and CINE Golden Eagle Awards.

**IMAGINING**  
THE INDIAN

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**PRESS KIT**

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