

Vernon Bellecourt, Who Protested the Use of Indian Mascots, Dies at 75

By Douglas Martin

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Vernon Bellecourt, an Ojibwa Indian who waged a long campaign for native rights, most visible in battling the use of Indian nicknames by sports teams, died Oct. 13 in Minneapolis. He was 75.

The cause was complications of pneumonia, his sister-in-law, Peggy Bellecourt, said.

Mr. Bellecourt (pronounced BELL-kort) first gained notice in 1972 as a principal spokesman for the American Indian Movement when the group organized a cross-country caravan to Washington, where members occupied the offices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He later worked to gain international recognition for Indian nations and their treaties, partly by meeting with controversial foreign figures like Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi of Libya and Yasir Arafat, the Palestinian leader who died in 2004.

But it was as president of the National Coalition on Racism in Sports and Media that Mr. Bellecourt achieved his greatest visibility. When teams with names like the Indians, the Redskins or the Chiefs appeared in high-profile contests, he was often there to protest.

He was arrested twice for burning an effigy of the Cleveland Indians' mascot, Chief Wahoo, and protested the Washington Redskins at the Super Bowl.

Mr. Bellecourt said Indian nicknames for sports teams perpetuated stereotypes, making it easier to forget the real identities, problems and demands of Native Americans.

The argument gained traction. In 2001, the United States Commission on Civil Rights criticized the use of Indian images and nicknames by non-Indian schools, calling them "insensitive in light of the long history of forced assimilation that American Indian people have endured in this country."

With many other forces in play, how much Mr. Bellecourt's campaign has influenced colleges and universities to abandon Indian mascots is hard to gauge. But in recent years, more than a half dozen have done so, including the University of Illinois this year. In 2005, the National Collegiate Athletic Association barred Indian mascots during postseason tournaments. A few newspapers have quit using Indian-related nicknames.



Vernon Bellecourt protested the use of Indian nicknames by college and pro sports teams. Doug Dreyer/Associated Press

Professional sports teams have been more resistant, although Mr. Bellecourt applauded in 1996 when Syracuse's Class AAA baseball team became the Skychiefs after 62 years of being the Chiefs. What Bellecourt called his "big four" targets — the Washington Redskins, the Kansas City Chiefs, the Cleveland Indians and the Atlanta Braves — have not budged.

Bellecourt was born WaBun-Inini, meaning Man of Dawn in Ojibwa, on Oct. 17, 1931, on the White Earth reservation in Minnesota. His father was disabled by mustard gas in World War I, and his mother raised 12 children on government benefits in a home with no running water or electricity.

Mr. Bellecourt dropped out of parochial school after the eighth grade and worked at odd jobs. He was convicted of robbing a bar in St. Paul and sent to prison at 19. (The state expunged the conviction from his record in 1979, The Star Tribune of Minneapolis reported.)

In prison, he learned how to be a barber, then went to beauty school after his release. He soon owned two beauty parlors in the Minneapolis area and thought he was on his way to being a millionaire, he told The Star Tribune in 1999. He moved to Denver and sold real estate.

A sense that he was losing his heritage combined with an admiration for his brother Clyde, a founder of A.I.M. in the late 1960s, led Mr. Bellecourt to help start an A.I.M chapter in Denver. He was soon involved as a spokesman and negotiator in the 1972 Washington demonstration, known as the Trail of Broken Treaties caravan. The next year, he played a small part in the 1973 occupation at Wounded Knee on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota.

In 1974, Bellecourt helped organize an international conference of native peoples under United Nations auspices to proclaim their rights. After Leonard Peltier was convicted for killing two F.B.I. agents during a shootout at Pine Ridge in 1975, Mr. Bellecourt became a leader in the campaign to free him.

Mr. Bellecourt's first trip to see a foreign leader was in 1989 when he met with Col. Qaddafi, whom he described as a "very warm, sensitive human being," and later visited at least a half dozen more times. In August 2007, he traveled to Venezuela to meet with President Hugo Chávez about getting free or cheap heating oil for Indian reservations.

Mr. Bellecourt is survived by his wife, Carol Ann Bellecourt, from whom he was separated; his companion, Janice Denny; six children; and seven grandchildren.

Mr. Bellecourt never stopped repeating that Indians were people, not mascots. At a playoff game in 1993 between the Minnesota Vikings and the Redskins, he declared, “We don’t like your chicken feathers, your paint, your cheap Hollywood chants.”