Massachusetts communities celebrate first Indigenous Peoples' Day

By Olivia Quintana GLOBE CORRESPONDENT OCTOBER 11, 2016

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The first Indigenous Peoples' Day arrived Monday in several towns across Massachusetts.

In June, the Cambridge City Council voted unanimously to change Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples' Day. The city was not able to host an official celebration this year, but groups at Harvard and Tufts universities held free, public events to mark the occasion.

"The important thing is that the Cambridge city councilors actually listened to all this," said Mahtowin Munroe, organizer of Indigenous Peoples' Day of Massachusetts. "It wasn't a matter of political expediency. They understood clearly that Indigenous Peoples' Day is a human rights issue."

A student group, Native Americans at Harvard College, hosted festivities beginning at 3 p.m., said Damon Clark, president of the group. The group is also pressing Harvard University to recognize the renamed holiday, he said.

Tufts University has already recognized Indigenous Peoples' Day on the academic calendars of the School of Arts and Sciences and the School of Engineering, said Patrick Collins, a Tufts spokesman.

Student groups had planned a celebration for Monday evening featuring cultural performances, food, and art, Munroe said.

Munroe said she hopes the holiday's new name will enhance public understanding of Native Americans.

"We have been so thoroughly erased that people think we are dinosaurs and aren't even alive anymore," Munroe said. "It's really important to change the conversation away from genocide and to the original inhabitants of this land and to the fact that we continue to be here."

Munroe said the group hopes other cities will follow Cambridge's lead and move away from celebrating Columbus Day.

"To continue to glorify Columbus is damaging to us and particularly to native children," Munroe said. "It perpetuates this idea that Columbus discovered something, but we were already here. You can't discover something that it is already there."

In May, both Amherst and Northampton declared the second Monday in October Indigenous Peoples' Day.

"The city of Northampton recognizes that Northampton is built upon the ancestral homelands and villages of the indigenous peoples of this region, without whom the building of the city would not have been possible," a City Council resolution stated.

The group is working for Indigenous Peoples' Day to be recognized in Boston, Munroe said.

"There needs to be a significant public acknowledgment of what happened to us," she said.

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