

Preserving Indigenous culture relies on highlighting Texas' discriminatory history

By Riddhi Bora

In seventh grade, Amy Taulman's classmates made derogatory chanting sounds aimed at her. Her teacher did nothing about it, so she left the classroom in protest.

Years later as the Texas State Board of Education forestalls enacting a clear policy for teaching about Native cultures in the state's high schools, she and others like her across Texas continue to stand up for the preservation of their Indigenous culture.

Taulman, Great Promise for American Indians board of directors chair, said because of a U.S. army campaign to eradicate Lipan Apache people, her grandmother and other Lipan Apache hid their Native ancestry and tried to blend in with Mexican American society.

"I think Texas has some room to make amends for the loss of Native culture that occurred over the past two centuries during which it was not safe to be Native in Texas," Taulman said. "Acknowledging the stripping of culture and working to make the Native presence in Texas visible again, would be a good start."

As of 2022, non-Hispanic Indigenous and Hispanic Indigenous people make up fewer than 1% of Austin's population. While currently Indigenous Americans serve as a minority in the city, Indigenous tribes such as the Coahuiltecan, Tonkawa and Jumanos have existed in Texas since 12000 BCE. Legislation such as the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 attempted to eliminate the Indigenous American population and erase their culture from Texas.

Despite this, groups such as the Native American Indigenous Collective and Great Promise for American Indians continue to educate and celebrate their culture in Austin.

In elementary, middle and high school, NAIC member Xochi Citalma, said she learned nothing about Indigenous American history and schools would only mention them when discussing their interactions with Europeans.

The problem persists. For example, just last April the conservative-leaning state education board delayed a decision on whether to include instruction on American Indian-Native Studies in the public school curriculum. Last November, the board instructed the Texas Education Agency to prepare a draft of a Native Studies course. However, after the draft's creation, the SBOE failed to include the course on the April meeting agenda. The next chance for the board to review the course will be in June 2025.

“There's a very clear agenda of centering whiteness. (Schools) only mention 1% of Indigenous dialogs that we're having while being on Indigenous land,” Citalma said. “That's 20,000 years (of) Indigenous (history) and 500 years that is European and Indigenous. And we only hear the European side. That's not correct.”

Taulman said a community of Lipan Apache people hid in Mexico to keep their culture alive. She said returning the Lipan Apache language to Texas would be an important opportunity to revitalize their culture.

“It may not seem like much, but language is a huge part of identity,” Taulman said. “Stripping Native peoples of their languages has been one of the most emotionally harmful practices used at reservation schools and throughout the efforts to subdue Native populations.”

Great Promise for American Indians hosts the “Austin Powwow,” an annual event featuring a Native market, a Native food court and traditional dance competitions. Taluman said that in addition to the Great Austin Powwow, the group provides other events to keep Indigenous people's cultures alive.

“We hold monthly Family Day potlucks that include teaching various topics and crafts,” Taulman said. “Additionally, our programs director sponsors interns from the University of Texas and provides weekly learning projects for them. We also have historically had a summer camp for children, which we hope to start up again.”

Citalma said to preserve culture, she and other Indigenous Americans focus on community and surrounding themselves with fellow Indigenous people.

“We immerse ourselves in indigeneity, history, cultures and others' lives,” Citalma said, “and continue to support other Indigenous people, through their art, through their craft, through their medicine, through what they bring and offer to the world.”