



Testimony for Maryland Indigenous Peoples Day Bill, House Bill 895
Submitted by Kerry Hawk Lessard, MAA,
Executive Director Native American Lifelines

Haŋ, mitákuyepi. Čhaŋté waštéya, napečhiyúzapi. Kerry Hawk Lessard émačiyapi. Wasiču na Shawnee na Očéti etáŋhaŋ imáčaŋe. Executive Director Native American LifeLines he miyé.

Hello, relatives. I greet you today with a good heart. My name is Kerry Hawk Lessard. I am descended of Irish and German immigrants, as well as Shawnee, Lakota, and Assiniboine people. I am the Executive Director of Native American LifeLines, which is an Urban Indian Health Program in Baltimore, City. We are funded by the Indian Health Service in part to uphold the trust and treaty obligations the United States government has to tribal citizens and their descendants.

I speak to you in the Lakota language to honor my ancestor, Clark Gregg, who graduated from the Carlisle Indian Boarding School in 1895 and came to Baltimore where he started a family. My family. My lala was called Suŋká Waŋblí, or Dog Eagle, and my uŋčí was called Thípi íh'payá, or Throws Down the Lodge. And although Clark Gregg would have himself be known by a Lakota or Nakoda name, that name has been lost to us because when he entered Carlisle, that name was taken from him, as was his language, his hair, his clothing, his religion, and really everything that made him a part of Lakota society. Of course, that was the purpose of these schools, to “kill the Indian and save the man.” I am telling you these things because the same system that ripped Native children from the arms of their mothers is the same system that celebrates – and, by extension, forces us to celebrate – the invasion of our homelands and the genocide of our people. I speak, of course, of Columbus Day.

I have heard some people say that we should “get over it” and that we “lost,” as if these things can be reduced to simple losses and victories. But I would here remind you of the land upon which you stand and of the people whose resources are the source of all your wealth. Beneath the foundation of this very building lies the dust of our ancestors, our villages, and our Turtle Island. These are our homelands and to be respected upon them should not, I think, be too much to ask.

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As I mentioned, I am the Executive Director of an Urban Indian Health Program. A significant focus of my work and the work of my team is to address the mental and physical distress experienced by our Native community and to restore health and wellness. No small task. And in my research as a medical anthropologist, one thing that I know is that these losses – the loss of land, the loss of language, the loss of agency and identity – are a primary driver of poor health among our people. Simply put, when the society in which you live and which has wholly overtaken your ancestral homelands continually messages that you have no value and no place, this has devastating psychological and somatic consequences.

The way we remediate these losses, then, is to, bit by bit, return to our communities the things we have lost. It is why I come to you today, humbly, and ask that you support House Bill 895, an act that would replace Columbus Day and instead observe Indigenous People's Day. By elevating the legacy and contemporary lives of indigenous people, you are taking an important step in reconciling the injustices and indignities my people have experienced for generations and which has personally robbed me of a language, culture, and *tíyošpayé* that my ancestors intended me to have. Only the cruelest of societies would ask the oppressed to celebrate their oppressor. You have today the ability to redress that wrong. I pray that you exercise it.

Héčetu.

Lila pilamaye ksto. Thank you very much.

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