

Native students exercise right to wear regalia at graduation

BY SAM METZ AND RICK BOWMER

Associated Press

CEDAR CITY, Utah — She walked up a red carpet and crossed a stage to accept her diploma wearing an eagle feather beaded onto her cap that her mother had gifted her.

Amryn Tom graduated last week from southern Utah's Cedar City High School. Her family cheered.

For the Paiute Indian Tribe of Utah and other Native Americans, eagle feathers of the variety Tom wore are sacred items passed down through generations, used at ceremonies to signify achievement and connection with the community.

"This is from your ancestors," Tom said her mother, Charie, told her.

One year ago, students in Tom's school district would have been barred from wearing any form of tribal regalia along with their traditional cardinal-colored caps and gowns.

Not this year.

In March, Utah joined a growing list of states in enshrining Native American students' rights to wear tribal regalia at their graduation ceremonies.

In Iron County, where the school district tried to bar two graduates from wearing regalia at last year's ceremonies, Tom and other Native American students savored the hard-won right.

"It's kind of huge," said Paiute tribal member Brailyn Jake, an eagle feather and beads dangling from her



Rick Bowmer/AP

Amryn Tom reacts after graduating from Cedar City High School on May 25 in Cedar City, Utah. Tom is wearing an eagle feather given to her by her mother and a cap that a family friend beaded.

turquoise cap. Her cousin was one of the students stopped from donning beads last year.

"People don't understand our culture, the meaning behind it and how, when you're turned down for something this big, it's kind of like, wow," Jake said.

Students across the U.S. often sport flower leis or flashy sashes at gradu-

ation with little controversy. But the rules governing tribal regalia at high school graduations have emerged as a legislative issue in several red and blue states after reports of students being prevented from wearing attire like Jake and Tom's.

Arizona, California, Kansas, Montana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota and Wash-

ington all recently enacted laws that either enshrine students' rights or bar schools from enforcing dress codes banning tribal regalia. After passing through the legislature, a bill with similar provisions is being sent to Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy.

In Utah, Paiute Chairwoman Corrina Bow brought the issue to state lawmakers after last year's two Iron County incidents. The district had no formal rules prohibiting Native American students from donning regalia.

Bow noted the graduation rate for Native American and Alaskan Native students was 74% in 2019, the lowest of any demographic group, and told lawmakers that guaranteeing students statewide the right to wear regalia would allow them to "honor their culture, religion and heritage."

Similar controversies have occurred at schools in Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, suburban Chicago and elsewhere, with graduates being barred from wearing everything from beadwork and moccasins to sealskin caps. The incidents pit Native American students and their parents against administrators who say they want to maintain uniformity at graduation ceremonies.

Emalyce Kee, who is Navajo and Rosebud Sioux, was one of the two students told not to wear a beaded cap or plumes to her Cedar City High School graduation ceremony last year. She did it anyway.

Before walking across the stage to

accept her diploma, Kee switched out her plain cap for one with a plume and beadwork by her uncle. Half a dozen family members in the front row applauded.

"I hadn't felt that powerful before that moment, standing up with my diploma, with my Native cap on and then shaking my principal's hand," Kee said.

At a high school that used "Redmen" as its mascot until 2019, Kee and her mother, Valerie Glass, said it stuck with them how the principal had argued beaded caps would set a precedent to allow all students to decorate their graduation attire.

"It's not 'decorative' regalia. It's traditional beaded regalia. How can you have the Cedar Redmen for so long and not honor your Native American students?" Glass said.

Iron County Superintendent Lance Hatch was not available for comment.

Hoksila Lakota gifted his nephew Elijah James Wiggins, who is of Lakota ancestry, an eagle feather in honor of his graduation from Cedar City High School on Wednesday. He said eagle feathers — called wamblii wakan in Lakota — are fundamental to celebrating once-in-a-lifetime achievements, with many believing they hold a connection to God.

"These aren't something you find on the floor and do whatever with," he said. "These are sacred items given from grandfather to son or uncle to nephew."

Endicott

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Endicott said he plans to make an endorsement in the November mayoral election, which he will announce later this week.

He argued that the next leader of Redmond should have a local focus, while also keeping an eye on larger issues.

"Mayors can have a great deal of influence, and when exercised wisely, can make an impact on public policy outside of their individual cities," he said.

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Bulletin file photo

In this file photo, Redmond Mayor George Endicott, center, addresses Redmond High School graduates.

Linschied

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In an Alford plea, the defendant accepts responsibility for a crime though does not admit guilt. First-degree assault is a Measure 11 offense in Oregon for which Linschied likely would have received around eight years in prison.

Deschutes County Circuit Judge Bethany Flint asked Linschied a series of questions to ensure she was entering her plea freely and voluntarily.

"As you know, the jury is

currently deliberating," the judge said. "You have the option to continue to let them deliberate. You do not need to do what you're about to do. You know that?"

"Yes," Linschied replied. Linschied's sentencing is scheduled for Thursday. Flint could go along with the plea deal, though that's not guaranteed.

Linschied has agreed to serve 30 days in jail and undergo a psychological evaluation. Under the plea deal, she is to have no unsupervised contact with minors or her victim, Jackson Rose

Sykes.

On the afternoon of Oct. 31, 2018, Linschied was the only adult in her apartment when Jackson suffered a brain hemorrhage and was rushed to a children's hospital in Portland. Linschied said Jackson had fallen 2 feet off a bed onto a carpeted floor. But prosecutors presented medical testimony saying Jackson's injury was more likely the result of abusive head trauma.

Evidence from Linschied's phone showed several queries in the weeks before Jackson's injury, like

"adults wanting to hit random babies for no reason" and "why do I want to hurt defenseless people?"

Her trial took place over six days in Flint's courtroom. Testimony was given by Jackson's parents and Linschied, who maintained her story: Jackson injured herself. Linschied was joined each day by a band of supporters, including her parents.

Deschutes County District Attorney John Hummel said this week Jackson has made a full recovery.

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