

The cost of an exhibit: The damage done to the Native American House's "Beyond the Chief" artwork

By Ashley Tsosie-Mahieu

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In mid-February, HOCK E AYE VI Edgar Heap of Birds, a Cheyenne-Arapaho artist, visited the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign campus. Just days after his "Beyond the Chief" exhibit debuted on Nevada Street, Heap of Birds gave a talk about the social justice elements of his work. Heap of Birds explained that his exhibits are intended to make viewers confront America's controversial past and reflect on the treatment of Native peoples, as well as to understand Native peoples' resistance to colonial imposition.

The "Beyond the Chief" exhibit is specifically intended for viewers to reflect on the history of Illinois. The top words on the signs, "Fighting Illini," are printed backwards to enhance this effect. Additionally, each of the twelve signs represents an Indigenous group who once belonged to the lands now known as "Illinois." These include Kaskaskia, Peoria, and Wea. The signs are reminders of those whose lands we now walk upon, work upon, and live upon. By reflecting back, we can try to understand the complex histories of forced removal and attempt to respect those who came before us.

Heap of Birds' work is often politically-charged in nature, and the "Beyond the Chief" exhibit is no exception. The damage done to the exhibit, then, provokes much wonder due to the political significance of the signs. One of the signs in the exhibit showed considerable damage when Robert Warrior, the Director of the Native American House, John McKinn, the Assistant Director of the Native American House, and I passed by the sign on the afternoon of Monday, March 16. The sign that was damaged was the "Peoria" sign, one of three signs installed directly outside of the Native American House. It appeared as if someone had used a shoulder or foot to crush the sign, as it was bent in at the center, the ends pulled in toward each other. Each sign is appraised at \$10,000 each due to artist fees, cost of materials, and cost of installation.

The monetary damage done to the sign is significant, but is it more significant than it seems? Was the perpetrator merely a drunk college student on their way home from the bar picking out random things to destroy? Or was the damage to the sign a malicious attack on the Native American House and the "Beyond the Chief" exhibit? As a Native student and an employee of the Native American House who has dealt with the overwhelming racist attitude of many folks on and off campus and who has witnessed many verbal attacks on the Native American House, on Native students, and on Native peoples and communities in general, it is difficult to dismiss this incident as a harmless prank.

Because the "Peoria" sign was singled out, the intent of the perpetrator further comes into question. A picture of the "Peoria" sign is what was used by the Native American House to widely publicize the "Beyond the Chief" exhibit and the Heap of Birds visit and presentations at

the University. Not only was the “Peoria” sign the most recognizable sign of the exhibit, but the Chiefs of the Peoria Nation, Chief John Froman and Second Chief Jason Dollarhide, had visited campus as part of the “Meet the Chief” event less than one week prior to the damage done to the exhibit. All of this makes one wonder if the damage done to the exhibit is just as symbolic as the exhibit itself. Did the perpetrator intend to attack the Native American House? Is this a reaction against the activities created by the Native American House, especially those surrounding “chief illiniwek”?

I suppose we may never know the answers to those questions. But, what still remains evident by this occurrence and the commentary after this story was reported by the *Daily Illini* is this community’s dire need for education about Native peoples, communities, and nations *by* Native peoples. This is what the Native American House and American Indian Studies program try to achieve with programs like “Meet the Chief” and the Heap of Birds exhibit “Beyond the Chief.” It is just unfortunate that our efforts always seem to come at an additional cost.