

## Columbus Day and the “Rest of the Story”

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Fall of 2010 was the beginning of my last year as an undergraduate at BYU studying public health. I had just returned from an internship in Washington, DC with the Office of Minority Health (OMH). The fall semester came with the usual angst of upcoming colonial holiday narratives. “But this is your last year at BYU,” I told myself, “You’re now a pro at managing the dismissive and lonely conversations about Native American culture and stereotypes. You got this!” Then, I received an indelible impression to organize a public educational event on the BYU campus for Columbus Day. The purpose of the event was, first, to raise awareness of the full legacy of Columbus by acknowledging the devastating consequences of his voyage for the Indigenous population of the Americas. Second, it was to generate dialogue among BYU students that genocide is not the Lord’s will. The third priority was to use the awareness and dialogues to synthesize solutions to modern systemic racism of this history. Hopefully, this would create a meaningful and enriching experience for students and faculty, both Native and non-Native.

I sent an email to trusted colleagues and administrators from the Multicultural Student Services Office with whom I had previously worked and volunteered in order to find out how to organize such an event on campus. There was no response for several weeks, until I received a kind invitation to lunch from the Dean of Student Life. The dean encouraged me to organize the event as long as I followed the office guidelines on how to host a public educational event on campus. First, it had to be called a “demonstration,” and second, I had to obtain two faculty advisors and one department chair sponsorship with signatures and the college dean’s approval.

My first request to the history department chair seemed the most logical, but it was immediately rejected with no explanation. My next attempt was to approach the religion department, so I started with my

religion professor. I knew the dominant narrative within the Church regarding Columbus was one of glory, and it was supported in large measure by interpretations of the Book of Mormon and Church leaders.<sup>1</sup> My professor referred me to the department's expert on Columbus, who respectfully declined my request to sponsor the event as he was no longer the department chair, and he attached quotes from past Church leaders supporting his opposing view.

Feeling a little defeated, I turned to a Latin American history professor, Jeffrey Shumway, who offered moral support and encouragement for the cause. As I was waiting outside the professor's office, I overheard two history professors speaking openly to each other in the hall close to where I was standing. One asked the other: "Have you heard about that girl who is trying to organize a Columbus Day demonstration?" The other responded while laughing: "Yeah. I don't want to receive a call from a General Authority in the middle of the night asking about historical interpretation of 1 Nephi 13." It was clear to me that as much as I wanted to give voice to an unpopular Indigenous perspective on the holiday, my own voice was mute. I privately cried out my feelings of loneliness, and I remember questioning my own sanity. *What am I doing? Is this worth it? Am I wrong?*

This experience taught me that I had very few friends in the Church who were able to comfortably talk about Columbus or issues of modern systemic racism. In my final attempt, I walked into Renata Forste's office, who was then serving as the sociology department chair, and gave my pitch. I shared with her the stories of my previous failed attempts to seek sponsorship, and she asked me to check with BYU's David M. Kennedy Center of International Studies to see if they would sponsor me, and if they would not, she assured me that the sociology department would. After working with sociology faculty advisors Carol Ward and Cardell Jacobson, the BYU Office of Student Life approved my

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1. Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987), 91.

application for the demonstration. I had two weeks to plan the actual demonstration and panel discussion, plus I had to keep up with my coursework and weekly rehearsals for a performing arts group.

To my surprise, I felt the most resistance from fellow Native students and staff, many of whom were my friends and colleagues. The demonstration had stirred some discomfort and controversy. The advisor for a Native student club that I regularly supported would not allow me to make an announcement at a club event. And then, a few nights later, my house was egged in the dark.

On the morning of the event, my heart was racing and I felt anxious. The demonstration took place on the front quad of the Joseph F. Smith Building at 10:00 a.m., right in time for high foot traffic. I instructed nine of ten students to lie upon the concrete ground, while one in ten remained standing to symbolize that 90 percent of the Indigenous population was decimated after the arrival of Columbus. Comparative literature professor George Handley showed up the morning of the demonstration to support the event with his teenage children.

History professor Jenny Pulsipher had prepared a table and a blank journal for students passing by to write any thoughts or comments about the demonstration. The event was covered by the local news as well as by Alfredo Carrera from BYU Broadcasting. One passing student commented: "I think this is an excellent, valuable effort. I believe that many are simply unaware of how their perspective of an event has been skewed from childhood. I appreciate the opportunity to be aware and thus more sensitive to the views of my brothers and sisters." Another student wrote: "An excellent, fact-driven event. Awareness of 'our' actions, past and present, breeds understanding, compassion, and cultural harmony." Overall, I would say the demonstration and discussion were a success.

I learned a valuable lesson about intellectual freedom and faith-based institutions. Although the pursuit of truth is Christ's way, by design, truth will challenge faith in understanding God's will, and that is part of the journey.