



## 2014 Chief Standing Bear Essay Winner

One hundred and thirty-five years ago Chief Standing Bear boldly stood before U.S. District Judge Elmer Dundy in Omaha, Nebraska, and not only fought for the right to the equal protection under the law for his people, but also set a resounding example of true perseverance and leadership for future generations. Judge Dundy ultimately ruled in favor of Standing Bear, reasoning that the 14th Amendment's guarantee of equal protection of the laws also applied to the Ponca people. The decision was a landmark declaration of Indians' equal rights and profoundly impacted Civil Rights history.

Rarely have I felt so passionate about a leader's vision for equality as I do for that of Chief Standing Bear. His is a story of remarkable courage and fortitude, of tenacity and perseverance, and a keen awareness for social justice. These are ideals I strive toward daily, examples I want to exude and mirror in every aspect of my life, in the relationships I foster and in the causes I champion. What causes do I see today that are worth pursuing with Chief Standing Bear's admirable persistence for equality? For me, there is no area in today's society that so blatantly reflects inequality as that of the criminal justice system. In an age of austerity, the iron cage that so many Americans are forced to inhabit has not only continued to serve as a form of bondage, it is now a common norm largely ignored by a subservient, sleepwalking society.

Similar to Chief Standing Bear and his people who were stuck on the reservation, Natives are now stuck in a systematic cycle that keeps them in poverty and incarcerated at wildly disproportionate rates. Further, prisons feed a pathological cycle of poverty, community dysfunction, crime, and hopelessness.

I hope to fundamentally alter this trend by providing adequate legal representation for indigent populations. Chief Standing Bear had to work tirelessly to be recognized as a person in the eyes of the law. I recognize this fight will be a prolonged one and will require no small measure of work and effort. It will take leaders such as Chief Standing Bear, together united to serve the underprivileged and enact true, lasting, equality-driven change. I strive to be such a leader and to do my part in radically improving the lives of other Native Americans in a meaningful way. Whenever I am fraught with distress, overwhelmed by the staggering problems that mire society, I turn my eyes toward the proverbial horizon of the past and to Chief Standing Bear's incredible journey—a frigid, six-hundred-mile walk back to a land tied inextricably to the identity of himself and his people—to honor his dying son's last wish to be buried in his homeland. If Chief Standing Bear can brave incredible odds and conquer the dead of winter to keep a mere promise, I, too, can face the formidable obstacles that lie ahead and work unceasingly toward the promise of equality for all.

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