

Della Floyd

Fighting for the Original Seattleites

I grew up on Coast Salish land. It is the land of the Duwamish and Suquamish people, which has been sacred since time immemorial. It was my school and my playground. I grew up at Chief Sealth International High School football games, cheering for a school named after a Native American leader, Chief Sealth, with no understanding of the power behind the namesake. Indigenous culture is interwoven with present day infrastructure in Seattle, and as Seattleites, we have a moral responsibility to understand the oppression experienced by the original Seattleites, the Duwamish.

My schools and communities failed to recognize and educate my peers and I about the land we walk on every day. Until recently, I've been blind to the true significance of Chief Sealth, and the ongoing struggle of the Duwamish people, a tribe that still does not have tribal recognition despite its centuries of history. Lack of recognition is a tangible result of violations to the famous Treaty of Point Elliott by the United States government.

The movement for tribal recognition has been headed by Cecile Hansen, present day tribe-chairwoman and descendent of Chief Sealth. Hansen demonstrates civic courage through advocating for both tribal recognition and upholding of the original treaty between the Coast Salish people and settlers which was signed by her ancestor Chief Sealth.

The original European settlers in the Pacific Northwest arrived in 1792, driven by manifest destiny and hope for unsettled land. George Vancouver and his men did not find uninhabited wilderness. They found a centuries old civilization. The Duwamish tribe alone filled 40 villages spanning from present day Burien to Everett¹. When engaging with the Native American people, settlers did not turn back or respect the established community. Instead they began an era of genocide and trickery.

Today's estimates indicate that 12,000 Coast Salish people died from diseases introduced by white settlers in the first 80 years of contact². Those that remained were forced to live alongside settlers; they faced oppression through murder, rape and systemic racism.

Perhaps the most famous treaty between the Coast Salish peoples and European settlers was the 1855 Treaty of Point Elliott. The treaty contained 15 articles and was signed by 99 chiefs as well as Isaac I. Stevens, the governor and superintendent of Indian affairs. The treaty guaranteed native rights to fish and hunt. It outlined which lands the Native Americans would give up in addition to the payment for said land. It discussed assimilation policies. It also dictated that all Indians would move onto reservations, where they would receive financial support from the United States government.³ It guaranteed tribal sovereignty, rights to healthcare, and education.

Historians see it as unlikely that the treaty was completely understood by all who signed. Is it reasonable to assume all the chiefs who signed it signed voluntarily? How could such an

¹ "The Tribe That Would Not Die." *Seattle Met*, 28 Oct. 2016, www.seattlemet.com/news-and-city-life/2009/02/0309fea-duwamish.

² "Chief Si'ahl." *Duwamish Tribe*, www.duwamishtribe.org/chief-siah1.

³ "Treaty of Point Elliott, 1855." *GOIA*, goia.wa.gov/tribal-government/treaty-point-elliott-1855.

elaborate treaty be drawn up when those 99 chiefs did not speak the same language? In 1855, settlers and Native Americans had developed Chinook-Jargon, a simple language used to communicate for trade.

The treaty gave rights to tribes and protected them from exclusion from rights. The issue today has two parts. First, many tribes did not receive satisfactory payment for land, and the treaty itself is evidence of taking advantage of indigenous peoples. Second, the Treaty of Point Elliott guarantees rights to federally recognized tribes. Not all the original signers are recognized as tribes today, meaning they do not all have tribal rights or access to federal assistance. Tribes without sovereignty cannot operate casinos, a popular business among tribes in the Pacific Northwest.

The Duwamish Tribe, led by Chief Sealth, the first signer, does not have tribal status today. The fight to gain that status, and therefore secure the rights guaranteed in the Treaty of Point Elliott, has been a long struggle for the Duwamish. That fight has been headed by different leaders, the most prominent being Cecile Hansen. Hansen has made her message clear, stating in 2009, “I truly believe that it is the will of our creator for our acknowledgment to be restored...Until that happens my work isn’t finished⁴.”

⁴ “The Tribe That Would Not Die.” *Seattle Met*, 28 Oct. 2016, www.seattlemet.com/news-and-city-life/2009/02/0309fea-duwamish.

Hansen has worked tirelessly to fight for tribal recognition. Hansen organized the group that built the Duwamish longhouse, the first longhouse Puget Sound built in the last 115 years. She has lobbied to a variety of groups and politicians on the local and national levels.

Hansen demonstrates civic courage by taking personal and professional risks. Personally, Hansen's advocating for tribal recognition is a risk as many people are against it. Especially as a Native American woman, a group in which more than 4 in 5 have experienced violence, she has put her life in danger by fighting for something many powerful people are against⁵. Professionally, Hansen is a chairwoman for the Duwamish. She gets respect as a leader for the actions she takes. By taking the risk of not being successful in gaining recognition for the Duwamish, she risks not being respected as a leader and possibly even losing her position.

Hansen has made statements in support for tribal recognition which could make her a target for anti-indigenous sentiment. In a video statement produced by Seattle Live, Hansen gave her sentiment as to why the Duwamish need recognition. In “We’re Still Here,” Chairwoman Hansen responded to a comment made by an official in the Bureau of Indian affairs. The official responded to a call for tribal recognition saying, “You’re extinct.” Hansen responded by suing for recognition in 2001⁶. This is the attitude by which Hansen has lived her whole career as chairwomen.

⁵ “Ending Violence Against Native Women.” *Ending Violence Against Native Women* | Indian Law Resource Center, indianlaw.org/issue/ending-violence-against-native-women

⁶ “We’re Still Here - Cecile Hansen, Chair of The Duwamish Tribe.” *Youtube*, Seattle Live, 23 Apr. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5S5lvvhC4>.

Cecile Hansen has fought for the Duwamish in Washington DC courts, and on the streets of Seattle, where she has worked to gain support among Seattleites⁷. In 2017, Hansen unveiled a program in Seattle called Real Rent Duwamish in which locals can make donations to the tribe, symbolically paying rent for the land that was taken in the Treaty of Point Elliott⁸. The front page of the Rent Real website reads, “We sacrificed our land to make the City of Seattle a beautiful reality. We are still waiting for our justice.” This quote by Cecile Hansen demonstrates her continuous fight for Duwamish rights.

Hansen has also made strides to increase resource availability for the Duwamish people who have been denied federal services since the Treaty of Point Elliott. In 1983, just 8 years after her election, Cecile Hansen helped establish Duwamish tribal services. These services help provide education, food and money to tribe members who cannot get them in other ways. The mission is still funded today through the Real Rent program. Despite losses in court to gain recognition, Hansen has made strides within her community to create change and has opened the door for future recognition.

By taking action in her community through unveiling of Duwamish services, as well as petitioning the court in Washington DC for federal recognition, Hansen took personal and professional risk, demonstrating civic courage. The Duwamish tribal recognition lawsuit was not a case with much promise. Hundreds of tribes today are without recognition, and by taking her case to the federal level, Hansel risked failure and even ridicule. Furthermore, she risked her career. Her status as chairwoman of the Duwamish is an elected position, contingent on her

⁷ “The Tribe That Would Not Die.” *Seattle Met*, 28 Oct. 2016, www.seattlemet.com/news-and-city-life/2009/02/0309fea-duwamish.

⁸ “Real Rent Duwamish.” *Real Rent Duwamish*, www.realrentduwamish.org/.

fulfilling her role. By targeting huge issues, Cecile allowed the possibility of the Duwamish people being unhappy and even wanted her removed as chairwoman.

Hansen's actions also constitute personal risk because many people are strongly against recognition. Even members of Indian tribes are sometimes against recognition due to perceived competition for limited resources and unspecified sovereignty for recognized tribes. A key economic venture for many tribes is casinos. Only federally recognized tribes can operate casinos, so getting more recognition could mean more competition between tribes, especially in a metro center like Seattle. There are a limited number of casinos within the Seattle area. For this reason, Hansen may have made herself less popular among other tribes by fighting for Duwamish recognition. This is a risk Hansen took willingly as she petitioned for Duwamish sovereignty.

Racism is a key issue that demonstrates Hansen's civic courage. Racism towards indigenous peoples has been prevalent since George Vancouver first arrived in the Pacific Northwest. Today, it is more systemic than the mass genocides that occurred in the 19th century, but the danger to simply be indigenous is still apparent. The third leading cause of death among Native American women in the United States is murder. In 2016, 5,712 cases of missing American Indian women were reported to the US Department of Justice's federal missing persons database. Only 116 were logged⁹.

⁹“Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.” *Urban Indian Health Institute*, 2016, <https://www.uihi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Missing-and-Murdered-Indigenous-Women-and-Girls-Report.pdf>.

Statistically, Hansen is a member of an at-risk group. By advocating for policy changes that are undesirable to many people, she puts herself more at risk for hate crimes and anger. She has courageously fought for her mission since she was first elected chairwomen and continues to do so today despite personal and professional danger.

Federal recognition for the Duwamish matters to the Duwamish community which has been my home for the past 18 years. It matters to the Duwamish people who have yet to receive the services promised to them when Chief Sealth signed the Treaty of Point Elliott in 1855. This is an egregious violation of legal rights. Cecile Hansen of the Duwamish tribe has tirelessly fought for her people on the local and federal level. Her courage has not yielded a law change, but it has increased local services available to the Duwamish people. Her civic courage has supported the original Seattleites and has honored her ancestor Chief Sealth.

Bibliography

1. “Chief Si’ahl.” *Duwamish Tribe*, www.duwamishtribe.org/chief-siah1.
2. “Ending Violence Against Native Women.” *Ending Violence Against Native Women | Indian Law Resource Center*, indianlaw.org/issue/ending-violence-against-native-women.
3. “Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.” *Urban Indian Health Institute*, 2016, <https://www.uihi.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Missing-and-Murdered-Indigenous-Women-and-Girls-Report.pdf>.
4. “Real Rent Duwamish.” *Real Rent Duwamish*, www.realrentduwamish.org/.
5. “The Tribe That Would Not Die.” *Seattle Met*, 28 Oct. 2016, www.seattlemet.com/news-and-city-life/2009/02/0309fea-duwamish.
6. “Treaty of Point Elliott, 1855.” *GOIA*, goia.wa.gov/tribal-government/treaty-point-elliott-1855.
7. “We’re Still Here - Cecile Hansen, Chair of The Duwamish Tribe.” *Youtube*, Seattle Live, 23 Apr. 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D5S5lrbvhC4>.