

When you hear about the San Diego State Aztecs this time of year is usually about football bowl games. But my next guest is deeply involved in expanding Aztec awareness at SDSU. Dr. Ramona Perez was named the chair of Aztec culture education for the Aztec governing committee earlier this month. She's in SD a professor of anthropology and also directs the Center for Latin American studies. So Professor Perez welcome to the program. Thank you. It's my pleasure to be here. Now for people unfamiliar with the group what is the mission of the Aztec governing committee at SDSU.

The Aztec governing committee was created from the task force report. Its mission its overall mission is to have all of the key governing bodies of the university participate in the overall movement of cultural education and events around Aztec identity. And so it consists of folks like the director of athletics the president of the Associated Students the chair of the Faculty Senate the president of the alumni association. And it's chaired by President the authority. Now what does it mean to advance Aztec culture at San Diego State. Literally what it means is to put it on the table in such a way that it is a naturalized part of being an SD community member.

We want to make sure that if we're going to hold this as part of our identity that people who come onto campus don't just see it as something emblematic of sports. The Aztec Empire was so much bigger than that and it does encompass almost every element of our campus from community outreach to science to technology to engineering to literature poetry was one of the major forms of communication for the non-white people. So we want to make sure that that becomes a part of everybody's experience at San Diego State. Tell us some ways you're going to go about doing that.

You know there are so many different ways to do it but what we want to do is not create solo events or moments but rather have it more integrated so we will hold events throughout the year where we bring in people who can participate with us in

understanding better the Namma empire than what contemporary people were going to make sure that that conversation is a part of our conversation with native Indians of California. We are on Koomey territory and you know though although it's a very heterogeneous group and we talk about indigenous people or Native peoples we want to make sure that we recognize what we're doing and who we are so we're not another empire so to speak with it with a negative relationship but more of a positive one but it will also be things like an online education program that really talks about our history of how we came to be the Aztecs our history of being on Koomey lands and about the notion of cultural appropriation so that every incoming student were hoping to start this fall.

Every incoming student will go through this and they'll have an opportunity to think for themselves about what this means and what this means to them. It will also be things like the healing garden that we have on the calendar that will become a space where anybody and everybody in the San Diego region and if people want to come from outside they're more than welcome can come and participate in a space of healing a kind of holistic healing. We want to make sure that it has the kinds of healing herbs we're gonna have a mural we'll have other art forms and I know that teaching the Aztec language is has been a big part of the cultural awareness campaign will have impact does teaching the language have it has a huge impact.

It's not one that we necessarily recognized right away as having that but language encompasses worldview and any time that we lose a language anywhere in the world we lose an opportunity to understand the world in a much different way by us providing language instruction and what it basically confirms that we want people to have the opportunity to understand the true culture and ideology and perspectives of the non-white people. It's contemporary and it's live streamed. We actually live stream it from Zacatecas where maternal Nà was speakers are the instructors. Now last spring you decided to keep the Aztec name but modify the mascot's appearance.

How has it been modified. It really hasn't yet. I think people are beginning to see that there is a different way in which the spirit leader. The other thing is mascot when trying not to use it in that way because it's not a character. It is a representative a symbolic representative but at this point the Aztec Warrior has a more subdued role how that will look as it pans out. We're still working on the athletics department is basically the one who handles that part of it but they are part of the tech education committee.

So as they move forward and think about what the warrior will do and how that Worrill will represent Aztec identity is held in now in conversation with this larger group that includes representatives from Associated Students from faculty from staff from different areas. Do you agree with keeping that Aztec Warrior symbol. Do you agree with that position. No it's not whether I we disagree it's that the decision has been made and so the decision has been made. How do we do this how do we move forward in a way that honors and respects the many feelings many sentiments the way in which people live the experience of having that name out there and that identity people have varying views.

The task force did an amazing job in doing surveys across the SD community and people voted you know very much in favor of keeping it. It was there in the data. So now what we need to do is recognize that it hurts some people. It challenges the way in which they can have a relationship with the Su. We would need to recognize that we need to honor it. We need to respect it and we need to do so and almost everything that we do. It sounds as if this issue really hasn't been settled.

It's been settled in terms of making a decision now. You know that's the whole reason for this position right now we need to figure out how do we move forward with it. And we have two basic concepts that we're using to do that. One is honor. You know we need to honor the multiple ways in which people experience this. We need to honor who that Aztecs were. We need to honor who contemporary non-white

people are. There's one point five million non-white speakers in Mexico. That doesn't include what speakers that are in the US or in other parts of the world.

So this isn't just something where we can say well you know it existed at one time. There are descendants and so we need to honor that. The other one is respect. People may not always like the decisions that are made. They may not like the things that we do but we will do them with respect and we hope in return they will at least be a respect for the way in which we're attempting to approach you Professor Perez what are the key points that you want all students to know about the aspects that they exist in the non-white people today.

They're not necessarily the Aztecs but they are descendants that we have groups here. Native American groups here in California who are descendants of that now are people that the non-white people are an active and vibrant people that the language holds a kind of knowledge that we need to better understand that to be an Aztec is not just sports to be an Aztec is to be an engineer. I mean when you when you think of the way in which they built that entire city oversaw implants it's to be a mathematician is to be a musician it's to be a poet it's to be a powerful woman to be a powerful person in and of itself.

And we want to follow some of the basic ideas of what that meant to the non-white people who were known as the Aztecs at that time.

I've been speaking with Professor Ramona Perez San Diego State's newly named chair of Aztec culture education. And thank you for your time. Thank you. And you're listening to KPBS midday edition.