

Clustered in the stands of Assembly Hall are: Beth, a tall, tan, blue eyed, blonde with an infectious smile, Brandon a tall, lanky kid, with short hair and hazel brown doe eyes and Alex a short, stocky kid, with mop-top hair and a shaggy beard.

Emotions are high as 16,618 other people, clad in orange, gather at Assembly Hall. Students, faculty, administrators, local residents and alums came together tonight, but it wasn't to witness a basketball game. Though the Illini are facing Michigan in the last home game of the year and it is senior night, the thousands in attendance attention is directed toward another event, one that would take place during halftime. After tonight, the campus's foundation will be rocked.

The air is thick and the building is hot. It seemed as if someone turned up the heat to magnify the already growing tension in Assembly Hall. Alex was one of the many students, who proudly displayed their 'Chief' shirts, in support of Chief Illiniwek – others in the stands chose to paint their faces to resemble the 'Chief'.

"I can't believe this will be his last dance," Alex said, shaking his head in disbelief. "We won't sit by and stand for this" (the 'we' he refers too suggests that there are many more who feel as he does). Parents showed their support not only by wearing their own 'Chief' shirts but also by parading their kids in authentic looking 'Chief' outfits (This is unfortunate for the children because they have no idea what is going on yet, their parents are essentially forcing them to partake in something that they can't possibly comprehend at this time).

Though in attendance believe strongly that the legacy of the 'Chief' should continue as it has for the past eighty years. They consider it a symbol for the school and that it represents attributes that any would aspire for: courage, beauty, strength and

bravery. Not only that they believe they have treated it with respect all these years and have tried to be sensitive to complaints but making it as authentic as possible.

As the game begins it is clear that it is a mere after-thought. People are merely amusing themselves with the game until halftime. Cheers aren't nearly as loud as they normally are and our nationally acclaimed home court advantage is non-existent. It disturbs Beth that people aren't cheering the Illini on like they should. She is one of the few who try and begin I-L-L I-N-I chants. The others in attendance however, are non-responsive. She could care less whether or not the 'Chief' ever performs again. "It's just a mascot," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "Doesn't mean anything to me. Many argue that the 'Chief' is not a mascot but rather a symbol since it doesn't act like a normally mascot (accompany team in road games stand with cheerleaders on sidelines etc.). But even if the 'Chief' is discontinued she'll still love this University like she always did. "My loyalty is to the school, not some random guy in a costume."

When halftime arrives fans immediately rush the baseline to get a better view of mid-court, pushing aside many of the several dozen reporters and journalists who already crowd the baseline. Brandon stays seated (he is one of the few without a 'Chief' shirt on). He stretches his arms and legs out before slouching back in his chair. Everyone has moved toward the baseline, he can now rest comfortably.

Camcorders and cameras are in hand as people patiently await his arrival. You would swear that President Bush was planning on speaking with the all the media attention. Alex and Beth are both along the baseline with the others. Alex takes out his digital camera and adjusts the settings to get the best possible shot. He then makes his way toward the front of the crowd by pushing and shoving his way through. Beth is just

happy to actually be on the court. “I wish I could watch the game from here,” she said, starry eyed.

On the big screen is footage of past ‘Chief’ performances at other athletic events. Over eighty years of history is packed into a five minute montage of the ‘Chief’. The previous ‘Chief’s’ of the past are also in attendance and they stand to watch the video. Once the video is over the former ‘Chiefs’ receive a standing ovation as they wave to the thousands in attendance.

Alex whispers to a student next to him “It’s absurd that that they would want to get rid of the ‘Chief.’ I mean it’s the symbol of our school.” The student simply shook his head in agreement.

The fans begin to clap simultaneously, as if hyping the ‘Chief’ to finally enter the building (this is a normal procedure). With the music blaring and excitement from fans brimming, the ‘Chief’ enters the building. He has a stern and intense look on his face. His eyes are long and narrow as he stares straight ahead not wavering in any direction. Bright almost blinding flashes of light emit from cameras and cell phones all over the arena. The lighting overtakes the arena making it impossible to see. The chief then saunters toward center court jumping and skipping, moving his body rhythmically to the sounds of the speakers. He circles mid-court high stepping along the way, each new kick higher than the one before. Tears begin to fill the eyes of fans as they fight to hold their emotions in check. Brandon laughs hysterically to himself and he wonders why people love the ‘Chief’ so much. “I just can’t figure it out. It’s blatantly racist, would they have a man in black-face dancing around.” Those that echo’s Brandon’s sentiments aren’t in

attendance and if they are, their voices are drowned out – even so they have the last laugh because this is the last dance of the ‘Chief.’

The ‘Chief’ spins and twists with more vigor than ever before as thousands stand and cheer on his every move. His movement is eloquent yet, powerful making you feel as if you are witnessing poetry in motion. As he circles the court, head-dress flowing like the wind, fans respond with a slight nod, as to say thank you for all you have done. By now it becomes impossible for fans near the baseline to hold in their tears, as an avalanche of tears come streaming down. Women’s makeup is ruined, as mascara is smeared over their faces and men look away refusing to blink and acknowledge the tears forming, as they too continue to struggle holding in their emotions. Brandon is taken aback by the responses of the fans. “I can’t believe this,” he said, with a confused and perplexed look on his face. “How can you mascot a culture.”

As the ‘Chief’ finishes his dance routine he slowly strolls toward center court and raises his hands high above his head. Everyone along the baseline joins hands and rocks (slightly off-beat) to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign fight song, Illinois Loyalty, Oskee Wow Wow. Once the song is completed he folds his hand across his chest and struts toward the exit. Fans in unison scream ‘Chiiiiieef’ stretching the word into multiple syllables. As the ‘Chief’ is supposed to take one last stomp before heading off – to the surprise of the crowd he turns around and comes back out onto the court.

The arena erupts as people realize what he is doing. He comes back to mid-court and soaks in the cheers from the fans. He is enjoying every minute because he knows this will be his last dance. The cheers continue to rise and the even ‘Chief’ can no longer hold in his emotions, as tears flow down his face. As the ‘Chief’ leaves the cameraman

slowly follows behind him capturing his every step. He stops right outside the locker room, as traditions suggests, and waits for the basketball team to re-enter. The camera zooms in on his face and his make-up is slightly smeared from the tears. He tries his hardest to hold back the rest of the tears that are now brimming on his eye lids. But as tradition suggests he is not supposed to move, so he stands perfectly still, like a corpse.

Back inside the stands are no longer painted in a sea of orange. The crowd is now scattered with black shirts throughout. These shirts are meant to mourn the death of the 'Chief.' The gloominess of the moment is quickly replaced with anger and lack of understanding as to why the 'Chief' is no longer. The 'Chief' is now dead but based on the reaction of those in attendance it wont soon be forgotten.

Brandon smiles as he looks at the sad faces that surround him in the stadium. "These people don't realize the 'Chief' had to go. This is a money issue." As long as the 'Chief' existed the University of Illinois was banned from hosting any NCAA tournament events by the NCAA, because it was deemed offensive (ironically, the Florida St. Seminoles were allowed to keep their mascot because they have a contract with the Seminole tribe.)

Beth was happy halftime was so all the hysterics would stop. Not that she wanted the 'Chief' to be gone but she understood it was necessary for the school to become a better recognized worldwide global school. "We can't be a global school if people associate us with a racist mascot.

Alex was one of the fans to take it the worst. He was very angry that they got rid of the 'Chief.' "We've become to sensitive as a culture," he said. "It's that PC garbage."

Walking back to his seat he vowed he would do everything he could to make sure the 'Chief' came back.

February 21, 2007, will forever be remembered at the University of Illinois. It marks the day that the school was split into two – those who wanted the Chief Illiniwek to stay and those who were glad to see him do his last dance.

The argument that the 'Chief' in some way represents the University is how many of the fans in attendance feel about the issue. For over eighty years the 'Chief' has performed at halftime during athletic contests. However, during the past twenty years it has been the center of a major controversy. Many Native Americans consider it a misrepresentation of Native American culture. While others feel it is inappropriate to have a white male dancing in supposed authentic Native dances. Now that the 'Chief' has officially been retired another problem has arrived, potential backlash from alums and current students many of whom are traditionalist and do not want to see change. However, studies show that it only takes four years for a mascot to be forgotten which is the equivalent of full crop of students. New incoming freshman will not have any loyalty whatsoever to the 'Chief' since it wasn't around when they arrived – only time will tell whether or not the theory will work here or not.