Should America force sports teams to change their mascots if they are found to be offensive? Jane interviews an advocate for this policy.

It is an issue that affects the lives of many Americans, Native-American or otherwise. It has raised eyebrows all over the world, and made Americans wonder, for the first time in nearly half a century, if discrimination really is dead. The questions is this: Should the use of Native American sporting mascots be continued?

Jane interviewed Professor Thomas Norton-Smith of Kent State University. Norton-Smith is a Shawnee descendant and the author of a controversial resolution that objects to the presence of Chief Wahoo of the Cleveland Indians at Kent State University.

Norton-Smith said that the goal of his campaign is to convince Americans that the use of Native Americans as sports team mascots is wrong.

“The ultimate goal, of course, is to have sports teams stop using [Native-American mascots], for they are racist, offensive and harmful to Native peoples because they perpetuate negative stereotypes,” Norton-Smith said.

Norton-Smith’s campaign began in March 2002, when he introduced a resolution at a Kent State faculty senate meeting, in which he objected to the presence of Chief Wahoo on Kent campuses. However, Norton-Smith wished to raise awareness, not ask for a total ban of the mascot.

“The resolution would not have banned Wahoo, for that would have violated free speech—the cornerstone of the university,” Norton-Smith said.

Norton-Smith explained that his strong feelings for this issue began when he attended the University of Illinois in his youth. There, he watched Chief Illiniwek (Illinois’ mascot) dance at the halftime game and began to grow increasingly upset over the depiction of Native Americans via sporting mascots such as this. Furthermore, Norton-Smith was discovering more about his Shawnee heritage, and felt that the portrayal of Native Americans in this way was degrading and offensive. All these things led to the birth of the “anti-Wahoo” campaign and the subsequent admission of his resolution to the Kent State faculty senate.

Norton-Smith was asked just exactly what it was about Chief Wahoo in particular that he found offensive.

“I find Wahoo to be a goofy and offensive caricature of Indian people—one that doesn’t look like any Indian I know,” Norton-Smith said. “I suppose I feel rather like a person of African descent would when confronted by Li’l Black Sambo,” he said.

Norton-Smith has encountered a few negative reactions since he began his campaign, such as nasty notes pinned to his bulletin board, and even the ripping down of posters promoting awareness of this issue on his office door. However, he does not let any of this keep him from his goal.

People tend to be less ambivalent once Norton-Smith has spoken to them about his views on Wahoo.

“Often, they’d never really thought about the issue before. Afterwards, they tend to be either pretty hot or sympathetic to the cause,” Norton-Smith said.

What makes this issue so controversial is that certain “Wahoo Defenders” claim that the mascot alludes to Louis Sockalexis, the first Native-American to
play in major league baseball. Since then, this information has been discovered to be false, yet Wahoo remains—in all his contentious glory.

Still, Norton-Smith refuses to give up his fight against what he considers racially discriminatory symbols in a supposedly racially equal United States of America.

“This Wahoo issue is a moral issue. It’s a question of right or wrong—not popularity or profitability,” Norton-Smith said.

Many people, Native-American or otherwise, have taken up the fight against racially discriminatory sporting mascots and strive to change these common symbols in America’s sporting history.

Yet, there are many who do not see these mascots as a threat or discriminatory at all. Then again, many people did not know anything about the plight of Afghanistan until Sept. 11, 2001 either.

It’s all a matter of perspective, really. In the words of Norton-Smith: “You have to change one mind at a time.”