

# The Michigan Daily

## Chippewa tribe asks 'U' to return remains, relics

*Tribe's culture director says storage facilities have 1,428 ancestral objects*

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DAILY NEWS EDITOR ON MARCH 20TH, 2008

At yesterday's meeting of the University's Board of Regents, members of the Saginaw Chippewa Indian Tribe of Michigan asked the University to return hundreds of sets of human remains and relics they say belong to their ancestors.

Shannon Martin, director of the tribe's Zibiwing Center of Anishinabe Culture and Lifeways, said the University holds 1,428 pieces of ancestral remains and other tribal objects in cardboard boxes on the shelves of University storage facilities.

The tribe submitted a request to the University in November for the return of the remains. In January it was denied. The tribe doesn't intend to drop the matter, though.

University officials say they're keeping the bodies for research purposes, but the tribe contends that they should be returned so the tribe can bury them.

According to the tribe, the remains came from burial sites in Michigan.

Under the federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act passed in 1990, institutions that receive federal funding must return all "culturally identifiable" remains to tribes. The University cannot release the remains unless this is proven.

"The law is not to be used as a tool for universities, museums and institutions to maintain possession of these bodies," Martin said. "It's to be used to work in concert and cooperation with tribes to repatriate ancestral remains and funereal objects."

While the tribe claims it has submitted "supporting research and documentation" to prove the origins of the remains, the University has said the bodies aren't culturally identifiable.

Gavin Clarkson, a Native American studies faculty member and assistant professor in the School of Information, said the University's position dishonors and disrespects the dead.

"There are literally thousands of remains in the University's collection, most of which have never produced a single scholarly article," he said. "One wonders why the University resists returning them."

Stephen Forrest, the vice president for research, said in a letter on behalf of the University that because the bodies are "culturally unidentifiable," the University can't return them to the tribe.

"The University does not have the legal authority to do what you are requesting," the letter read.

The language of the NAGPRA dictates that museums and institutions "retain possession of culturally unidentifiable human remains until final regulations are promulgated or the Secretary recommends otherwise."

Forrest's letter ended by saying that the University is "willing and interested in maintaining a dialogue" with the tribe.

University officials couldn't be reached for further comment yesterday.

Martin said that if the University continues to deny the request after appealing to the regents, the tribe will pry deeper into the laws to make its case.

"We're going to keep looking into the legality of this issue with our attorneys and keep knocking on the University's door," she said. "We're not going to go away."

Clarkson cited similar cases when the University did return remains to other tribes.

In compliance with the act the University has returned remains to three different tribes.

"There are good, well-meaning people inside the Fleming Building, and I'm hopeful they'll do the right thing again," he said.

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