

Librarian's Shelf by Marilyn Zehring

Chief Standing Bear's Story Comes to the Library

Sunday, April 15th, the Friends of the Columbus Public Library and The Book Review Club will present Joe Starita at 2:00 p.m. in the Art Gallery. Mr. Starita is the author of the 2012 One Book, One Nebraska selection, "I Am a Man: Chief Standing Bear's Journey for Justice."

Starita's book is a well-researched and insightful account of a major court case and decision which had long-lasting consequences. Although factual, the book reads like fiction with its suspenseful twists and turns, heartbreaks, and triumphs.

In 1877 Chief Standing Bear's Ponca Indian Tribe was forcibly removed from their Nebraska homeland and marched through Columbus to what was then known as Indian Territory (now Oklahoma), in what became the tribe's own Trail of Tears.

The book chronicles what happened when Chief Standing Bear set off on a six-hundred-mile walk to return the body of his only son to their traditional burial ground in Nebraska. It examines the complex relationship between the United States government and the small, peaceful Ponca tribe. It is a story of survival - of a people left for dead who arose from the ashes of injustice, disease, neglect, starvation, humiliation, and termination. It is also the story of life and death, despair and fortitude, freedom and patriotism; a story of Christian kindness and bureaucratic evil.

The story questions whether native sovereignty, tribal-based societies, and cultural survival are compatible with American democracy. Standing Bear successfully used habeas corpus, the only liberty included in the original text of the constitution, to gain access to a federal court in Omaha and ultimately his freedom.

Standing Bear's fight for freedom led to all Native Americans being given full rights of American Citizenship.

Starita is Pike Professor of Journalism in the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. For the past ten years he has taught classes designed to give students the skills to probe deeply into a focused topic. He has co-taught a reporting class that exhaustively examined the pros and cons of corn-based ethanol as well as being involved in an attempt to significantly strengthen state immigration laws.

Starita spent thirteen years as an investigative reporter and New York bureau chief for the Miami Herald where one of his stories was a Pulitzer Prize finalist. His reporting has garnered more than two dozen regional and national awards - including the prestigious national "Investigative Reporters and Editors Award."

Interested in American Indian history and culture since his youth, Starita returned to his Native Nebraska in 1992 and began work on a three-year book project about five generations of an Indian family, "The Dull Knives of Pine Ridge - A Lakota Odyssey." The book was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

"I Am a Man" has also been chosen as Nebraska's best non-fiction book of 2010 and the One Book, One Lincoln selection for 2011. The book is currently being developed into a screen play.

In July, 2011, Starita received the Leo Reano Award, a national civil rights award, from the National Education Association for his long time work with the Native American Community. Starita's program is open to the public at no charge. It is being funded by the Nebraska Humanities Council which receives support from the Nebraska Endowment for the Humanities, the Nebraska State Legislature, the Nebraska Cultural Endowment and private donations.