

Armit Khaira

Grand Prize Winner, Grades 5-8

One name. One, single character on everyone's keyboards. How important could it be? To parents Salia and Joseph, it makes all the difference.

On March 1, 2022, the couple named their newborn daughter Alíla7, which means "wild raspberry" in Squamish, their mother tongue. The number "7" is a very distinct character in this language, so when it was deemed invalid for birth registration in British Columbia, the parents were outraged. It was suggested that they simply use an Anglicized version of their daughter's name, but they refused, saying that it would be a "watered-down" representation of their culture. They felt it was their duty to give their child an authentic, Indigenous name because it would honor their ancestors and ensure their language, culture, and identity were kept alive.

As advocates for Indigenous rights, the parents held the B.C. government accountable and moved them to action. On March 30, 2022, the province released an 89-point plan for upholding these rights, which will be implemented over the next five years. One of the changes provides a solution for the situation that Salia, Joseph, and countless others have been fighting for.

These parents' experiences have shed light on the manifestation of colonialism in current policies including strict birth registration criteria, which continue to have a disproportional impact on Indigenous Peoples today. It is appalling and invalidating that our nation prioritizes English, a language that has been spoken for just a few hundred years, over one that has shared stories, knowledge, and traditions for millennia.

Fighting for the inclusion of Indigenous characters in regard to birth certificates is just the beginning of the long road toward the acceptance, reclamation, and revitalization of Indigenous languages, but the fire for change burns more fiercely than ever.