

Modern Cherokees' first female chief, Wilma Mankiller, excelled over hardship

By Patricia Sullivan
Washington Post Staff Writer
Wednesday, April 7, 2010; B05

Wilma Mankiller, 64, the first female chief of the Cherokee Nation in modern times, whose leadership on social and financial issues made her tribe a national role model, died April 6 at her home in Adair County, Okla. She had metastatic pancreatic cancer.

Ms. Mankiller, principal chief of [the Cherokee](#) from 1985 to 1995, tripled her tribe's enrollment, doubled employment and built new housing, health centers and children's programs in northeast Oklahoma, where most of the 200,000 or so tribal members live. In 1990, she signed an unprecedented agreement in which the Bureau of Indian Affairs surrendered direct control over millions of dollars in federal funding to the tribe.

Although women have long played leadership roles in Native American communities, few before Ms. Mankiller were elected to the top position of one of the country's largest tribes.

"She was the first to step forward, although that's vastly changed in last 20 years. Many [women] are now heads of their tribes because of her," said Susan Masten, past chairman of the Yurok tribe, who also founded [Women Empowering Women for Indian Nations](#). "She helped create the aspiration of other women who maybe wouldn't have thought to run for office."

Under her leadership, infant mortality declined and educational achievement of tribal members rose, although she was quick to say much more needed to be accomplished.

Her attention to social and family issues sometimes caused grumbling as other tribes poured more of their resources into casinos and tobacco stores, but Ms. Mankiller said, "I'd like to see whole, healthy communities again, communities in which tribe members would have access to adequate health care, higher education if they want it, a decent place to live and a decent place to work, and a strong commitment to tribal language and culture."

President Bill Clinton awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1998, and she was inducted into the [National Women's Hall of Fame](#) in 1993.

Kevin Gover, director of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian, said, "Wilma in some ways became larger than life and something of a legendary figure because of the force of her personality. She has a very compelling personal story . . . and established herself as a leader not just in the Indian community, but beyond that."

In her 1993 autobiography, "Mankiller: A Chief and Her People," she said she wanted to be remembered for emphasizing that Cherokee values can help solve contemporary problems.

"Friends describe me as someone who likes to dance along the edge of the roof," she wrote. "I try to encourage young women to be willing to take risks, to stand up for the things they believe in, and to step up and accept the challenge of serving in leadership roles."

Born into poverty

She was born Nov. 18, 1945, in Tahlequah, Okla., one of 11 children and a fifth-generation Mankiller. Her surname was an old term of respect for Indian warriors who guarded tribal villages. "It's a nickname -- and I earned it," she would sometimes tease inquirers.

After drought devastated her family's land in the 1950s, the U.S. government moved them to a housing project in California where the adolescent Mankiller experienced culture shock, exacerbated by poverty and racism. She married an Ecuadoran accountant, Hector Olaya, in 1963, and they had two daughters, Felicia Olaya and Gina Olaya, both of whom survive her, as well as four grandchildren and several great-grandchildren.

But hers was an unhappy marriage, she wrote, especially after she began taking college classes and bought a car without her husband's knowledge. She started visiting the Indian activists who had occupied the abandoned federal prison on Alcatraz Island in 1969, a controversial protest that was "a tremendous wake-up call," she later said.

After divorcing Olaya, she moved back to her family's Oklahoma land in 1977, graduated from college through the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities and became the tribe's community development director, leading the creation of community water systems and rehabilitating houses.

Kidney ailments eventually required a transplant. In 1979, she was severely injured in a head-on traffic accident that killed the other driver, her best friend. Ms. Mankiller endured 17 operations during her recovery. In 1980, Ms. Mankiller came down with myasthenia gravis, a muscle disease. She later battled lymphoma and breast cancer. Throughout her illnesses, friends described her as resilient.

Advertisement



Refreshingly Urban.

New Apartment Residences.
PENTHOUSE HOMES NOW AVAILABLE

Sustainability meets refined luxury.

888 306 6597 | [WestEnd25apts.com](#)

1255 25th Street NW, Washington, DC



Ms. Mankiller was elected deputy chief of the tribe in 1983 and, two years later, when principal chief Ross Swimmer left to become director of the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, Ms. Mankiller filled the vacancy. She remarried in 1986 to Charlie Soap, a Cherokee community developer and organizer, who encouraged her to run for the principal chief's job in 1987, and who also survives her.

She was surprised by the sexism she encountered.

"I had supervised carpenters and engineers, and no one ever questioned me. But when I wanted to move into leadership, they couldn't figure me out," she told The Washington Post in 1993. "At committee meetings people would say, 'If we elect a woman, our tribe will be the laughingstock.' If I hadn't been through all I'd been through, I wouldn't have had the maturity and the calm to go on talking about the issues."

Once elected, council members repeatedly interrupted her during meetings. Ms. Mankiller, a soft-spoken leader, consulted a communications expert, then installed a cutoff switch for the microphones. Four years later, she was reelected in a landslide. She did not run for reelection in 1995 and dedicated herself to teaching and volunteering.

Sponsored Links

[Penny Stock Jumping 2000%](#)

Sign up to the #1 voted penny stock newsletter for free today!

[AARP 50+ Auto Insurance](#)

Over 50? Save up to \$402. 9 out of 10 AARP Policyholder's saved.

[Bose® Official Store](#)

Shop award-winning products from the most respected name in sound.

[Buy a link here](#)

© 2010 The Washington Post Company