

## Cherokee Nation Mourns the Passing of Wilma Mankiller

Wilma Mankiller, former Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, passed away the morning of April 6. Mankiller served 12 years in elective office at the Cherokee Nation, the first two as Deputy Principal Chief followed by 10 years as Principal Chief. She retired from public office in 1995. Among her many honors, Mankiller was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Clinton.

Mankiller, a native of Tahlequah, served as Principal Chief from 1985 through 1995 and was the first female elected to lead the Cherokee Nation. She was an internationally known advocate for the rights of all Native peoples and was a champion for the rights of women around the world. During her tenure as Principal Chief, she met with Presidents Reagan, Bush and Clinton to present critical tribal issues and helped facilitate the establishment of an office of Indian Justice within the United States Department of Justice. She received numerous awards and honors throughout her life.

“Our personal and national hearts are heavy with sorrow and sadness with the passing this morning of Wilma Mankiller,” said Chad Smith, Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation. “We feel overwhelmed and lost when we realize she has left us, but we should reflect on what legacy she leaves us. We are better people and a stronger tribal nation because of her example of Cherokee leadership, statesmanship, humility, grace, determination and decisiveness. When we become disheartened, we will be inspired by remembering how Wilma proceeded undaunted through so many trials and tribulations.

Years ago, she and her husband Charlie Soap showed the world what Cherokee people can do when given the chance, when they organized the self-help water line in the Bell community. She said Cherokees in that community learned that it was their choice, their lives, their community and their future. Her gift to us is the lesson that our lives and future are for us to decide. We can carry on that Cherokee legacy by teaching our children that lesson.



Please keep Wilma’s family, especially her husband Charlie and her daughters, Gina and Felicia, in your prayers.”

### *In Her Own Words*

My first job with the Cherokee Nation began in October of 1977. People did not quite know what to make of me. I cheerfully worked longer hours than most anyone, and I would do whatever it took to get something done. My secretary would often find me sitting on the floor of my office trying to collate a grant proposal while my colleagues were worrying about the state of their bouffant hairdos. By then I had an abiding belief that a distinct and vibrant Cherokee culture which should be more fully supported existed in some historic Cherokee communities.

Cherokee traditional identity is tied to both an individual and collective determination to follow a good path, be responsible and loving, and help one another – or as some Cherokee traditionalists say, “Not let go of one another.” The whole self-help concept of community development and the founding of the Cherokee Nation Community Development Department was based on the simple premise that when given the resources and opportunity, tradition-oriented Cherokee people will help each other and take on projects for the larger community good. Gadugi, or working collectively for the common good, is an abiding attribute of Cherokee culture.

Excerpts from *Everyday is a Good Day: Reflections by Contemporary Indigenous Women*. Wilma Mankiller. Golden, Colorado - Fulcrum Publishing, 2004. ♣