

Indian Country Mourns the Passing of Chief Phillip Martin of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians

Phillip Martin, the former Chief of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and one of Indian Country's respected and beloved leaders, died the evening of February 4 after suffering a massive stroke earlier in the week. He was 83.

Miko Beasley Denson, the current Tribal Chief, said of Martin, "I, along with every member of our tribe, am saddened by the passing of Philip Martin. He was a great man and a visionary leader. I had the privilege of working with Chief for many decades when I was on tribal council and leading various tribal enterprises. He transformed the economy of our tribe and with it the fate of our people. He modernized our government. Our tribe and all of Indian Country would not be where we are today without his leadership, commitment to self-determination and his dedication to economic development. My prayers are with his family."

Martin served as the democratically elected Tribal Chief for 28 years and served in tribal government for 45. He brought the Choctaw people out of dire poverty by focusing on economic development and self-determination. He established over a dozen tribally owned enterprises, diversified the tribe's economy and created over 9,000 jobs. He was responsible for the creation of an 80-acre industrial park, a tribally owned construction company, and several public-service enterprises. Due to his efforts, the tribe is now one of Mississippi's largest employers.

Martin built the tribe's first casino, the Silver Star Hotel and Casino, in 1994 and added a second casino, the Golden Moon, in 2002. The two casinos, Geyser Falls Water Theme Park and Dancing Rabbit Golf Club comprise Pearl River Resort, the largest and most profitable Choctaw enterprise. The resort became a catalyst for economic growth and jobs not only on the reservation, but throughout East Central Mississippi.

"When we think of Chief Martin, we think: Visionary, Warrior, Leader, Dignitary, Diplomat, and Economic Powerhouse," read a statement issued from the National Indian Gaming Association. "For fifty years, Chief Martin dedicated himself to public service and he served as Chief of the Mississippi Choctaw for almost 30 years. When he returned



home after serving 10 years in the Air Force, his people were living in poverty, with little or no community infrastructure. Chief Martin determined to build an economy and set out to establish auto-parts and defense manufacturing, government contracting, publishing, retail, tourism, golfing and Indian gaming. The Mississippi Band of Choctaw employs more than 6,000 people, which makes it one of the largest employers in the state. His success was so outstanding that the Choctaw economic development plan was known as the 'Miracle in Mississippi.'"

The list of Chief Martin's accomplishments and awards is long. He served in the Air Force for ten years, was President of the National Tribal Chairmen's Association and President of United South and Eastern Tribes, Inc. He was the first President of the Board of Regents of Haskell Indian Junior College, now Haskell Indian Nations University. He established the Choctaw Tribal Scholarship Program, which allows all tribal students to attend the colleges and universities of their choice.

His achievements have been honored by dozens of national organizations, among them the Small Business Administration, the United Indian Development Association, the United Indian Youth Organization and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

"Chief Martin earned respect for the Mississippi Band of Choctaw as one of our original American democracies and he was a champion of Indian sovereignty," said Ernest L. Stevens, Jr., Chairman of NIGA. "He always worked to create Indian opportunity and to ensure respect for Indian sovereignty. He improved the lives of Indian people throughout the nation. He was one of most important mentors in my life. He was an American legend."

Chief Phillip Martin held an honorary degree from Millsaps College, is a member of the *Mississippi Business Hall of Fame*, and was named *Man of the Year* by the Philadelphia Neshoba County Chamber of Commerce in 1997. Chief Martin is survived by his wife Bonnie, daughters Deborah Lewis and Patricia Gibson, five grandchildren and four great grandchildren.