

## Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians Mourns the Passing of Vyola J. Ortner

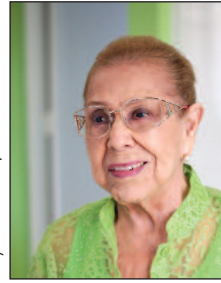
The oldest member of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, 95-year-old Vyola J. Ortner, died on Feb. 10, 2017 at her Palm Springs home. She will best be remembered in Palm Springs and throughout Indian Country as a determined tribal leader ahead of her time and as a progressive woman who helped change the course of history for her tribe and other tribes across the nation. She was the Vice Chairman and Chairman of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians Tribal Council from 1952 to early 1959.

“Leadership is about taking people to places they didn’t realize possible,” Chairman Jeff L. Grubbe said. “Vyola was passionate, engaged and ambitious in ways that ultimately made life better for our tribal members. She set out to make a difference, and along the way, she inspired many of us to step up and do the same.”

Ortner was born in Palm Springs as Viola Juanita Hatchitt on April 1, 1921. She grew up on Section 14 in downtown Palm Springs and attended Frances Stevens School.

In 1952, at the insistence of her mother, Juana Saturnino Hatchitt, that Ortner attended a Tribal Council meeting. By the time the pair returned home that night, Ortner had been elected to serve on the Tribal Council at the age of 30. In 1954, she was elected Chairman of the Tribal Council of the first-ever all-women Tribal Council and served with fellow members LaVerne Saubel, Eileen Miguel, Flora Patencio and Elizabeth Pete Monk.

Through persistence and dedication, it was her work in these tribal leadership positions that allowed her to guide her tribe



Viola J. Ortner

Joy Calderon/Desert Sun

out of poverty and toward prosperity.

In 1955, the Tribal Council adopted the first-ever Constitution and By-Laws, a document that ratifies that the Tribal Council is the official governing body of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians.

The women leaders worked to convince Congress that the tribe had a right to long-term leases for their otherwise valueless land. The all-woman Tribal Council partially succeeded with the

General Leasing Act allowing 25-year leases in 1955. In 1957, President Dwight Eisenhower finally signed the federal law to allow Indian land leases up to 99 years.

During the 1950s, she was the Executive Officer of the California Indians Congress and the National Congress of American Indians.

One of Ortner’s passions was creating a strong tie between city government and tribal government. From 1973 to 1980, she served as Chairman of the City of Palm Springs Planning Commission. In 1980, she was elected to the City of Palm Springs City Council and was the first and only tribal member to ever serve on the Palm Springs City Council. She also served on the Tribal Building Design Committee in the 2000s.

From her book, *You Can’t Eat Dirt*, Ortner writes, “We have the obligation as tribal members to our own people and the right under the laws of this nation to determine the use of our own land and the destiny of our tribe.” ♣

implementation of Plan 2014 to ensure that outflows from Lake Ontario into the St. Lawrence River, including releases from the Moses-Saunders Dam, comply with the requirements of the IJC’s Supplementary Order of Approval (Dec. 8, 2016). The tribe has been working to negate the environmental impact of regulated water levels and supported implementation of Plan 2014 in partnership with Save the River, American Rivers, Congressional leadership, and the IJC.

“Tony David’s professional expertise and demeanor will prove to be an asset to the International Lake Ontario – St. Lawrence River Board of Control in ensuring compliance with Plan 2014,” remarked Tribal Chief Eric Thompson. “His ability to comprehend and translate the science behind environmental changes has proven invaluable in managing a number of significant water resource projects in collaboration with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services, U.S. Geological Survey, and the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation.”

As the SRMT Water Resources Program Manager, David oversees the Environment Division’s effort to protect and enhance Akwesasne’s water resources; including fish species through a partnership with the U.S. Geological

Survey’s Tunison Laboratory of Aquatic Science. Since 1999, he has coordinated efforts to reintroduce Atlantic Salmon into the St. Regis River, as well as to improve the natural habitat for Lake Sturgeon and other species.

David also served as project leader for the tribe’s decommissioning and removal of the Hogansburg Dam in collaboration with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services and NYS Department of Environmental Conservation; which was the first hydroelectric dam to be successfully removed in the state and the first federally licensed dam in the United States to be removed by a tribe. Removal of the outdated dam opened up 555-miles of stream habitat for fish species and helped restore the St. Regis River to its natural state.

“Being appointed to this international oversight body is a tremendous accomplishment and recognition of Tony David’s passion to apply his education and environmental knowledge for not only the Akwesasne community, but all communities that will benefit from implementation of Plan 2014,” noted Tribal Chief Beverly Cook. “I am proud to know we have talented and caring Mohawk people, such as Tony, who are contributing their skills to a matter that is important for everyone, our environment.” ♣