

Women's History Month Spotlight

Did You Know?

Wilma Pearl Mankiller (1945 – 2010)

Wilma Pearl Mankiller, born on November 18, 1945, in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, emerged as a trailblazer for American Indian rights. She became the first woman elected Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, a position she held for a decade, leaving a mark on Indigenous communities and American history at large.

Her early life, like many American Indians, was fraught with struggles, as her family endured the government-sanctioned relocation known as the Trail of Tears. Despite these challenges, Wilma drew strength from her Cherokee heritage and the resilience of her people.

In the 1960s, Wilma embarked on activism, joining the fight for American Indian rights. She participated in the occupation of Alcatraz Island and later aligned herself with the activism of the American Indian Movement. These experiences fueled her determination to empower indigenous communities, instilling pride in heritage and advocating for justice.

In 1985, Wilma shattered barriers by becoming the first woman elected Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, a role she held until 1995. During her tenure, she revitalized tribal governance and spearheaded numerous initiatives to enhance healthcare, education, and infrastructure for the Cherokee people. Under her leadership, the Cherokee Nation made significant strides in social and economic progress, earning her widespread admiration.

Beyond her nation, Wilma was a vocal advocate for Indigenous rights, amplifying their voices and addressing issues such as poverty, healthcare disparities, and cultural preservation. Her advocacy shed light on the challenges faced by American Indian communities and paved the way for greater recognition of their sovereignty and self-determination.

Throughout her life, Wilma remained committed to empowering women and advancing gender equality. She championed representation and worked to create opportunities for women within the Cherokee Nation and beyond.

Wilma's legacy continues to inspire women from all walks of life to pursue their passions and seek leadership roles in their communities. Her journey exemplifies the power of perseverance, compassion, and resilience, leaving a profound impact on countless lives. President Barack Obama hailed her as an inspiration, while Gloria Steinem, her close friend, honored her as a beacon of change.

Sources:

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