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## Firsts

Marilyn Grady

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# Firsts

Marilyn L. Grady

Wilma Mankiller was a first—the first woman Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, the second-largest U.S. tribe. Her death on April 6, 2010 focused attention on her accomplishments as a legendary leader.

Wilma Pearl Mankiller, born November 18, 1945, in Tahlequah was sixth of eleven children. In 1956 her family moved to San Francisco as part of a Bureau of Indian Affairs relocation effort that promised jobs in the city. In 1963 she married Hugo Olaya, an Ecuadorean businessman, and had daughters Gina and Felicia. The takeover of Alcatraz by Indian demonstrators was a life changing event for Wilma. During the 19-month occupation, she visited the demonstrators and helped raise money for the cause. She began taking courses at Skyline College and San Francisco State University while working as a coordinator of Indian programs for the Oakland public schools. When her marriage ended in divorce, she returned to live on her grandfather's land in Oklahoma in 1977 with her daughters. She became involved in volunteer work related to tribal affairs and leading health and Head Start initiatives and then became economic stimulus coordinator for the Cherokee Nation. She completed a bachelor's degree at Flaming Rainbow University and took graduate courses at the University of Arkansas in community planning.

Mankiller focused on providing opportunities for Cherokee people to help themselves. To Mankiller, Cherokee people were not wards of the U.S. government, in need of assistance from Washington. She saw Cherokees as having everything they needed to succeed except opportunity. The success of the Cherokee Nation today is based on the fundamental principles she espoused (Smith, 2010).

According to Chad Smith, her successor,

She believed in our history, our culture. And she understood the position of a woman, and that is to lead her people, and she did so with grace, humility, and decisiveness and with vision. . . . We all are better people for the leadership of Wilma Mankiller (CNN.com).

Chad Smith called Mankiller “the iconic leader of the tribe.”

Wilma Mankiller received many honors and honorary doctorates chronicled on the Manataka American Indian Council website (<http://www.manataka.org>) Among these many honors are:

- The Medal of Freedom, the highest U.S. civilian honor, awarded in 1998 by President Clinton.
- Induction into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1993.
- She was on the board of the Freedom Forum and Women Empowering Women for Indian Nations (WEWIN).
- "WEWIN founder Susan Masten said 'she was a true warrior and an excellent leader in the sense that she worked tirelessly to improve the lives of everyone else, including her own people, and she did it in a humble way.'" (Sullivan, 2010)
- Her books include *Every Day is a Good Day* (2004) and *Mankiller: A Chief and Her People*, co-authored with Michael Wallis.

As a First, Wilma Mankiller is a legend.

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