

# 'Wilma Mankiller was a role model'

**MANKILLER continued  
from front page**

come out and help us, and help her own people.

"Somehow, she had inner strength for her people, for all people. She'll sure be missed."

"Wilma Mankiller was a role model for Native American women," said current Tribal Chairwoman Cheryle A. Kennedy, who introduced Mankiller when she came to the University of Oregon in 2005 to serve as the Wayne Morse Chair of Law and Politics at the university. "Wilma was an educator, a political warrior and a trailblazer who will sorely be missed by all who knew her. She will be noted in history as a great Tribal leader."

But for the Contreras children, Tribal members Kalene and Christine, it was memories of sneaking off to the store with Mankiller's daughters, Gina and Felicia, and the ice cream pops they lost when they were caught.

It was squeezing 13 people into Mankiller's little red Mazda to go to one powwow or another.

"Whoever got in first got to go," said Beryle. "We had a lot of fun."

It was letting the kids behind the wheel while waiting hours for gas during the 1970s embargo.

It was staying up around the clock to finish grant proposals.

"I proofread," said Beryle. "Wilma could not spell. She had words and you couldn't even recognize what they were supposed to be."

It was meetings at San Quentin prison where each had prisoners that they sponsored.

It was feet blistered in endless protest walks.

It was commiserating about marriages breaking up.

"We were both separated from our husbands and supported each other in that turmoil," said Beryle.

After Alcatraz, Beryle and Wilma, on their own, went to school together at San Francisco State College.



File photo by Toby McClary

**Tribal Elder Beryle Contreras, right, and Wilma Mankiller were reunited after 30 years when Mankiller visited Grand Ronde in November 2005.**

"That was the time they were letting in minorities, and that's when Wilma and I decided we were going to go back to school," Beryle said.

"I remember an English class and we had to write a paper on whatever subject, and the teacher gave Wilma and I real bad grades. I just got mad and stuffed it, but she complained that she only got the bad grade because of the subject matter (which was Indian justice). I remember her speaking out in class about it. The teacher just pushed it aside, but that didn't stop her. When she had something to say, she said it."

"Her and I used to take her girls and my youngest girls, (Tribal members) Kalene and Kim, and we would take off for the weekend and not tell anyone where we were going."

"Remember we went to Lake Tahoe?" said Kalene.

And off the family goes on another story. Kalene told one of the beauts that maybe no more than a handful of people know or remember.

"She had a cat that used the toilet," said Kalene. "She told us about it, a big gray cat, and told us about it, but I never believed her. Then, one day, she said, 'Com'ere. Look at this.' And it was doing it. She said she never taught it or anything, that maybe it picked it up from watching the kids."

"She was real good about talking to young people," said Beryle. "There were a lot of teenagers that didn't have any goals, or any guidance at all. She had to deal with drugs and alcoholism in her own family, and would focus on those things to keep our own kids from falling into those categories."

"She would turn people around to accept themselves, to celebrate their culture."

Beryle says with gratitude that her daughter, now Tribal Elder Kerma, was one of the youngsters with whom Wilma spent a lot of time.

"Wilma was a very proud woman," said Beryle. "She loved her home, her family, her reservation, her people."

## An educator

Others, like Tribal member and Cultural Resources Manager David Lewis, remember her in an academic setting. Lewis took a class in Native Law with Mankiller when she was visiting Wayne Morse professor in 2005. He was working on his Ph.D. at the University of Oregon at the time.

Lewis let her know that he was taking the class as part of his dissertation, and he found her "understanding and knowledgeable," he said. "She was very powerful, and very interested in my work, and the Indian history in Oregon" that he was writing about.

"She was very interested and willing to listen. I talked to her for an hour about Oregon's Indian history," he said, "and when the class was over, she wrote to me every few months to ask how my dissertation was going."

"She was really amazing to talk to. Once she understood something, she followed it through."

"She really inspired me to continue with my work," said Lewis. "The Cherokees had written their own history so that everyone in the Tribe was on the same page. A lot of Tribes do that now, but the Cherokees led the way. She always worked for the survival of their culture, their language. They set the model."

"The Cherokees were also the first Tribe to have a written language, and the first to have a Native American newspaper." The language emerged during the Sequoyah era spanning the 1700s-1800s, said Lewis.

"Within 10 years of their having a written language," he said, "90 percent of the Tribe was literate."

Contreras believes Mankiller would have taken her mortality in stride.

"I can just hear Wilma now, saying, 'This is what the Creator wants me to do, so I'll just take this road.' She accepted whatever was handed to her." ■

## 2010 Community Meetings Schedule

**4/25 Yakima - at the Red Lion (same ballroom as last year)**

**Social Hour from 11:00-12:00**

**12:00 Lunch and then the Community Meeting**

**607 East Yakima Ave., Yakima, Washington 98901**

**5/23 Bend - at the Riverhouse Inn (same ballroom as last year)**

**Social Hour from 11:00-12:00**

**12:00 Lunch and then the Community Meeting**

**3075 N. Highway 97, Bend, Oregon 97701**

