

## Introduction to Wilma Mankiller: Julie Moss

Photo: Minnie Bommer



It's wonderful to be a part of this auspicious occasion, to come together like this in a multicultural setting. It's really a cause for celebration. What I see today here in this room is representatives of the world. We're real happy to have you here in Tahlequah.

Wilma Mankiller comes from a very, very large family. I think she has eleven brothers and sisters. When she was a child, her family left Oklahoma and moved to California as part of the

Indian Relocation Program, which was trying to assimilate us into mainstream society. What ended up happening to a lot of our people was they left rural poverty and moved to urban poverty. So Wilma's family went from rural poverty to urban poverty.

She came back to us in Oklahoma in 1976, and that's when I met her. She's been a great inspiration, a mentor and encourager. She's basically taught me everything I know and made it possible for me to do a lot of the things that I've done. She's part of the reason I'm here today. We were sort of a team for a lot of years at the Cherokee Nation. She took me under her wing and she showed me how to write grants. She's very creative, and we did a book of poetry together in 1982. I was really happy to be a part of that.

She's leaving a great legacy behind. She's come out of poverty and has gone on to accomplish a lot. We're really proud of her here at the Cherokee Nation. I'd like to present to you Wilma Mankiller, Chief of the Cherokee Nation. *[Julie Moss is an RDLN Leader.]*

## Wilma Mankiller: Graduation Address

At one point I considered joining this program. I've not always felt that being the head of a large, somewhat bureaucratic organization was exactly what I wanted to do. My background is in community organizing and community development, and I actually looked at this program as a possibility for myself and my husband. So **I've followed the progress of this program and I'm delighted to be here and to be a part of this graduation.**

Most of the Cherokee Nation is rural. In fact, some of our area is even remote. Most of you are from those kinds of areas and know the developmental issues that we're presented with every day here in eastern Oklahoma — a daunting set of problems that in their totality are almost overwhelming. If I, people like myself, the people that I see graduating here today, and the people that are participating in this program, didn't have faith that we could do something about these problems, we wouldn't even get up every day, because the problems would overwhelm us.

### Solving Our Own Problems

I moved from community organizing and community development to a leadership position in my tribe, not because I'm any great leader — I can tell you right now, I'm not a great leader — but because I have absolute hope and faith in our ability to solve our own problems ourselves.

What I represent to our people, I believe, is hope that things are going to get better for us. If you look at our history, the history of any native people, you will know that our greatest strength, which we share with many minorities in this country, is tenacity, our ability to survive adverse situations, to bounce back again and again and again. Twenty years ago, when we decided to revive a central

Cherokee democratic form of tribal government — and not the form of Cherokee tribal government in which the U.S. President appointed our leaders, — we were bankrupt. We started this revitalization in a storefront here in Tahlequah in 1971, and in twenty years time we've gone from being almost bankrupt to running a fifty-two million dollar organization. We had no marketable natural resources, we had nothing except our tenacity and a sheer determination and will to survive — a will to maintain a sense of community, a will to keep the tribe, a will to keep those things that make us culturally distinct alive. That's what motivated us to rebuild.

People outside our communities might look at us, much as they look at your community, and say, "Well, they have the worst housing problems in the country, and the highest infant mortality rate, and the highest unemployment rate," but that's not what I see, and I don't think that's what my



Photo: Clark Arrington

Wilma Mankiller  
Principal Chief  
of the Cherokee Nation



## CHEROKEE NATION of OKLAHOMA



Visitors (L to R): Dave Singleton (CA), John Zippert (AL), Cleo Askew (AL), Clark Arrington (MA), Hector Correa (PR), Wendell Paris, (MS) Beatrice Shelbourn (AR), Yvonne Hampton (AL), Shirley Sherrod (GA), and Ernest Johnson. (AL) [Photo: John Zippert]

husband sees, and I don't think that's what Julie sees. Certainly we acknowledge that we have these problems—we deal with them every single day of our lives—but what we see when we look at our people is that tenacity, that ability to bounce back and solve our own problems.

### Coming Home

When I came home in 1976, I had been dealing with international treaty issues. It was interesting. We would send people to Geneva, and I could talk about principles of sovereignty and tribal government. But I could come home to my own rural community every few years, and kids were still dropping out of school. I could come home, and kids were still sniffing paint. I could come home, and old people were still living on nine hundred dollars a year. I'd see all these problems and I couldn't walk away and just deal with those legal issues. I think it's appropriate to have people work in that forum, but that's not my forum.

I came home with an absolute faith and belief in the ability of poor people to solve their own problems. I can't tell you in my lifetime how many well-meaning social workers had come to my family and tried to save us. No one ever believed that we had ideas that were valid. No one ever asked us what we wanted or what we saw for our future. A belief in poor people and our ability to solve our own problems, the incredible tenacity and strength that our people have had, the ability to hang on to our culture and a sense of self despite everything that has happened to us, those are the things that I've tried to build on here.

It's very, very simple. There's nothing complicated about it. I just believe in people. I believe in our ability to face new problems and solve them. It's not just words. We develop programs and projects that build on that.

### 1992 and Cherokee Survival

You're going to be hearing a lot in 1992 about the history of this country. If you look at history from a native perspective, an honest perspective, then I think you'll see the incredible strength of our people.

**From our perspective, the most powerful country in the world basically tried to wipe us off the face of the earth,** period, and then, failing that, instituted a couple of hundred years of policies that were designed to make sure we didn't exist in 1991 as a culturally distinct group of people. Yet here we are. Our tribe, the Cherokee tribe, is one of the most acculturated tribes in the country. I think anybody would agree with that. **And yet there are thousands of people who still speak Cherokee.** Tribal ceremonies that we've had since the beginning of time are still intact. We have a sense of interdependence in our communities. People still care about the collective good of the family, the tribe, the community, more than they care about themselves. Where else can you go in the world and find that sense of interdependence?

We could spend 1992 going around being very, very angry because this country is celebrating a fellow who opened the slave trade to this part of the world and killed hundreds and hundreds of native people, or we could use the time to do something constructive and educational. What I hope to do with my time in 1992 is to talk about some of the positive attributes that I see in our communities despite all the problems that we have.

### We are the Leaders

Many of our people, and I'm sure many of the people in the communities that you work in, sit around talking about a vacuum of leadership in this country, about not having someone who will just take on the educational problems in this country, take on problems in the inner city, or the loss of the family farm, or environmental issues. Well, you know what? I don't think any visionary or any prophet's going to come along and save us. I think that the people that are going to provide leadership in this country for solving our problems is us—you and me, the people that are

graduating here today, the people that are out in the field doing this work. **We're the people that are going to solve the problems. Looking at the list of people that are involved in this organization and working throughout the United States in rural areas, that became very, very clear to me.**

You've heard people say, "They're going to solve the environmental problems. They're going to solve the problems with the educational system. They're going to solve the recurring overt racism in this country." Well, you know what? I don't know who 'they' is. I've never met em. **I tell my own people, "There ain't no 'they'. There is only us."** I can't change the world by myself and you can't either. Neither can these graduates today. But we can and should, all in our own way, take charge and do what we can in our world, to create a better situation for ourselves. It's not going to happen with some visionary coming along doing that for us.

#### **Trust in Grass Roots Practitioners**

We run a very sophisticated organization. We've built clinics, and we have a number of businesses. We have almost a thousand regular full-time employees, but if you ask me what my single biggest job is in my tribe, and also my husband's biggest job in his rural work, it is to get our people to a point where they begin to believe in themselves again, trust in their own thinking and trust in their own ability to solve their problems. We've had a couple of hundred years of being acculturated to think that our ideas aren't valid, that our religion's pagan, that our history doesn't even exist, and that there's something wrong with us as a people. It's very dehumanizing.

After a couple of hundred years of that kind of acculturation, it's very difficult to work with people and get them to understand that we should listen to the well-meaning social workers, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Native Health Service, and all these hotshot planners who want to come out and do things for us, and we should have their input, but that the better ideas for resolving our problems lie within our own thinking, that we can trust our own thinking, that we have the ability to articulate our own vision of the future and then work toward implementing that vision.

I've had a lot of people come out and say that they're doing organizing or that they're working with people. They're not. They've got some plan or some idea about how to do this project and they don't trust people and they don't ever listen to them. They won't sit down and have a cup of coffee with them and really listen. So I guess, more than anything, **the reason that this program appealed to me is because of the fact that it actually supports practitioners, people who are out in the field doing work. We recognize the importance of that.**

#### **Experiential Education**

One of the big problems in the American educational system is there's not enough acknowledgement of experiential education. Watching the people walk in today and graduate, I was thinking **I'd much rather walk in with this group than I would with a group from an Ivy League College, because these are the people who are actually doing things.**

#### **Importance of Higher Education for Minorities**

We're in a frightening time in this country. The minority population is increasing dramatically and many of the people who are in positions of power are trying to pretend that's not happening, or they're wringing their hands and talking about how terrible it is, rather than seeing this as something that we all should celebrate, deal with, and acknowledge.

If this country doesn't begin to eliminate some of the stereotypes that everybody has about one another and grapple with issues like minority education, then we're going to be in for real trouble in twenty or thirty years from now. In 1988 I and a number of other people worked on a minority task force as part of the American Council on Education. We put together a little report called "One Third of the Nation," which talked about **the increase in minority population and the decline in the number of people enrolling in and completing courses of higher education.** Our argument was that this is not just a question for people in the academic community. **All Americans should be concerned about this problem.** Where is industry going to get a labor pool from twenty years from now if the majority of the population hasn't had an opportunity to have a higher education? We rang the alarm bell and submitted this report to both Republican and Democratic Presidential candidates in 1988, hoping they'd take it on as an issue. As we all know, neither candidate took on any issue in 1988, so our issue did not get discussed, and no one, to my mind, has still paid much attention.

#### **Eliminate Stereotypes**

It's very important that we eliminate stereotypes. Like Julie, I think it's just absolutely wonderful to see people from so many backgrounds, so many cultures, come together. This is a very unique program, a unique school, and I think that the people that are graduating today should feel honored to be a part of this process. I certainly have been very honored to be here and spend some time with you.

I think most of you got a little tour of the Cherokee Nation yesterday, and then got to go to one of our more private tribal ceremonies last night and a more public powwow. I'm glad you got to do that. And I'm glad that I got to talk with you so you don't have any stereotypes about what a chief looks like!