

JUSTICE HERO
WILMA MANKILLER
1945–

"Prior to my election, young Cherokee girls would never have thought that they might grow up and become chief."

In many ways Wilma Mankiller stunned not only the Cherokee nation, but also the entire United States, when she became the first woman in modern history to head a major Native American nation.

Mankiller was born in Oklahoma in 1945. Her family moved to San Francisco in the 1950s as part of a Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) relocation program. As Mankiller talks about this part of her life, two realities become apparent. One was the brutal face of racism. She relates that the man who conceptualized the relocation program for the BIA was the same person who conceptualized the internment camps for the Japanese during WWII. And even though the real intent of the program was to break up Indian communities and families, her family of eleven children managed to stay together, partly because of the Indian Center in the city.

The second reality was that in living in an African American community in San Francisco, she was confirmed in a belief that was at the core of her community organizing work—"poor people have a much, much greater capacity for solving their own problems than most people give them credit for."

During her years in California, Mankiller had opportunities to practice her community organizing skills, as well as to be vocal about her passion for justice. She was part of the occupation of Alcatraz Island by Native people in 1969.

In 1975 she returned to Oklahoma and soon after that began her community development work among the Cherokee people in earnest. By 1982 she was the Director of the Community Development Department. In 1983, the Chief asked her to run for Deputy Chief with him. They won the election, despite the tremendous amount of overt sexism that was directed at Mankiller. This was a difficult experience for her.

In 1985 Mankiller assumed the role of principal Chief when the current Chief resigned to take a position as BIA director. She became the "CEO" of the second largest Indian nation in the United States—with a population of 140,000, an annual budget of \$75 million, 1,200 employees, spread out over 7,000 square miles. In 1987, she won the position outright in a tribal election.



ACTIVITIES BASED ON THE LIFE OF WILMA MANKILLER

A. Pride in Cherokee Heritage

1. The Cherokee Heritage Center's web site (www.cherokeeheritage.org) contains interesting information about pottery and other arts. Check other websites, especially (www.cherokee.org) for information on Cherokee arts. Children can do some of their own work with clay in art classes, to get a feel for this art form.

YOUNGER STUDENTS

2. Sequoyah's Talking Leaves—Sequoyah came up with the idea of "Talking Leaves" when he visited Chief Charles Hicks, who showed him how to write his name so he could sign his work like American silversmiths had begun to do. Initially, Sequoyah tried pictographs, but soon discovered that the number of symbols in the Cherokee language would be in the thousands. Then he began to create symbols for each syllable the Cherokees use. This was the essential step in creating the syllabary. Have the students work on their own syllabary for English, just for a paragraph. Then experiment with games around the syllabary—on the website (www.cherokee.org/Culture/kids). **OLDER STUDENTS**

3. The legendary humorist, philosopher, actor, Broadway star and cowboy, Will Rogers was part Cherokee. Discuss with students this quote of his "I have Indian blood in me. I have just enough white blood for you to question my honesty." **OLDER STUDENTS**

B. Women in Leadership

1. Since Wilma Mankiller assumed her role as principal Chief, there have been other women who were chiefs. Have the students research who they are. An interesting add-on to this would be to also research how many women have headed other nations. Have the students discuss when they think the first woman will be President of the United States. What makes that difficult? **ALL AGES**
2. When Mankiller was facing the overt sexism directed at keeping her from her leadership position, she operated with the following philosophy: ". . . a very simple little saying helped me get through that election . . . something like 'Don't ever argue with a fool, because someone walking by and observing you can't tell which one is the fool.' I thought that was very good advice; I continued on, and I thought that the idea that gender had anything to do with leadership, or that leadership had anything to do with gender was foolish. . . ." Discuss this with the students. **OLDER STUDENTS**

C. Racism

1. The Trail of Tears is a key experience in Cherokee history.
 - a. Have students trace the trail on a map of the United States. Compare the distance with a distance from their home city. Talk about the length of time the people were on the trail. A simple dramatization/simulation of the whole experience would be helpful in understanding it, eg., moving from one corner of the playground, where all your friends, play equipment, etc. were to another corner of the playground, with about one quarter of the group not making it. **YOUNGER STUDENTS**
 - b. Use the following reflection on the forced removal of the Cherokees to stimulate discussion and/or a writing project:

"We, the great mass of the people think only of the love we have to our land for . . . we do love the land where we were brought up. We will never let our hold to this land go . . . to let it go it will be like throwing away . . . [our] mother that gave . . . [us] birth."

(Letter from Aitooweyah, to John Ross, principal chief of the Cherokees.) **OLDER STUDENTS**

2. Buffy Sainte-Marie's Nihewan Foundation is creating an opportunity for multicultural youth ages 12-20 to get together online to discuss race and culture. Nihewan's mission is to build self esteem in young people of all colors by helping them to get to know each other. For Information Contact: Buffy Sainte-Marie, 808 822-3111 info@youth.nihewan.org. **OLDER STUDENTS**

