



Frederick J. LeRoy
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LeRoy a 'warrior for his people'

Fred LeRoy lobbied political leaders and rallied fellow Native Americans more than 20 years ago to obtain federal recognition for the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska.

LeRoy's eight-year campaign paid off in 1990, making the tribe eligible for federal funds to help provide essential services to its members. The effort also instilled a new sense of pride and community to people who had lost federal recognition in the 1960s.

"It brought back our identity," LeRoy told *The World-Herald* in 2000. "It helped establish our customs and traditions."

LeRoy, 63, died Wednesday at his home in Omaha after a recent illness.

He was a Marine Corps veteran of the Vietnam War, said Judi gaiashkibos, executive director of the Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs and also a Ponca tribal member.

"He was a warrior then, and he came back and was a warrior until his passing," she said Wednesday. "He really was a warrior for his people."

A lifelong Omahan, LeRoy said he grew up isolated from other members of his tribe.

When he visited his grandfather in northeast Nebraska, the ancestral home of the Ponca, he said other native people accused him of not being a "real Indian."

Those experiences helped motivate him to wage the long fight to restore the tribe, he said, but he added that he had a lot of help from others.

LeRoy was the first president of the tribal council after the reinstatement and served a second term. He remained active in tribal leadership until his death, said his daughter, Rhonda Weston of Omaha.

"His passion was native kids," she said. "He felt if you kept them together and kept them from growing up on the streets, they had a better chance. He was always about the people."

Other survivors include his sister, Wanda LeRoy of Omaha; children Janelle Whipple and Chance Clincher, both of Macy, Neb.; and three grandchildren.

Services pending:

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The man who helped put the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska back together again died early Wednesday in Omaha.

Fred LeRoy -- Marine, Vietnam vet, tribal leader, tribal learner -- was 63.

"He was so proud to be a Ponca," said Judi Morgan gaiashkibos, director of the Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs. "He came home after Vietnam and continued to be a warrior for the Ponca people."

And at the time, the Northern Ponca needed a warrior. After it was terminated by the federal government in the 1960s, the tribe -- with its traditional homelands in northeast Nebraska -- ceased to officially exist.

Its members were losing their culture, heritage and identity.

LeRoy had been searching for a life with meaning after the war, said his daughter, Rhonda Weston. He tried various trades, different jobs. Then he found his purpose: Restoring his tribe.

The Northern Ponca Restoration Committee earned the backing of the state and other tribes before taking its request to Washington. Weston remembers her father's frequent trips there to lobby, meet with members of Congress, to put his face behind his people's effort.

In 1990 -- a quarter-century after it was terminated -- the tribe officially was restored as the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska. And LeRoy was named its chairman.

He never stopped learning about the Ponca culture, trying to recapture what the tribe lost through its termination, gaiashkibos said.

"Everybody looked to Fred as an elder and a keeper of our stories and history," she said. "He was the wisest person."

The Ponca is a tribe without a reservation, and that can make it more difficult to maintain its culture, his daughter said.

So LeRoy urged his children -- and their children -- to practice and preserve the tribe's traditions, to take part in its ceremonies and sweats, to learn the language, to listen to the stories of their elders.

"His culture meant the world to him," Weston said.

He served two terms as chairman, during which he fought hard for the return of Native remains held by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

"It's a good feeling," he said in 1999, after the university announced its repatriation plan. "Unfortunately, it took a year to do it, but it's being done. That's the main thing."

After his last term as chairman, LeRoy continued to serve the Ponca as a tribal councilman. But her father was never interested in politics, Weston said.

"It wasn't about any of that. It was about the people."

Gaiashkibos, a member of the Ponca Tribe, sought LeRoy's guidance frequently.

He had been in the hospital over the weekend, she said, but "he sounded optimistic and good" when she spoke to him Tuesday.

He leaves behind three children and three grandchildren -- and a nephew he met a few years ago. Jai Steadman grew up in Lincoln, adopted by non-Ponca parents. But he recently retraced his roots and became close to LeRoy.

"In such a short time, he made such a big influence on myself and the way I look at Native people," he said.

His uncle inspired him to be proud of his heritage -- and to keep it alive. The assistant coach of the Rio Grande Valley Vipers, an NBA D-League team plans to learn the Ponca language.

"I'm going to miss him. I enjoyed coming home and just sitting there, listening to him and learning from him."

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Read more: http://journalstar.com/news/state-and-regional/nebraska/ponca-tribe-loses-warrior-guardian/article_56c8105b-e551-5a62-aadd-dce261dd1c3f.html#ixzz1jGFmYPVT