

# Making Mankiller

A new documentary about Wilma Mankiller is a call to action for education on social issues as well as a tribute to the life and legacy of its namesake. By Leighona Bernstein

**W**ILMA MANKILLER WAS a visionary. Her lifelong work as a civil rights activist and the ten years she spent as the first female principal chief of the Cherokee Nation began to erode a long list of prejudices. Despite her victories across the country, not many have been widely publicized. To shed light on what history forgets, the producers at Red-Horse Native Productions and Valhalla Entertainment set out to tell her story.

Valerie Red-Horse, owner and founder of Red-Horse Native Productions in California and a member of the Cherokee Nation, worked with Gale Anne

Hurd, producer of *The Walking Dead*, to fund and film the story of Mankiller's life. Their goal was to highlight how she rose above opposition to improve the lives of the Cherokee people through increased tribal enrollment, a focus on education and healthcare, and an agreement that shifted control of the tribe's federal funding from the Bureau of Indian Affairs back to the Cherokees.

The producers received initial funding in 2011 and started filming *Mankiller* in Oklahoma with a grant from Vision Maker Media. For the rest of the funding, they created a Kickstarter campaign starring the cast of *The Walking Dead*.

"It turns out a lot of them have Native American blood," says Hurd. "Scott Wilson, for instance, who played Herschel Greene, is part Cherokee."

While Hurd is not Native American, she said being in the tribal lands was inspiring.

"It was profoundly moving to meet so many people whose lives Wilma positively affected," Hurd says. "It reminded us how important it was to get this story out as widely as possible."

The producers interviewed people across the country, including Gloria Steinem, who spoke of Mankiller's role in the feminist movement, and members of the Cherokee Nation, who praised her compassion. The



In addition to being the first female chief of the Cherokee Nation, Wilma Mankiller was the first woman elected chief of any major Native American tribe.

hours and unwavering commitment it took to make the film.

"She did everything she accomplished with kidney disease, and she persevered and never complained," she says.

In making the Mankiller documentary, Hurd and Red-Horse are hoping to foster appreciation for the Cherokee leader's life and influence and to make sure Mankiller is remembered as, in her own words, "the person who helped us restore faith in ourselves."



*Mankiller* is expected to premiere in 2017.

MANKILLER FOUNDATION

documentary follows her life from Oklahoma to northern California and back again while showcasing Cherokee history.

Red-Horse says the parallels between her life and Mankiller's made filming in Oklahoma a special experience. Mankiller lived on the tribal lands of eastern Oklahoma. When she was eleven, her family was moved to San Francisco in a Bureau

of Indian Affairs relocation program. Similarly, Red-Horse grew up in California after her father was brought there from Tahlequah by the same program.

"We were embraced, and I have loved Oklahoma for a long time," she says.

In addition to their shared heritage, Red-Horse found a more personal relationship to Mankiller in the grueling