



Phyllis Bigpond: A Legacy of Service

Phyllis J. Bigpond, a member of the Yuchi Tribe of Oklahoma, devoted her life to advancing the wellbeing of American Indian families and children through four decades of advocacy, leadership, and service. Her influential work impacted Native communities throughout Oklahoma, Arizona, and Colorado—leaving a lasting legacy of positive change.

Born on October 7, 1939, in Mounds, Oklahoma, Phyllis grew up immersed in her Yuchi heritage. She pursued higher education at Oklahoma State University before earning a Master of Social Work from Washington University. Bigpond's career in social services began in her home state of Oklahoma before expanding to the San Carlos Apache Reservation in Arizona and then later moving into leadership roles with the Intertribal Council of Arizona and Phoenix Indian Center. She also served as a consultant for Columbia University and Oklahomans for Indian Opportunity.

In 2000, Bigpond founded the Denver Indian Family Resource Center (DIFRC), serving as its executive director until 2009. Under her leadership, DIFRC became a vital resource for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) families in the Denver metro area. The center focused on developing culturally responsive services under the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) to prevent, support, and advocate for families involved in the child welfare system. More than 1,500 families and 2,400 children have received case management services since the agency's inception.

Between 2006-2007, Phyllis oversaw a DIFRC study to identify the mental health needs of American Indians in the Denver metro area. This work revealed significant barriers preventing Native families from accessing mental health services, including lack of health insurance, transportation, and culturally insensitive programming. She worked diligently to address these challenges, securing grants and developing innovative solutions to better serve the community.

"Wisdom, generosity, tremendous commitment to the community and selfless devotion" were the words that Denver Mayor John Hickenlooper used when proclaiming July 30th "Phyllis J. Bigpond Day" in 2009. Phyllis served on many boards and advisory groups including the Denver American Indian Commission, the Colorado Child Welfare Action Committee, Vice Chair of the Colorado Family Resource Center Association, and Policy Committee Chair of the National Urban Indian Family Coalition, among others.

She is an alumna of the Denver Community Leadership Forum and has received numerous awards that include the Outstanding Native American Leader from the Association of American



Indian Social Work, Distinguished Alumni award from the Washington University's George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Swanee Hunt Leadership Award from the Denver Foundation, and the 2008 Martin Luther King Jr. Peace Award from Metropolitan State College of Denver.

Phyllis J. Bigpond passed away on September 26, 2009 after a 2 year battle with lymphoma. However, her legacy lives on through the programs she established, the communities she strengthened, and the countless lives she touched through her compassionate leadership and unwavering dedication to Native American families and children.