

Wilma Mankiller

Wilma Mankiller, as Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, reflects encouragement, commitment, hope, and survival in her comments on the Columbian Quincentenary.

Certainly I believe the ancient tribal cultures have important lessons to teach the rest of the world about the interconnectedness of all living things and the simple fact that our existence is dependent upon the natural world we are rapidly destroying....

While it is indisputable that the traditional value systems native people held for centuries before European contact have been somewhat eroded, basic traditional values continue to exist, even in the most fragmented, troubled communities. The traditional value systems that have sustained us throughout the past 500 years of trauma are those value systems that will bolster us and help us enter the 21st century on our own terms.

Despite the last 500 years, there is much to celebrate as we approach 1992. Our languages are still strong, ceremonies that we have been conducting since the beginning of time are still being held, our governments are surviving, and most importantly, we continue to exist as a distinct cultural group in the midst of the most powerful country in the world. Yet we also must recognize that we face a daunting set of problems and issues--continual threats to tribal sovereignty, low educational attainment levels, double digit unemployment, many homes without basic amenities and racism. To grapple with these problems in a positive, forward thinking way, we are beginning to look more to our own people, communities and history for solutions. We have begun to trust our own thinking again. If we are too look to our culture and history for solutions to problems, let us look at an accurate history, not the Columbus myth native children and non-native children are taught in every grade school history class in America.

As native people approach the 21st century, we look into the faces of our youth and see, despite everything, hope. We would like to see that hope kept alive by doing everything possible to assure that our tribal communities continue to dig a way out of the devastation of the past 500 years. We look forward to the next 500 years as a time of renewal and revitalization for native people throughout North America.