

Girl Scouts of the Jersey Shore's Amazing Woman of the Month Series:

Wilma Mankiller

"Chief of Her People"



Best known as the first female Chief of a Native American tribe, Wilma was also an advocate of Native American and Women's rights. She was a spokesperson for healthcare, education, and tribal sovereignty. She fought for the rights of Native Americans to control their own destinies and worked with her people to increase their self-reliance and prosperity. She fought against cultural appropriation and worked to preserve the culture of the Cherokee. Over her lifetime, Wilma met with three sitting US presidents, and was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom which is the highest honor a civilian can achieve. After her retirement as Chief, Wilma toured the country speaking on behalf of Native Americans, Women, and Cancer Awareness.

Watch this video to get a brief overview of Wilma's life and achievements:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2OM6zXhfY0>

STEP ONE: What made Wilma a Mankiller?

"My name is Mankiller, and in the old Cherokee Nation, when we lived here in the Southeast, we lived in semi-autonomous villages, and there was someone who watched over the village, who had the title of mankiller. And I'm not sure what you could equate that to, but it was sort of like a soldier or someone who was responsible for the security of the village, and so anyway this one fellow liked the title mankiller so well that he kept it as his name, and that's who we trace our ancestry back to."
- Wilma Mankiller

Wilma Pearl Mankiller was born in 1945 in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the capital of the Cherokee Nation. Wilma was the sixth of eleven children born to Charley Mankiller and Clara Irene Sitton. The name "Mankiller" is a respected tribal military position given to the person assigned to protect the tribe. Wilma's grandfather served in this position and so adopted the title as his last name.

Growing up in Oklahoma, Wilma did not have electric lights, running water, indoor toilets, or a telephone. She never felt poor though because everyone else she knew was living the same way. When she was 11, her family was forced to move to San Francisco as part of the Bureau of Indian

Affairs Relocation Act. Wilma called it her “own little trail of tears” referring to a time when her great grandfather was forced off his land in North Carolina.

It was in California that Wilma learned to be an advocate. San Francisco in the 60s was a time of change and social activism. (Ask your grandparents about the hippies of Haight-Ashbury) In 1969, a group of Native Americans occupied Alcatraz Island using the “Right of Discovery” to claim it was their land just as European settlers had done when they landed in North America years before. Listening to their argument, Wilma “became aware of what needed to be done to let the rest of the world know that Indians had rights, too.”

She got involved with the Native American Youth Center and restored pride in Native Culture to the tribal children who were living in California. Wilma learned how the justice system works when she assisted the Pit River Tribe in a legal battle with the Pacific Gas and Electric Company over millions of acres of tribal land. She put this knowledge to good use in her later career. During this time, Wilma also became good friends with Gloria Steinem, and a fierce advocate for women’s rights as well.



ACTIVITY: What’s in a Name?

Most surnames, or last names, have an origin that tells something about the person. For example, someone with the last name of Baker could have an ancestor who made bread, and Schumacher probably had someone in their distant family who made shoes. Use the internet or other resources to investigate the origins of your surname and write your findings on the page provided. This site may help you get started, but there are many others if your last name is not listed here: <https://surnames.behindthename.com/>

Surname: _____

Country of Origin: _____

Meaning: _____

Variations: _____

Popularity: _____

STEP TWO: Water is Life

"I want to be remembered as the person who helped us restore faith in ourselves." - Wilma Mankiller



When the Cherokee were relocated away from their tribal lands, they also lost their way of life. Children were taken away from their families and forced to live in boarding schools where they were punished for speaking Cherokee. Because of this, many Cherokee people felt powerless; they had no control over their own lives, and their way of life was dying out.

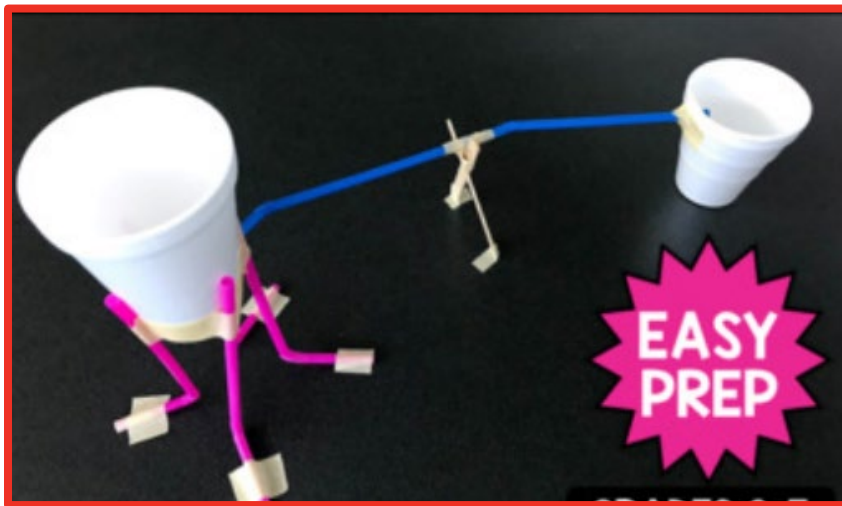
Wilma and her two daughters moved back to Oklahoma after her divorce, and she became known for her creation of the Bell Water Project. Bell Oklahoma was a town of two hundred families, with no running water, and high unemployment; many of the residents felt

hopeless. Wilma used the Cherokee idea of Gadugi (working together) to bring running water to the people of Bell Oklahoma and restore their self-determination. Wilma had secured a grant to help the people of Bell live better lives. She thought the people would use the money to build a school, but instead, they decided more people would benefit from having running water. This was a much bigger project and would cost more than the grant would provide if they hired professionals to build the pipeline. Wilma took a big risk and bet on her people to come through. She used the grant money to buy the needed materials and recruited volunteers from the area to build 16 miles of water line themselves. While working on this project, she relied on tribal leader Charlie Soap who helped her make the necessary connections with the people in the community, their partnership extended far beyond the building of the project, and they were married in 1985.

The success of this project was much-needed proof to the American government, and the Cherokee people themselves, that tribal people were able to identify and solve their own problems. The Bell Water Project model was used for many other improvements on Native American lands. Watch this video to see the importance of this project and why it helped Wilma gain national attention. And if you would like to learn even more, download The Cherokee Word for Water, an award-winning film directed by Kristina Kiehl who helped in the writing of this program!

<https://www.pbs.org/video/bell-water-project-u3ln8z/>

ACTIVITY: Build your Own Water Pipeline



Materials:

- Paper or Styrofoam cups
- Bendy straws
- Something to poke a hole with
- Masking tape

Instructions:

1. Poke a hole in the bottom of one cup and along the top edge of another.
2. Build a stand for the cup with the hole on the bottom. Use extra straws and masking tape. Be creative, the only rule is that it must be sturdy.
3. Connect the two cups together using straws. You can be simple and only use one straw, but you can also make it more difficult by using multiple straws and having them bend in different angles.
4. Pour water into the top cup and plug any leaks with tape. If your pipeline does not work, reconfigure your design until it does. That's what engineers do!



How it works: Water is transported from a big tank to a smaller tank using an incline. Gravity is needed to pull the water into the pipeline. That is why water towers are very tall structures! You must also make sure that all the connections are watertight; testing and plugging are always part of any water pipeline project.

STEP THREE: A Chief to Her People

"Everybody is sitting around saying, 'Well, jeez, we need somebody to solve this problem of bias.' That somebody is us. We all have to try to figure out a better way to get along."
- Wilma Mankiller

Because of the success of the Bell project, Wilma caught the attention of Ross Swimmer who chose her as a running mate in his campaign for Chief of the Cherokee Nation in 1983. The pair won the election despite being from different political parties. When Swimmer was offered another government position, Wilma took over as Chief in 1985 and then won re-election on her own in 1987. During the campaign, she noticed that voters did not want to talk to her about her ideas, because they didn't think a woman could lead.



Despite their doubts, Wilma was a very successful tribal chief. She improved housing, healthcare, and education for her people, and she worked with the United States government and the EPA to guarantee Native Americans the right to self-government and natural resources. Wilma also knew that money is needed to run a government, so she supported businesses in the hospitality, manufacturing, natural resources, and gaming industry. Under her leadership, the Cherokee Nation increased its budget to \$150 million a year and unemployment significantly dropped!

ACTIVITY: What Would You Do as a Chief?

The job of a Cherokee Chief is like the job of the US president. They are responsible to make sure laws are enforced and can **veto** (or say no) to laws they don't agree with. Chiefs also create partnerships with other groups, companies, or countries to help their people. For instance, Wilma had to work closely with the Environmental Protection Agency to make sure her people would retain ownership of their tribal lands.

Be like Wilma and use the next page to plan what you would do as Chief of your people. Remember that she always consulted the people to understand their problems and then worked to find solutions.

PROBLEM	WHO IT HURTS	SOLUTION	WHO CAN HELP

STEP FOUR: Cherokee Culture

“A significant number of people believe tribal people still live and dress as they did three hundred years ago. During my tenure as principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, national news agencies requesting interviews sometimes asked if they could film a tribal dance or if I would wear traditional tribal clothing for the interview. I doubt they asked the president of the United States to dress like a pilgrim for an interview.” - Wilma Mankiller

Wilma served her people well as Chief, but she decided not to run for re-election in 1995. Wilma had suffered many health problems throughout her life and wanted to take time to heal and pursue other interests. This did not mean that she just sat in a rocking chair for the rest of her days! Once Wilma was no longer in office, she began touring and giving speeches advocating for women's rights, cancer awareness, and of course, Native American rights. One of the things Wilma spoke out against was cultural appropriation which is when you take one aspect of a culture and use it to your own benefit without understanding what it really means. Wilma worked to create a registry of authentic Native American artisans to separate them from other people just trying to make a profit. There are many gift shops in tourist locations that sell artwork, jewelry, pottery, clothing and blankets, and weapons that they claim are Native American when they were really produced in a factory overseas. This is unfair because it takes away from the hard work that goes into making authentic Native American products.

ACTIVITY: Appropriation vs. Appreciation

There is a difference between cultural appreciation and appropriation. For example, when someone is really interested in Polynesian culture and learns to hula dance, understanding that the dance tells a story in movement. If they know the meaning behind each gesture and can respectfully tell the story behind the dance, they are appreciating the culture and trying to further understand. Appropriating would be when a dancer just imitates the moves because they like how their hips look when wearing a grass skirt.



Many people would wear headdresses to sporting events because they thought they were showing support for their team. But this is appropriation because in Native American culture only those who were admired and greatly respected by other members of the tribe would wear a headdress. It is a symbol of **bravery and honor** – worn only by a distinguished community member such as the chief, or a warrior. In comparison, the American military gives medals to soldiers to honor them for brave acts and sacrifice. It would be considered very offensive if someone wore these medals who had not earned them.

As Girl Scouts, we know how important it is to learn about and appreciate different cultures. Watch this video of a Cherokee storyteller as she explains the Cherokee Creation story. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DfcznspMFeA>

Once you have learned the Cherokee story of how the earth was created and made suitable for people and animals, make a traditional clay necklace to honor one of the characters in the story.



Materials:

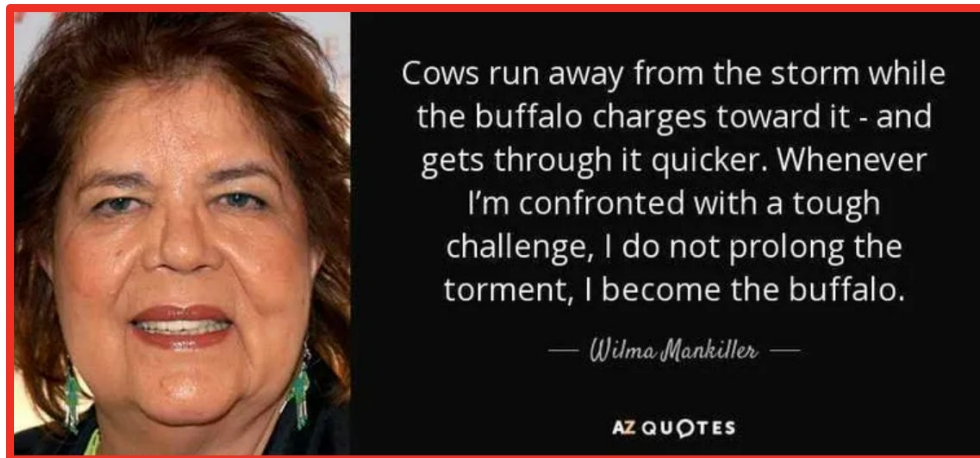
- Modeling Clay
- Wax Paper
- Rolling Pin
- Knife or bamboo skewer
- String
- Scissors
- Pencils and markers

Instructions:

1. Roll out a ball of modeling clay to about ¼ inch thickness on a sheet of wax paper.
2. Cut out your medallion. It can be any size or shape you like, but a circle with the size of a soda can works well.
3. Pick up your medallion and smooth out any bumps or cracks in the clay.
4. Use your knife or bamboo skewer to poke two holes in the top of your medallion
5. Let your medallion dry for a few hours
6. Once dry, use your pencil to sketch your animal design on your medallion
7. Trace over your design with your marker
8. Thread your string through the two holes, and tie to desired length. Trim off excess length. Here is a video demonstration that contains some things to use if you don't have clay or string:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqPhkUYccEO>

Step Five: Use Your Inspiration



At the age of 64, Wilma passed away due to pancreatic cancer. During her lifetime, she battled many serious illnesses, but she never let her illnesses stop her. Diagnosed with lymphoma, breast cancer, myasthenia gravis, and kidney failure, Wilma always got right back to work as soon as she could after each procedure or surgery.

She was also involved in a serious car accident that resulted in 17 surgeries and years of physical therapy. Wilma used these experiences to inspire her to improve the healthcare offered to Native Americans and to bring awareness to cancer-related issues. When she learned that she had end-

stage cancer, she said she was “mentally and spiritually prepared for this journey” as she had “been blessed with an extraordinarily rich and wonderful life filled with incredible experiences.”

ACTIVITY: Be the Buffalo



All of us have things that we don't want to do, or that scare us. Wilma recognized that a cow, would run away from the things that scared it which made the cows suffer and be afraid even longer. Wilma preferred to be like a bull that ran towards the thing it was afraid of. The bull is no less afraid, but it gets through the scary thing much faster than the cow! Think of a thing that you are afraid of or just don't want to do. It might be getting a needle at the doctor's or having to do a hard assignment at school. You could put that thing off and wait until

the last minute to get it done. But you won't be able to really relax and have fun while you are putting it off because you will always have that small worry in the back of your mind about what you must do.

Talk about some tasks that make you uncomfortable with your troop or group of friends. Discuss ways you can be like Wilma and charge towards them! Then draw a picture of yourself conquering your fear and becoming the bull. Once finished, snap a photo of your drawing and email it to us at spetti@gsgfun.org.