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Elder of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, Marshall McKay

By Jenessa Howard

On January 2, 2021, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article titled, “Marshall McKay, Indigenous leader who helped steer Autry Museum, dies of COVID-19 at 68.”¹ Despite his lifelong work as a Native American activist, dated records of Marshall McKay’s achievements are rare, which complicates the chronology of his life. McKay worked in institutions across the state of California such as the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation Tribal Council, the Native American Heritage Commission, the University of California, Davis, and the Autry National Center. Through his work with these institutions, McKay advocated for Indigenous rights through politics and education reform.

On June 5, 1952, Marshall McKay was born to his biological mother Frances Lorenzo McDaniels and his father Charles McKay in Colusa, California.² He was raised by his mother Mabel Lorenzo McKay in migrant housing in Arbuckle, California.³ Little is known about his early or personal life. He

¹ Carolina A. Miranda, “Marshall McKay, Indigenous leader who helped steer Autry Museum, dies of COVID-19 at 68,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 2, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2021-01-02/marshall-mckay-indigenous-leader-autry-museum-dies>.

² “Marshall C. McKay (1952-2020),” *Daily Democrat*, April 24, 2021, <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/dailydemocrat/obituary.aspx?n=marshall-c-mckay&pid=198371489&fhid=3131>.

³ Native News Online Staff, “Tribal Elder Marshall McKay, a ‘Resolute Protector’ of Native Culture, Dies from Covid-19,” *Native News Online*, January 7, 2021, <https://nativenewsonline.net/currents/tribal-elder-marshall-mckay-a-resolute-protector-of-native-culture-dies-from-covid-19>; “Marshall C. McKay (1952-2020).”

eventually became the first person to represent his tribe, the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, at Sonoma State University and the University of California, Berkeley.⁴ As a Native American from a low-income background, it was an achievement for him to be the first to represent his tribe as a university student. Furthermore, during an unspecified time in his life, McKay supervised work crews to repair and maintain submarines for the United States Navy's Department of Defense for fifteen years.⁵ Regarding his personal life, McKay married his first wife, Electa Reynolds in 1976, but later remarried to Sharon Rogers in 2003.⁶ He had two children with Reynolds, Rebecca, and Dillon, and adopted Rogers' kids, Brent Rogers, Hsin Neh Rogers, and Alexander Finkel, into his family.⁷

One of his most important leadership positions was his time as a representative of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation. According to The Tribal Council of his nation,

for 31 years, from 1984 to 2015... [McKay] served as a member of the Yocha Dehe Tribal Council, elected to lead the Tribe as its Chairman for nearly a decade of that time. He served on many of the Tribe's governmental bodies, including the Board of Directors for Cache Creek Casino Resort.⁸

The Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation is an independent tribal government recognized by the United States and is located in Sacramento, California. The Wintun have survived many difficulties including the Spanish mission system in the eighteenth

⁴ Native News Online Staff; "Marshall C. McKay (1952-2020)."

⁵ Native News Online Staff.

⁶ "Marshall C. McKay (1952-2020)."

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ The Tribal Council of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, "Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation Mourns Passing of Tribal Elder," Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, December 30, 2020, <https://www.yochadehe.org/news/yocha-dehe-wintun-nation-mourns-passing-tribal-elder>.

century and the exploitation and land acquisition of the Gold Rush in northern California in 1855. During an interview tour with documentary media-maker, Jesikah Maria Ross, McKay said,

I think it's important for non-Native people in Yolo County [California] to understand what happened to the Wintun people so that there's a truthful exchange of information. I want to bring out the facts rather than the fantasy and I think that's necessary in order to get an understanding between cultures and I think it's important for historical value that these incidents become part of our history here in Yolo County.⁹

McKay, as both chairman and director, secured economic stability for the Yocha Dehe Wintun by developing Cache Creek Casino Resort.¹⁰

As an educational activist, he championed cultural renewal, promotion, and advancement. He established sustainable agricultural practices by founding Séka Hills, an artisanal olive oil company.¹¹ Moreover, the Séka Hills company continues to practice Patwin cultural beliefs through the preservation of the environment and Indigenous language.¹² During his interview with Jesikah Maria Ross, McKay stated,

The name of my language is Southern Wintun. We also have in our own dialect we call it Patwin, the language of the people and it was almost a dead

⁹ Jesikah Maria Ross, "Audio Tour Interview With Marshall McKay Stop 5: Memorial Grove," Art of Regional Change University of California Davis, November 9, 2011, http://restorerestory.org/sites/default/files/files/tour-transcripts/McKay_05_Memorial.pdf.

¹⁰ Miranda.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Yocha Dehe," Seka Hills, accessed March 15, 2020, <https://www.sekahills.com/story/yocha-dehe/>.

language. We had two culture keepers that knew the language. One has since passed last year and we still have one and she is graciously helping us reclaim that language.¹³

That action led to the present Patwin language preservation.

The preservation of the Patwin language follows McKay's cultural beliefs in the protection of the environment. In another interview with Jesikah Maria Ross, McKay expressed, "restoration means to me directly a representation of a time before destruction and I mean by that not so much an absolute destruction, but whenever something is disturbed in a fundamental way with mining or farming even or even over-cultivation of plant material or basket making material, it becomes an unnatural setting" for the environment.¹⁴

McKay has represented Indigenous Americans locally, nationally, and internationally. In 2007, McKay served on the boards of both the Native American Heritage Commission and the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian.¹⁵ According to the California Native American Heritage Commission, "Commissioner McKay carried the tribe's sovereignty and advocacy for California Native Americans into the halls of power, from the Governor's Office to two State Commissions (the NAHC and the State Historical Resources

¹³ Jesikah Maria Ross, "Audio Tour Interview With Marshall McKay Stop 1: The Overlook," Art of Regional Change University of California Davis, November 9, 2011, http://restorerestory.org/sites/default/files/files/tour-transcripts/McKay_01_Overlook.pdf.

¹⁴ Jesikah Maria Ross, "Audio Tour Interview With Marshall McKay Stop 2: Wetlands," Art of Regional Change University of California Davis, November 9, 2011, http://restorerestory.org/sites/default/files/files/tour-transcripts/McKay_02_Wetlands.pdf.

¹⁵ Miranda.

Commission), with grace and humility.”¹⁶ This made him a memorable and impactful figure in the Native American community. Furthermore, in 2015, in defiance of the United States pulling out of the Paris Climate Accords, McKay attended the accords to represent Indigenous Americans.¹⁷

After being chairman of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Tribal Council, McKay later became a member of the University of California Davis Foundation Board in 2008.¹⁸ As former chairman, he utilized his connections with the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation to provide financial support to the University of California, Davis. That support led to the creation of the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts and two endowed chairs in the Department of Native American Studies and the Pediatric Endocrinology clinic within the University of California, Davis school of medicine.¹⁹ According to the regents of the University of California, the governing body of the University of California system, a “cornerstone of Marshall McKay’s vision is his commitment to Native American cultural renewal—a focus he extended into education and sustainable land practices.”²⁰ The Native American Studies program at the University of California, Davis, which McKay helped establish, “has supported undergraduate student internships, graduate student research, hosting California Indian speakers, and the development and publishing of research on

¹⁶ California Native American Heritage Commission, “In Remembrance of Commissioner Marshall McKay and Commissioner Joseph A. Myers,” The State of California Native American Heritage Commission, accessed January 2021, <http://nahc.ca.gov/2021/01/in-remembrance-of-commissioner-marshall-mckay-and-commissioner-joseph-a-myers/>.

¹⁷ Paige Laduzinsky, “Remembering Marshall McKay,” KCET, February 10, 2021, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/tending-nature/remembering-marshall-mckay>

¹⁸ The regents of the University of California, Davis campus, “Renewing Culture Marshall McKay,” UC Davis Stories, accessed March 2021, <https://stories.ucdavis.edu/stories/community/mckay.html>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

California Indian land and water rights and restoration.”²¹

McKay’s activism included the preservation and revitalization of some California native languages, a perfect example of his support for Native American Studies.²²

McKay further fulfilled his leadership role in 2010, as he “was the first Native American to be appointed Chairman of the Board for the Autry National Center,” which includes the Southwest Museum of the American Indian, the Museum of the American West, and the Institute for the Study of the American West.²³ McKay’s appointment was significant because it signaled the shift of the center’s focus away from an archetypal American cowboy museum to one inclusive of Native Americans. As Chairman of the Autry, he advocated for changing the museum’s viewpoint to give voice to Native Americans. Following the end of his term as Chairman at the Autry in 2016, McKay loaned the museum some Indigenous artifacts that he and his second wife, Sharon Rogers, had collected.²⁴ Among these artifacts was a signed logbook by thousands of Indigenous activists who occupied Alcatraz from November 20, 1969, to June 11, 1971.²⁵ The Autry Museum even featured an exhibit in 2018 that represented his mother as a prominent Pomo teacher, renowned healer, and basket weaver.²⁶

²¹ The regents of the University of California, Davis campus, “UCD NAS Remembers Yocha Dehe Chairman Emeritus Marshall McKay,” UC Davis Department of Native American Studies, accessed March 2021, <https://nas.ucdavis.edu/news-and-events/ucd-nas-remembers-yocha-dehe-chairman-emeritus-marshall-mckay>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Claire Selvin, “Marshall McKay, ‘Pioneering Former Board Chair of Autry Museum, Has Died at 68,’” *ART News*, January 5, 2020, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/marshall-mckay-autry-museum-dead-1234580793/>; “Marshall C. McKay (1952–2020).”

²⁴ Miranda.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

McKay strove for the implementation of Native American representation on multiple platforms. McKay had spoken at the 35th annual American Indian Film Festival in 2010 that featured the documentary, *A Good Day to Die*. The film was executively produced by his nation and covers the American Indian Movement (AIM), a civil rights movement dedicated to protecting Native Americans, established in 1968.²⁷ AIM's focus was directed towards the independence of American Indians and their lands to preserve culture and traditions. They have also fought to hold the United States government accountable by honoring past treaties with Indigenous nations. At the festival, McKay stated that this "movement has changed and continues to change the way the country and the world perceive tribal people in North America."²⁸

The Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation's Tribal Council issued the following statement upon hearing of Marshall McKay's death on December 30, 2020: "We know also the pain of Marshall's loss is shared by the many who loved him and learned from him. We will miss his strength and wisdom. He was a resolute protector of Native American heritage here, within our own homeland, but also throughout California and Indian Country."²⁹ The Native American Heritage Commission remembered him "with heavy hearts and deep sadness," stating that they were "devastated beyond words...May Commissioner McKay...be warmly welcomed by the ancestors [he] sought to honor."³⁰ He was remembered by educational bodies, such as The Department of Native American Studies at the University of California, Davis, who expressed their deepest condolences: "Marshall was a visionary leader; a champion of Indian education, self-determination, tribal government, economic development, and the arts. A kind,

²⁷ Quanah Brightman, "Marshall McKay speaking at the 35th annual American Indian Film Festival," YouTube, 3:48, November 17, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L0moYWRyV_w.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ The Tribal Council of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation.

³⁰ California Native American Heritage Commission.

inclusive, and friendly man, he was also a fierce advocate for Indian students and Native American Studies.”³¹ Even the University of California, Davis’s Chancellor, Gary S. May, personally expressed his deepest respect for McKay and remembered him as a good friend and inspiration to the students, faculty, and staff alike.³² In remembrance of McKay, Jackie Autry, Founding Chair and Life Trustee of the Autry Museum, wrote, “Marshall was an inspiration to me and to everyone at the Autry Museum...[he] was an extra leader...a generous and beautiful soul and I will miss him with all my heart.”³³ McKay was a man remembered by his colleagues and friends endearingly.

Native elders like McKay thought seven generations ahead, anticipating the future instead of reacting to the present. He inspired future generations of children to remember their ancestors with the creation of educational programs through Native American communities in California’s higher education system. Moreover, he actively represented those native elders as a leader of the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation and his work at the University of California, Davis, the Native American Heritage Commission, and the Autry Center by sharing his experience as a Native American with others. McKay advocated for Indigenous peoples to be represented through political organizations and the California education system and helped adjust the perception of non-Indigenous Americans. However well described he may be in this article, he describes his values, beliefs, and his life best in his own words:

My name is Marshall McKay and I am honored to
lend my support as the Chairman of the Native Arts

³¹ The regents of the University of California, Davis campus, “UCD NAS Remembers Yocha Dehe Chairman Emeritus Marshall McKay.”

³² News and Media Relations, “Chancellor’s Statement on the Passing of Marshall McKay,” UC Davis, January 04, 2021, <https://www.ucdavis.edu/news/chancellors-statement-passing-marshall-mckay>.

³³ Jackie Autry, “A Tribute to Marshall McKay,” Autry Museum of the American West, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://theautry.org/marshall>.

and Cultures Foundation Board of Directors. As the son of renowned healer and basket weaver Mabel McKay, I understand and respect artistic vision and practice. Through our artforms, Native people have described our agonies, mobilized for our struggles, talked of our cosmologies and world-views, transmitted our histories and celebrated our joys and our hopes. Our arts and cultural expressions are the key to the very survival of American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian and in fact, all cultures. For me, the significance of keeping our stories, art, language and culture alive is personal, because it is central to our own survival as a people. It reflects the promise we have made to generations of storytellers and culture keepers – the promise that we will carry the knowledge of our traditions on into perpetuity – to preserve the core of who we are as Native people.³⁴

³⁴ Marshall McKay, “Chairman Marshall McKay on The Cultural Survival of Native Nations,” Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.yochadehe.org/news/chairman-marshall-mckay-cultural-survival-native-nations>.

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<https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/dailydemocrat/obituary.aspx?n=marshall-c-mckay&pid=198371489&fhid=3131><https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/dailydemocrat/obituary.aspx?n=marshall-c-mckay&pid=198371489&fhid=3131>.
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Author Bio

As a student at California State University, San Bernardino pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in History, Jennessa Howard is dedicated to preserving Indigenous Peoples' culture, traditions, and informing the public about the historical significance of those topics. She takes inspiration from Professor Raul Chavez, Elder Robert John Knapp, and Professor Francis Borella who were instrumental in igniting her respect for history and Indigenous Peoples. She is a professional dancer, dance instructor, and student of the world, with a forward focus on ensuring that the nameless and voiceless are represented and recognized in the world today. Beyond dance, Jennessa is an avid writer; she is concentrating on her internship with Dr. Long. As a former member of the Native American Inter-tribal Student Association (NAISA), she is always looking for the next story to be told through a historical lens.

