

The Tulsa Voice – Close up (Oct. 2017)

Your Guide to the 2017 Tulsa American Film Festival

Documentary Feature Film

Oct. 13 - 8:00 P.M.–10:00 | Circle Cinema

Mankiller

Directed by Valerie Red-Horse Mohl

I figure it's not up to me to capsule Wilma Mankiller's story. "Mankiller," the new documentary from director Valerie Red-Horse Mohl ("Naturally Native") does a more than ample job of that. Right up front, anyone—especially anyone who's lived most of their adult life in Oklahoma—should seek it out.

As the first female Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation in 1985, Wilma Mankiller broke through a glass ceiling of political patriarchy, while forging a level of bipartisan cooperation—in the name of, you know, actually governing for the collective good—that was not only atypical for a such a politically conservative place and time, but also brings into depressing focus the absurd negligence of our contemporary state of non-governance by a party seemingly powered by cruelty, obstructionism, and wrong-headed, inflexible ideology. With heart and a healthy sense of humor (she seemed keenly aware of how cool her last name was), Mankiller's desire to improve the lives of her people is a lesson in actual leadership. You could hardly be blamed for forgetting what that looks like lately.

The legacy of Mankiller's liberal populism lives on today in the likes of another native-Oklahoman, Senator Elizabeth Warren, whose non-candidacy last year made even full-throated supporters of Hillary Clinton pine for an ideologically purer (and politically savvier) choice for the presidency. The corollary between Clinton's near-win and Mankiller's ascension to Chief couldn't be made clearer. And it's no accident that the film inspires a similar longing for Mankiller—a "what if" fantasy of how things might have turned out had she lived long enough to run for the highest office in the land.

As a documentary, “Mankiller” is an engaging and inspiring chronicle. Mohl directs with compelling immediacy and passion. It somewhat glosses over the pall that befell Mankiller before the end of her second term—accusations of embezzlement, the details of which remain murky. As a production, the format is standard though well-executed: archival footage, talking head interviews (including Michael Wallis and Gloria Steinem), along with friends, family, and colleagues who recall her effect on their lives, and the lives of Oklahomans, with moving sincerity and respect. The parallels between the issues that gave birth to her activism and how they informed her life are still present. Loss of cultural identity, colonization, marginalization, and other familiar battles.

—Joe O’Shansky

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