



Joseph "Joe" Jenkins

April 16, 2020

Mardi Gras Indian chief and cultural elder Joe Jenkins died at Passages Hospice on April 16, 2020. He was 90 years old. Chief Jenkins spanned several generations in the Mardi Gras Indian culture, beginning in 1955 as a trail chief for the Seminoles and later as Second Chief with the Guardians of the Flame led by the late Big Chief Donald Harrison, Sr.

Chief Jenkins was an artist and a craftsman – creating elaborate, beautiful suits as a Mardi Gras Indian and constructing buildings throughout New Orleans. He served as a mentor to young Indians and members of Tambourine and Fan at the Tremé Community Center.

He was proud to be a background actor on Tremé, the acclaimed HBO series, and sang on New-Way Pockey-Way, a CD recorded in 1998 by the Young Guardians of the Flame. He was a dedicated board member of the Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame.

He debuted as a Seminole under the late Big Chief Oliver Pookie Crowden before joining the Guardians of the Flame and serving as a Counsel Chief to Big Chief Brian Nelson, a fourth-generation tradition participant. Chief Jenkins was excited to bring the distinctive culture to Martinique where he performed with the Guardians. He masked Indian for the last time in 2016.

Maroon Queen Cherice Harrison-Nelson said, "Chief Joe was so special to me. I was honored to be his Queen and I will never forget working with him to share the tradition with our children's group, Young Guardians of the Flame."

Chief Jenkins was delighted attend an occasional Indian practice on Sunday to sing and dance. He also worked at the Tremé Center sharing elder wisdom at the urging of his dear friend, community activist and Tambourine and Fan director Jerome Smith. Smith said, "He enjoyed talking to the children, and they loved hearing his stories with messages to stay strong and standup for justice."

He was honored to be photographed by Gus Bennett, Jr. for the New Orleans People Project, enjoyed monthly hamburger lunches at Sammy's, BBQ beef brisket from the joint, old R&B songs, chocolate candy and chocolate cake from Antoine's bakery (he called it, "the good stuff."), Barq's root beer, sharing stories about all things Indian and singing Indian songs. Mr. Jenkins was veteran of the U.S. Army and became a homeowner at age 76. He loved spending time with his dog, Foxy. His favorite sayings were, "And you are correct," "Don't bow down," and "Ya' got that right."

Chief Jenkins was portrayed by Harold Sylvester, an award-winning actor and New Orleans native, in Big Chief Brian Nelson's Keeper of the Flame, a short dramatic film set in the Mardi Gras Indian tradition. Nelson, who met Joe when he was five years old said, "Joe was my counsel chief, he guided me on the protocols of the tradition, he was my friend. I gave him a Native American head ring, every time I saw him, he told me how much he loved it and me. That meant a lot to me." His life was documented in an oral history for the Cultural Elders Project by WWOZ 90.7FM.

Sacred Mardi Gras Indian chants were sung to him as he passed away by Big Chiefs Nelson and Kevin Goodman of the Flaming Arrows, Queen Silvana

Miranda, Ambassador Queen Jamilah Muhammad, Little Warrior Marley Jones and Queen Harrison-Nelson.

Mr. Jenkins proceeded in death by his parents Joseph Wesley Jenkins and Orlean Smith and two brothers, Lester Jenkins and Raymond Jenkins.

Burial will be at on Friday, June 26, 11:00 am at Southeast Louisiana Veterans Cemetery in Slidell. A memorial service to commemorate his 91st birthday will be held at the river on July 14. Arrangement by D.W. Rhodes Funeral Home. Please visit www.rhodesfuneral.com to share online condolences.

Donations in Chief Joseph's Memory can be made to National Performance Network for

UNOLA/Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame <https://npnweb.org/donate/>

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Cemetery Details

Southeast LA. Veterans Cemetery

34888 Grantham College Dr, Slidell, LA
70460
Slidell, LA 70460