

Written by gallupsun  
Wednesday, 08 March 2023 21:31

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WINDOW ROCK, ARIZ.— It is with great sadness and deep sympathy that Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren and Navajo Nation Council Speaker Crystalyne Curley officially announce the passing of the late Navajo Tribal Chairman and Navajo Nation President Peterson Zah. He was 85.

“The Navajo Nation lost one of its iconic leaders last night, Dr. Peterson Zah,” Nygren said. “He was the first president of the Navajo Nation and he was a good champion even in Washington, D.C., in the '90s and the '80s.”

Nygren thanked Zah's family for sharing him.

“It’s a big loss for the Navajo Nation. I want to let Indian Country know, as well,” Nygren said. “He was a huge tribal advocate across Indian Country and America. Thank you to his family for letting us have him lead the Navajo Nation.”

Zah had been ill for some time. He was at home March 7 when his family took him to the Tséhootsooí Medical Center in Fort Defiance, Ariz. He passed away with his family around him.

Zah was born in the Keams Canyon, Ariz., area Dec. 2, 1937. He was Kinyaa’áanii (Towering House), born for Táchii’nii (Red Running Into Water). His maternal grandfathers were Tódich’íi’nii (Bitter Water) and his paternal grandfathers were Tó’áhaní (Near The Water). His father was Henry Zah, known in Navajo as Ólta’í yázhí, “the schooled short person.” His mother was Mae Zah.

Nygren proclaimed all flags on the Navajo Nation be lowered to half-staff beginning March 9 and ending March 15 in honor of President Zah’s life of accomplishments and service to the Navajo people.

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"We are saddened and heartbroken by the passing of a great leader, and most importantly, a loving and compassionate grandfather and father," Curley said. "I will always cherish and honor Mr. Zah's guidance and support that he provided me throughout my academic and professional journey."

Curley also spoke about how Zah's legacy reached beyond the Navajo Nation.

"His legacy reaches far beyond our rural communities and the Navajo Nation. His leadership, service, and contributions were known across the country," Curley said. "On behalf of the 25th Navajo Nation Council, I offer condolences to his wife, Rosalind, his children, grandchildren, the community of Low Mountain, and his lifelong friends. May we all take comfort in knowing that he is now with our Creator."

Navajo Nation Council Delegate Carl Roessel Slater, who grew up knowing President Zah closely through the close friendship between the president and his own late grandparents, also spoke about the leader.

"Shida'í, Mr. Zah, molded our people to think as a nation, and, despite his age and health, he never quit in his mission to see us become who we ought to," Slater said. "We are stronger because of his leadership, compassion, intelligence, and gift for elevating the ordinary deliberations our society into echoes of our future."

Zah served as Chairman of the Navajo Nation from 1983 to 1987. He was the first Navajo Nation President from 1991 to 1995.

He described himself to the late historian of Navajo history, Peter Iverson, as "an ordinary man with extraordinary experiences."

Among his accomplishments as chairman was the establishment of the Navajo Nation's

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Permanent Trust Fund with the then-controller, which continues to produce revenue to fund direct services and projects throughout the Navajo Nation to this day. He also served as an advisor to the President of Arizona State University for 15 years.

He was considered one of the 100 most important Native Americans in the last century, recognized as a key leader in Native American government and education.

Among his other accomplishments as a leader of the Navajo Nation, he:

- Led the effort to close open uranium mine sites, clean-up tailing pond spills and compensate families of uranium mine workers.
- Renegotiated oil, gas and coal leases, pipeline and electric transmission rights- of-way to increase royalty and tax revenues.
- Led the national effort to include tribes in the Clean Water Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act , the Clean Air Act and Superfund.
- Led a national effort in 1994 to amend the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 to protect the right of all Native Americans to use peyote as a sacrament.

Zah received honorary doctoral degrees from Arizona State University, Colorado College and The College of Santa Fe. He was the 2008 recipient of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Servant Leadership Award.

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