



## MOHAWK AKWESASNE MOURN SALLI 'KAWENNOTAKIE' BENEDICT

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### SALLI "KAWENNOTAKIE" BENEDICT

The Mohawk community on both sides of the U.S.–Canada border is mourning the passing of Salli "Kawennotakie" Benedict, who died on May 15 at age 57 after waging what a tribal council statement called "a heroic and courageous battle."

Surrounded by family, she joined her father, the equally beloved Mohawk Elder Ernest "Ernie" Kaientaronkwen Benedict, who passed away earlier this year.

Friends, family and First Nations officials remembered the younger Benedict as an accomplished artist, author and cultural advocate.

"The community of Akwesasne has lost a cherished resident and champion of aboriginal rights," said Mohawk Council of Akwesasne (MCA) Grand Chief Mike Kanentakeron Mitchell in a statement. "Salli dedicated her life to protecting and fighting for Akwesasne. There was no one more committed to the cause than Salli, that's why we loved her so much. We knew what filled her heart, which was her family and her community—her Nation family."

Benedict was on the St. Anicet Tsionhiakwatha/Droulers Archaeological Site Board, the Onake Corporation Board, the Ronathahonni Cultural Center Board and others. She was also a founding member of the Akwesasne Communications Society. Most recently she headed the MCA's Aboriginal Rights and Research Office.

An artist and author, Benedict illustrated and edited children's books, according to an obituary on the Donaldson Funeral Home's website. The published poet was cited and acknowledged in books, articles and documents in reference to Native American culture, the obituary said. An avid speaker, Benedict conducted training on Native American cultural and sensitivity issues, traveling to the Nunavut Inuit capital of Iqaluit to teach indigent children. She also wrote several Mohawk-language textbooks, the Standard Freeholder in Cornwall, Canada, reported.

Benedict's cousin, Indian Country Today Media Network Opinion Editor Ray Cook, recounted a long family history of contributing to Mohawk culture and rights.

"She was born into a family of visionaries," he said, "among a long line of relatives who have sacrificed and given so much for her people, children and her own yet-to-be-born grandchildren. She shared so much that no one went without a good feeling after meeting her. Above all, she was the queen of good feelings."

Her mother, Florence, was a legendary Mohawk basket weaver "whose unique designs are the stuff of museum exhibits in Canada and the U.S.," Cook said, and her father founded the first mobile college, which circulated in the far north Native communities assisting children and young adults to achieve college entrance."

Benedict's grandfather was a religious man and a leader in his Methodist congregation "when being Methodist was not cool," Cook said. "His brother was a venerated chief on the Traditional Mohawk Longhouse Council at Akwesasne.... Her uncles were fierce political and social warriors of the community, establishing the first Native community press, museum and policy advocacy strategies and strategically networking with our allies among the power centers in D.C., Albany, NYC and Rochester, wherever allies were to be made to the Iroquois cause."

This combination of heritage and parentage made it "a matter of fate and good upbringing that she found her vision of creativity at an early age," Cook said, adding that it was no surprise that Benedict went on to become a "poet, photographer, a potter, a sculptress, a writer and a co-creator of many of the institutions found on Akwesasne and being the first to formally establish the curating policies and procedures that have protected our historical documents and memories even beyond her own death and rebirth."

Mitchell said it was especially painful that Benedict would not be present to see the fruition of her efforts to settle land claims with the Canadian government.

“It is a testament to her hard work and commitment that our community’s land claims are being negotiated with the government of Canada,” Mitchell said. “As a result, we wanted so much for her to be with us on the final leg of this journey. She was so much a part of negotiations, and she will still be with us in spirit. We will continue to work just as hard as if she was still by our side encouraging us all on.”

Benedict earned farewells and accolades nationally as well.

“Salli will be remembered as a strong voice and advocate for her nation,” said Assembly of First Nations (AFN) National Chief Shawn A-in-chut Atleo in a statement. He noted her work at the Akwesasne Museum and as a cultural historian of the Mohawks, a reflection of “the profound love she had for her roots.

“On behalf of the Assembly of First Nations and our Executive, I offer our sincere condolences to the Benedict family, to Salli’s colleagues and to her community on the sad loss of a great friend and leader,” Atleo said. “Salli Kawennotakie Benedict dedicated her life to helping promote and celebrate the Mohawk culture.... Akwesasne has lost a special person who touched the lives of so many in her community, and across the country.”

## BIO



At the age of 20, Salli served as interim director for her father’s travelling college and then went to Salmon River Central School, teaching children in the Title 4 Cultural Program where she made storyboards illustrating Aboriginal cultures. She went on to work for the Akwesasne Museum for many years, formally establishing curating policies and procedures to protect historical documents and artifacts.

Her love of history, archaeology and anthropology led her to the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe where she acted as a cultural historian involved in land claims and researching.

“More than any other person, Salli deserves full credit for the creation of the Akwesasne Communications Society which in turn established Radio CKON,” wrote George-Kanentio. “She was tenacious but diplomatic using her skills to secure an agreement with all three Mohawk councils to have CKON the only exclusively Native licensed radio station in North America.”

“She was never heavy-handed. She was just devoted to the truth. If she didn’t receive a certain response, she just went to work and did more research to prove her point,” Ransom said.

An artist and author, Salli illustrated and edited children’s books, and was a published poet. She is cited and acknowledged in books, articles and documents referring to Aboriginal culture. She also wrote several Mohawk-language textbooks, according to the Standard Freeholder in Cornwall.

She was also a photographer, potter, sculptress and co-creator of many of the institutions found on Akwesasne. Her most recent position was with the MCA, where she was heading the Aboriginal Rights and Research Office.

MCA Grand Chief Mike Kanentakeron said in a statement it was especially painful that she would not be present to see to fruition the result of her efforts to settle land claims with the Canadian government.

“It is a testament to her hard work and commitment that our community’s land claims are being negotiated,” Mitchell said. “We wanted so much for her to be with us on the final leg of this journey. She was so much a part of negotiations, and she will still be with us in spirit. We will continue to work just as hard as if she was still by our side encouraging us all on.”

