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When the Wind Blows: The Passing of Dr. Ella Sekatau

JULIANNE JENNINGS | 6/11/14

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The late Slow Turtle (John Peters), the Supreme Medicine Man from the Wampanoag Nation once told me, “When someone of great significance crosses over, the wind blows more forcibly, letting you know their spirit is passing by.” On Monday, April 7, the trees had bowed their heads when *Firefly Song of Wind*, Dr. Ella Wilcox-Thomas Sekatau passed from this world into the spirit world at the age of

85.

According to the Westerly Sun – Charlestown – her passing was described as “one of the greatest losses to the Narragansett Indian Tribe in the 20th and 21st centuries.” The tribe defined her as a “legend.”

Dr. Ella served as Ethno-Historian and Medicine Woman to the Narragansett Tribe. She was instrumental in her tribe's quest for federal recognition, and in 1983 the descendants of tribal members identified in an 1880 treaty gained **federal recognition** as the Narragansett Indian Tribe of Rhode Island and re-established sovereignty (Archaeological evidence and the oral history of the Narragansett People establish their existence in that region more than 30,000 years ago); she consulted and sat on many committees and boards, such as the Cultural Heritage Committee of United South and Eastern tribes, also known as USET; Rhode Island Ocean SAMP Cultural and Historical Resources Chapter and others too numerous to mention. Dr. Sekatau was one of the first American Indian interpreters to partner with the Heffenreffer Museum of Anthropology (Brown University) in their education program, and was also a key figure for the Wampanoag Indigenous program (WIP) at Plimoth Plantation. As a writer she penned numerous essays, including her Duke University published work, “The Right to a Name: The Narragansett People and Rhode Island Officials in the Revolutionary Era,” co-authored with Ruth Wallis Herndon. It was this writing, along with her mentoring that helped me pen my master's thesis, “The Politics of Indian Identity” for graduation. I will be forever grateful.

As tribal linguist, Sekatau is credited with the retention of the original Narragansett Language (an extinct Eastern Algonquian language, that is now heroically being revised by American Indian scholars and others). And, it was Sekatau's Narragansett language translation of the words “new town” – *Wuskenau* – that helped the Town of Westerly in naming its new town beach *Wuskenau Beach* in 2007. Her excellent orations given in the language will be missed during the tribe's annual August Meeting, which include ceremonies, traditional gatherings, presentations, and cultural representations.

Sekatau will be remembered as a teacher of culture, language, and for her traditional arts and crafts, as she was listed in the Rhode Island State Council for the Arts, artist roster, for her exceptional finger weaving and quill embroidery.

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She has taught thousands of school children, teachers, and educators from elementary school to post-graduate level. It is through her, many Narragansett Indians feel, "Our cultural traditions exist in the modern era because of her."

I was not able to contact her son, John Brown, Tribal Preservation Officer for comment, however, according to the Westerly Sun, "Even in his grief, Brown was willing to share his thoughts about his mother and her legacy. "She belongs to the family. That is true. She belonged to the tribe. That is true. But she also belonged to the world. And that is recognized by us."

Sekatau was buried Friday in the Narragansett Indian Cemetery on the tribal reservation in Charlestown. Today she is survived by her children Wenonah, Rosilyn, Hiawatha, John and Muriel, 24 grandchildren, 22 great grandchildren, 1 brother and many nieces and nephews. She is predeceased by three of her sons, John, Lloyd and Byron and one daughter, Ella.

Learn more about the Narragansett Indians [here](#).

Julianne Jennings (Nottoway) is an anthropologist.

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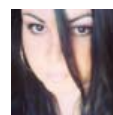
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