Navajo Nation Council recognizes former delegate Robert Billie Whitehorse and offer condolences on his passing

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WINDOW ROCK, Ariz. — Members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council expressed their condolences on the passing of former Council Delegate Robert Billie Whitehorse of Aneth, Utah, during a special session of the Navajo Nation Council on Monday. Whitehorse is remembered as a long-time member of the Council and a strong advocate for Navajo education and religious rights.

"On behalf of the 24th Navajo Nation Council, I share my deepest condolences to the family and relatives of the late Honorable Robert Billie Whitehorse. His time among the Navajo People is one that affected many lives, and he will surely be missed by his communities and the Navajo Nation. He had a great breadth of experiences that made him a thoughtful and diligent leader in the development of the Navajo Tribe and Navajo Nation. We will miss him, and we offer our most sincere well-wishes to his family and community," said 24th Navajo Nation Council Speaker Seth Damon (Bááhaalí, Chichiltah, Manuelito, Red Rock, Rock Springs, Tséyatoh).

"The late Honorable Robert Billie was a great advocate that worked tirelessly for our Navajo people of Aneth, Montezuma Creek and the greater Utah Navajo region. Whether it was his work in education, in political leadership, promoting business development, his strong advocacy for the freedoms of the members of the Native American Church of Navajoland or any number of initiatives he led, each of us can look to Mr. Whitehorse as a role model and as a figure of service and leadership," said Council Delegate Charlaine Tso (Mexican Water, Tółikan, Teec Nos Pos, Aneth, Red Mesa).

Whitehorse’s maternal clan was Tábąąhá Dine’é, his paternal clan was Tł’ááshchí’í, his maternal grandmother’s clan was Táchii’nii and his paternal grandfather’s clan was Bit’ahnii. He grew up and maintained his residence in Aneth, Utah.

Whitehorse, who was also known simply as Robert Billie, began his Navajo political career in 1967, when he was elected to serve as the secretary/treasurer of the Aneth Chapter.

He became the youngest delegate ever to serve on the Navajo Tribal Council in the 1971 election up to that point at 32 years of age. He represented the Aneth community on the Council, in addition to the communities of Mexican Water and Red Mesa later on. He was re-elected to the Navajo Tribal Council, which later became the Navajo Nation Council, in 1975, 1979, 1983, and also served in that capacity in 2000.

Davis Filfred, former member of the Navajo Nation Council, remembered Whitehorse, “He was my clan brother, and there was not even a mile between us. He was a US Army veteran of the Korean War, and before that, served alongside and roomed with Elvis Presley. He was known for that.”

Filfred also shared that Whitehorse served many years as a police office for the Navajo Nation before running for political office. He noted Whitehorse served in many roles throughout his life, working for the Resolute Oil Company, advocating for the return of the Montezuma Creek Glove Factory back from overseas and serving to continue discussion of current happenings with the Hipshooters – a group of former Navajo political leaders.

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Whitehorse was also the president of the Native American Church of Navajoland. He gave multiple testimonies in front of federal legislators and other lawmakers in support of religious freedoms for practitioners and followers of the Native American Church, especially those who were incarcerated.

Whitehorse also served on the Navajo Nation Permanent Fund Work Group beginning in 2002 alongside Chairperson Peterson Zah, Vice Chairperson Peggy Scott, Dr. Manley Begay, Jr., Alfred Yazzie, Walter Begay, Jr. and Bennie Cohoe. The group was tasked with establishing the first projects from the Permanent Trust Fund income, which was approved by the Navajo Tribal Council in 1985 with $217 million from the Kerr-McGee v Navajo Nation case in the US Supreme Court.

In serving on the Board of Education of San Juan County School District, Whitehorse is remembered for his advocacy in bringing the school district further on to the Navajo portion of Utah to serve Navajo students. At the time of his passing, Whitehorse was also serving on the board of the Utah Navajo Health System, Inc.

Members of the 24th Navajo Nation Council gave recognition to Whitehorse on the floor of the Navajo Nation Council during a special session held Nov. 2.

Council Delegate Herman M. Daniels, Jr. (Ts’ah Bii’ Kin, Navajo Mountain, Shonto, Oljato) expressed, “My condolences go out to the family. We lost a great leader in the state of Utah, in San Juan County.” Daniels related Whitehorse’s many years of service to the Council and asked those in attendance and those listening to offer their prayers to his family and relatives. Daniels’ father, the late Herman Daniels, Sr., served alongside Whitehorse on the Council, Daniels stated.

Council Delegate Thomas Walker, Jr. (Birdsprings, Leupp, Tolani Lake, Coalmine Canyon, Cameron), shared with the Council, “Navajo leaders rise to a level where things they say, things they do to stand for Navajo people and all native people, Mr. Whitehorse had done that many times in the years he was a leader. He rose to that level, we owe gratitude to such an individual. Mr. Whitehorse did indeed give his time, his effort, his energy for the betterment of people, and certainly the Navajo Nation and Indian Country.”

Council Delegate Daniel E. Tso (Littlewater, Pueblo Pintado, Torreon, Whitehorse Lake, Baca/Prewitt, Casamero Lake, Ojo Encino, Counselor) recounted, “I recall Cheii Robert Billie Whitehorse served with honor and distinguished himself to be a man of the people, to voice freedom of religion and to have increased health care services and education, most especially for the Utah portion of the Navajo Nation. As a point of humor to show great relationship, we addressed each other as ‘sha da Cheii’.”

Services for Whitehorse will be held in Cortez, Colorado, on Wednesday, Nov. 4. He will receive a military tribute by the Aneth Veterans Organization and the Cortez Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) organization.

Whitehorse leaves behind his wife, Arlene Whitehorse, children and grandchildren.

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