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and Navajo Nation Office of the Speaker

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Navajo Nation President Buu Nygren,
Navajo Nation Council Speaker Crystalyne Curley
express sympathy at loss of late President Peterson Zah



PHOTO: Navajo Nation President Peterson Zah on his inauguration on January 15, 1991, at the Navajo Nation Capitol in Window Rock, Ariz. (Image: Kenji Kawano)

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,” President 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.”

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“It’s a big loss for the Navajo Nation. I want to let Indian Country know, as well. 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.”

President Zah had been ill for some time. He was at home yesterday when his family took him to the *Tséhootsooí* Medical Center in Fort Defiance last evening. He passed away with his family around him.

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

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

“We are saddened and heartbroken by the passing of a great leader, and most importantly, a loving and compassionate grandfather and father,” Speaker Curley said. “I will always cherish and honor Mr. Zah’s guidance and support that he provided me throughout my academic and professional journey. His legacy reaches far beyond our rural communities and the Navajo Nation. His leadership, service, and contributions were known across the country. 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.

“*Shida’i*, 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,” Delegate 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.”

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

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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 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.

President 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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