

Indigenous activist and actress Sacheen Littlefeather dies at 75

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Sacheen Littlefeather appears at the Academy Awards ceremony to announce that Marlon Brando was declining his Oscar award on March 27, 1973. The move was meant to protest Hollywood's treatment of Native Americans [File: AP Photo]

Los Angeles, October 4 (RHC)-- Sacheen Littlefeather, an Indigenous U.S. civil rights activist who campaigned against the mistreatment of Native Americans in the movie industry, has died at the age of 75.

The news was announced by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which in August apologised to Littlefeather for the abuse she endured when she took a stand in the 1970s against anti-

Indigenous racism in the United States film industry.

Littlefeather, who was of Apache and Yaqui heritage, had made history by being the first Native American to step foot on the Oscars award ceremony stage – the first time the event was broadcast live around the world – and use the opportunity to make a political statement.

Her death was announced on Twitter where she was quoted as saying: “When I am gone, always be reminded that whenever you stand for your truth, you will be keeping my voice and the voices of our nations and our people alive.

In 1973, the Best Actor award was given to Marlon Brando for his performance in the film "The Godfather." Littlefeather came on stage when his award was announced and made a passionate 60-second speech on the insulting portrayal of Native Americans in the movie industry.

“He very regretfully cannot accept this very generous award. And the reasons for this being are the treatment of American Indians today by the film industry — excuse me — and on television in movie reruns, and also with recent happenings at Wounded Knee.”

She referred to protests taking place during the same year in Wounded Knee in South Dakota amid a period of mounting Indigenous activism in the United States. The American Indian Movement occupied the site in protest of the country’s legacy of anti-Indigenous violence and discrimination.

This moment resulted in her being professionally boycotted, personally attacked and harassed, and discriminated against for the last 50 years,” read an Academy statement from August 2022. The institution issued a public apology to Littlefeather for the bad treatment and held a ceremony at its new Los Angeles museum honoring her two weeks ago.

“I went up there, like a proud Indian woman with dignity, with courage, with grace, and with humility,” Littlefeather said at the museum event. “I knew that I had to speak the truth. Some people may accept it. And some people may not.”

She said Western star John Wayne had to be restrained from physically assaulting her by six security guards as she left the stage after her famous speech.

Littlefeather, a member of the Screen Actors Guild, subsequently found it difficult to get work in Hollywood, with casting directors warned not to employ her.

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