

WARRIOR NERD:

Pawnee fights for Native rights

By DANA ATTOCKNIE
Comanche

Walter Echo Hawk Jr. faced no shortage of encouragement from his family when it came to attending law school. His family wanted him to be like his cousin John Echo Hawk, who Walter considers one of his heroes.

"He's considered one of the icons of federal Indian law," Echo Hawk said of his cousin John, who is the director for the Native American Rights Fund (NARF).

By the time Echo Hawk himself graduated law school, he was one of about a dozen attorneys in the United States at the time who was Native American. One of the overarching lessons he learned is that a person has to care about what they're doing.

"I think you have to have compassion for whatever you do because that will enable you to do your best work," Echo Hawk said. "Anything that is worthwhile is always very difficult to do ... you have to have ... a firm grounding in culture. That will help you out along the way."

Echo Hawk, Pawnee, first earned an undergraduate degree in political science from Oklahoma State University in 1970. During summer 1968 he attended a program at the University of New Mexico (UNM) School of Law and at that point knew he would like to become a lawyer.

He said during this time the Civil Rights Movement and the Red Power Movement were ongoing and a lot of youth from his generation began attending law school.

"I thought it was pretty tough to go to law school," Echo Hawk said. "I found it to be very difficult as a young student. It's not the most pleasant task. It's very difficult, very trying to go through law school. You have to be very serious about your studies. It's not a pleasure cruise."

Echo Hawk graduated from the University of New Mexico School of Law in 1973. While at UNM he met his wife, Pauline of the Yakama tribe. They've been married since 1973 and have three children; Amy, Walter (Bunky) Echo Hawk III and Anthony.

He served as a legal assistant for NARF in 1970 then as a staff attorney for them from 1973 to 1981. While at NARF, he

Bird Corrections and Indian Religious Freedom projects.

He took a year of absence from NARF to represent the Pawnee Nation Business Counsel on a range of issues then returned to NARF as a senior staff attorney. His most memorable case with NARF was working on the American Indian Religious Freedom Act Amendments.

"It was a very bad decision when the Supreme Court said that the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution did not protect religious use of peyote by members of the Native American Church. It was just a very bad decision. But it weakened religious freedom for all Americans. It prompted a lot of church groups to go to Congress to overturn the decision," Echo Hawk said. "I represented the Native American Church of North America to get one of these laws that passed in 1994. It restored rights for Indians to use peyote for religious purposes. That was probably my proudest moment."

Former president Bill Clinton signed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act Amendments of 1994 on Oct. 6, 1994.

Echo Hawk worked at NARF from 1982 to 2009. He also began serving as an associate justice for the Supreme Court of the Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma in 2002. He can practice law in a number of federal district courts, the U.S. Courts of Appeals for the Eighth, Ninth, District of Columbia, and Tenth Circuits, Colorado Supreme Court, Oklahoma Supreme Court and the United States Supreme Court.

Although he has been before the U.S. Supreme Court twice as part of a legislative team, he said his goal has always been to argue and win a U.S. Supreme Court case.

As an attorney he understands how easily it can be to get swept up in a case, but



WALTER'S SON BUNKY DEPICTED HIS FATHER AS A "WARRIOR NERD" IN A PAINTING CREATED WHILE ECHO-HAWK WAS SPEAKING AT A BOOKSIGNING EVENT IN OKLAHOMA CITY LAST YEAR.

focused on civil right issues and constitutional law. He also worked on education law, water and treaty rights, Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) issues, and served as director for the Indian Corrections, Swift

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WALTER ECHO-HAWK IN WASHINGTON D.C. · PHOTO BY MICHAEL MCBRIDE

“THERE IS A GREAT NEED FOR NATIVE AMERICAN ATTORNEYS IN THE NEXT GENERATION. WE HAVE MANY ISSUES NOT ONLY IN FEDERAL INDIAN LAW, BUT MANY TRIBES FIND THEMSELVES IN UNCHARTED TERRITORY IN GAMING,” HE SAID, MENTIONING LABOR AND TAXATION LAWS. “I THINK ALSO THIS NEXT GENERATION IS GOING TO HAVE TO REFORM FEDERAL INDIAN LAW SO IT’S ALWAYS USED AS A SHIELD TO PROTECT TRIBAL PEOPLE.”

advises attorneys to stay focused and not let personal emotions take over.

“As an attorney you’re an advocate for other people. The best attorney’s are the ones that try to maintain a professional outlook ... It can be very trying sometimes,” Echo Hawk said. “You always have to maintain your professional duties. It’s not about you, it’s about your client. Try to be grounded in your own culture and spirituality that you have. That will give you strength.”

and his cousin Larry Echo Hawk who he called a ground breaking attorney and is now the assistant secretary for the U.S. Department of Interior.

Echo Hawk said there are now new areas in law that tribes have never had to deal with before, and recognizes the necessity for young students to attend law school.

“There is a great need for Native American attorneys in the next generation. We have many issues not only in federal

Echo Hawk has also begun teaching the next generation of lawyers as an adjunct professor at the University of Tulsa School of Law. “I’m very thrilled to do that,” he said. He also remains of counsel for the Crowe & Dunlevy Law Firm in Tulsa, Okla. and is the Board of Directors vice-chairman for the Native Arts and Cultures Foundation.

Outside the courtroom, but still in the realm of the law, Echo Hawk has authored two books: *Battlefields and Burial Grounds* and *In the Courts of the Conqueror: The Ten Worst Indian Law Cases Ever Decided*. His latest book featured artwork from his son Bunky. “He’s a real fine young artist ... It’s always fun to hang out with him,” Echo Hawk said.

His two books are only a morsel of the published works he has contributed to or been featured in. His major film appearances have been in: *Thieves of Time* (1992); *The Peyote Road* (1992); *Everything has a Spirit* (1993); *Who Owns the Past?* (2000); and *A Seat at the Table* (2005).

He has received an abundant number of awards and recognitions, including the Judge Sarah Hughes Civil Liberties award from the Federal Bar Association, the Martin Luther King, Jr., Peace Award from the Metropolitan College of Denver and the American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon “Civil Liberties Award.” He has also been a member of or remains a member of nearly 20 organizations.

Overall, Echo Hawk said when people look over his career, he hopes they think, “He was an attorney and that he wanted to do his best for our Native people.”

When Echo Hawk is with his Pawnee people, he participates in powwows as a straight dancer and said he is fortunate to have a family that taught him his culture. His father is the late Walter Echo Hawk and his mother is Jeanine Echo Hawk. He has two brothers, Lance and Roger, and one sister, Debbie. His father served in the Air Force and once moved his family to Puerto Rico when Echo Hawk was in



WALTER ECHO HAWK JR. SIGNS COPIES OF HIS BOOK, “IN THE COURTS OF THE CONQUEROR - THE TEN WORST INDIAN LAW CASES EVER DECIDED,” SEPT. 21 IN OKLAHOMA CITY. PHOTO BY DANA ATTOCKNIE

Echo Hawk said he has “a whole bunch of heroes,” and Vine Deloria was a great influence on him both professionally and spiritually. He said he always relied on the late F. Browning Pipstem for advice. He also thinks a great deal about his cousin John with NARF

Indian Law, but many tribes find themselves in uncharted territory in gaming,” he said, mentioning labor and taxation laws. “I think also this next generation is going to have to reform federal Indian law so it’s always used as a shield to protect tribal people.”

ECHO HAWK DURING THE
KLAMATH TRIBES' WATER
RIGHTS TRIAL IN 2010

PHOTO BY TAYLOR DAVID



high school. Echo Hawk said he learned to speak Spanish while working at riding stable in Puerto Rico.

Today, he likes to travel with his wife

and three grandkids to powwows across the country. His wife owns and operates Echo Hawk Indian Trading Company and sells items at powwows.

“I’m very proud of him and that he maintains his cultural ties to the community ... It’s what guided him throughout his career,” Pauline Echo Hawk said.