



## OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

November 5, 2017

### *Dennis Banks*

Dennis Banks was born on April 12, 1937 on the Leech Lake Indian Reservation in Minnesota. Even as his country celebrated a romanticized past of “cowboys and Indians,” Banks grew up under the brutal and lasting effects of colonization: the broken families, poverty and alcoholism afflicting a dispossessed people. After being abused in government “Indian schools” that strove to destroy what was left of his Ojibwa culture, Banks was incarcerated at a young age for petty crime. These were deplorable but unremarkable facts of life for a Native American of his generation.

But Dennis Banks was not, as the Western writer Zane Grey once called our indigenous people, a “Vanishing American.” Beginning in 1968, when he co-founded the American Indian Movement with fellow ex-prisoner Clyde Bellecourt, Banks had an extraordinary career as an activist that helped foster a complete shift in public consciousness around Native American issues. His early methods were rough, putting him on the wrong side of the law at times. In 1976, as Governor of California, I had the privilege of granting him asylum from charges related to a 1973 protest in Custer, South Dakota. It was not a decision I took lightly, but rather one that I made in cognizance of the tragic history and conditions that had sparked the

protest. During his time in California, Banks also served as chancellor of Deganawidah-Quetzalcoatl University in Yolo County, the state's first tribal college, a concept that California Tribes are currently working to revive.

There are few activists who can claim to have seen and perhaps caused so much change, so much raising of awareness, over the course of one remarkable lifetime. I was greatly saddened to learn of the death of Dennis Banks, and I hope that a new generation of activists will continue in his spirit to work for the rights and recognition of America's native peoples.

Sincerely,

  
EDMUND G. BROWN JR