

Dennis J. Banks Facts

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Dennis Banks (1932-2017) was an American Indian teacher, author and activist. After a painful childhood separated from his people and years struggling with alcoholism and crime, he helped found the American Indian Movement (AIM). The organization advocated for American Indian civil rights. AIM brought American Indian issues to national and international attention, sometimes engaging in civil disobedience and clashing with law enforcement in the process. Throughout his time with AIM and as an individual activist, Banks spent his life writing about American Indian concerns and championing the legal rights and cultural values of American Indians.

Early Life

Dennis Banks -- Ojibwe (Chippewa) leader, teacher, lecturer, activist, and author -- was born on April 12, 1932 on the Leech Lake Indian Reservation in northern Minnesota. Like many American Indians of his generation, he was taken from his family at the age of five and sent to a government-run school. He was shuttled between various boarding schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) throughout his youth.

At the age of 19, Banks joined the US Air Force. He served in Japan and was discharged in the late 1950s. On returning to the United States, he encountered the systemic discrimination that Native Americans faced at the time and continue to face today. He struggled

with employment issues and eventually fell into alcoholism and petty crime. In 1966, he was convicted of burglary of a grocery store and sentenced to three-and-a-half years in prison, of which he served 31 months.

American Indian Movement (AIM)

During his time in prison, Dennis Banks reconnected with the roots of his culture. He met a fellow American Indian activist, Clyde Bellecourt, and began to identify issues in American Indian culture that required active protest and community support. They prioritized housing, employment and “survival schools” that would preserve American Indian culture, rather than erasing it, as in Banks’s experience with BIA-run boarding schools.

In July 1968, Banks and Bellecourt joined with other activists in founding the American Indian Movement, or AIM. AIM was established to protect the traditional ways of Indian people and to engage in legal cases protecting treaty rights of Native Americans, such as rights to hunting and fishing, trapping, and gathering wild rice.

AIM was a major civil rights organization with a complex history of militancy and controversy, but also much success. AIM members participated in the famous occupation of Alcatraz Island from 1969 to 1971, where they demanded all federal surplus property be returned to Indian control. In 1972, AIM organized and led the Trail of Broken Treaties caravan across the United States to Washington, D.C., calling attention to the plight of Native Americans. The refusal of congressional leaders to meet with the Trail of Broken Treaties delegation led to the forcible takeover of the Bureau of Indian Affairs offices in Washington, D.C.

Under the leadership of Dennis Banks, AIM led a protest in Custer, South Dakota in 1973 against the judicial process that found a non-Indian innocent of murdering an Indian. As a result of his

involvement in the 71-day occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota in 1973, and his activities at Custer, Banks and 300 others were arrested. Banks was acquitted of charges stemming from his participation in the Wounded Knee takeover, but was convicted of riot and assault stemming from the confrontation at Custer. Refusing to serve time in prison, Banks went underground but later received asylum from Governor Jerry Brown of California.

Life Underground

Between 1976 and 1983, Banks earned an associate of arts degree at the University of California, Davis, and taught at Deganawidah-Quetzacoatl (DQ) University (an all-Indian controlled institution), where he became the first American Indian university chancellor. In the spring of 1979, he taught at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California.

After Governor Brown left office, Banks received sanctuary on the Onondaga reservation in upstate New York in 1984. While living there, Banks organized the Great Jim Thorpe Run from New York City to Los Angeles, California. A spiritual run, the event ended in Los Angeles, where the Jim Thorpe Memorial Games were held and where the gold medals that Thorpe had previously won in the 1912 Olympic games were restored to the Thorpe family.

In 1985, Banks left the Onondaga reservation to surrender to law enforcement officials in South Dakota, and served 18 months in prison. When released, he worked as a drug and alcohol counselor on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota.

Later Life

In 1987, Banks was active in convincing the states of Kentucky and Indiana to pass laws against the desecration of Indian graves and human remains. He organized reburial ceremonies for over 1,200

Indian grave sites that were disturbed by graverobbers in Uniontown, Kentucky. Both Kentucky and Indiana passed strong grave desecration laws in response to Banks' campaign.

In 1988, Banks organized and led a spiritual run called the Sacred Run from New York to San Francisco, and then across Japan from Hiroshima to Hokkaido. Also in 1988, Banks co-wrote his autobiography *Sacred Soul* with author and activist Morita Yuri.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Banks also acted in the films *War Party*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, and *Thunderheart*. He also led and organized several more Sacred Runs. Starting in 2007, Banks served on the Board of Trustees of Leech Lake Tribal College, a public two-year university in Minnesota.

Death and Legacy

Dennis Banks passed away in 2017 of pneumonia and complications from open heart surgery. He is survived by over 20 children and stepchildren. The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe suspended all administrative duties for a day so that tribespeople could attend Banks' memorial service. Banks continues to be a symbol of American Indian pride and advocacy for native peoples worldwide.

Updates by Matt Salter

