

Kenneth Leroy Smith, known by his Indian name “Walladawish,” (March 30, 1935 – May 13, 2020) was one of the most influential leaders in the history of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs and a nationally respected advocate for Tribal sovereignty and self-determination. A member of the Wasco Tribe, Smith was raised by his grandparents on Dry Hollow Ranch on the Warm Springs Reservation, where he learned the values of hard work, self-reliance, cultural responsibility, and respect for community—principles that would guide his life and leadership.

Smith was among the early generation of Native leaders to pursue higher education, earning a Bachelor of Science in business administration from the University of Oregon in 1959, becoming the second Native American graduate of the university. He started his career with the tribes as an accountant and rose through the ranks to serve as General Manager from 1971 to 1981. He also served on the 10th Tribal Council, helping shape policy and governance during a transformative era for Warm Springs.

During his tenure, Smith played a pivotal role in advancing economic development and tribal self-sufficiency. His leadership helped bring major projects to fruition, including the Kah-Nee-Ta Lodge Resort, Warm Springs Power Enterprises—the first federally licensed hydroelectric project on an Indian reservation—and later initiatives such as the Museum at Warm Springs, early childhood education and health facilities, and the development of Indian Head Casino and Warm Springs Composite Products. His work emphasized long-term planning, cultural preservation, and investment in future generations.

In 1981, Smith was appointed by President Reagan as Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs, where he oversaw a billion-dollar budget, managed thousands of employees, and worked with hundreds of tribes nationwide. Widely respected for his leadership, he was described by peers as one of the most effective advocates Indian Country had ever seen. After his service in Washington, D.C., he returned to Warm Springs as Chief Executive Officer/Secretary-Treasurer from 1989 to 1995, continuing to guide the tribe’s growth as one of the most progressive and successful in the nation.

Smith was deeply committed to strengthening Tribal sovereignty, protecting natural resources, and ensuring that Native communities had a voice in decisions affecting their future. He frequently shared his belief that the strength of Indian people lies in their ability to govern themselves and shape their own destinies. Throughout his life, he also assisted numerous tribes across the country, helping build economic development models and sustainable enterprises.

Known for his humility, steady leadership, and collaborative spirit, Smith believed in teamwork and leading with integrity. He balanced a strong work ethic with humor and kindness, earning the respect of colleagues, community members, and leaders nationwide. His dedication to cultural values and future generations reflected the teachings of his grandparents, whose influence he carried throughout his life. His legacy lives on through the institutions he helped build, the policies he shaped, and the generations he inspired to carry forward the work of strengthening Tribal nations.



Ken Smith
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