

USACE civilian reflects on Cherokee heritage

By Amy Bugala, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Expeditionary District, November 18, 2024



CAMP ARIFJAN, Kuwait — November marks Native American and Alaska Native Heritage Month, providing an opportunity to highlight diversity and amplify Native American voices and perspectives within the U.S. Army's workforce.

Jennifer Phillips, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Expeditionary District civilian and member of the Cherokee Nation, grew up in Westville, Oklahoma, a town with historical significance to the Trail of Tears. "It's where many Cherokee people settled after the forced migration from their ancestral lands in southeastern United States," she said.

The Cherokee Nation is the largest of three federally recognized Cherokee tribes. The tribe's reservation boundary covers a 7,000-square-mile radius of northeastern Oklahoma, encompassing all or parts of 14 counties, with the capital in Tahlequah, about an hour from Phillips' home.

The other two tribes are the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina.

"My father is Cherokee," Phillips shared. Growing up around many first-nation people, many whose parents spoke Cherokee exclusively at home, was commonplace for her. The Cherokee Nation reports that only about 2,000 first-language Cherokee speakers remain — those who learned Cherokee from birth — with several thousand more, considered beginner or proficient speakers through the tribe's language programs.

Phillips is the chief of human resources for USACE's only forward-deployed district, a diverse team comprised of Soldiers and civilians from various districts and disciplines worldwide.

When she deployed to Kuwait with the district in October of 2022, she saw an opportunity to share her culture through language by highlighting a Cherokee word of the week on a white board in her office. "It was a fun way to connect with co-workers and expose them to a little Cherokee," she said, explaining how several people would wait for the new word each week, come in, and attempt to pronounce it. "I even had some word requests."

Phillips didn't fully recognize the significance of her heritage until she had children of her own. "It's only really been in my adulthood that I've become more in tune with what the Native people endured...and I've truly grown to appreciate the way [the Nation] takes care of their people," she said. The tribe's response to the pandemic was immediate, providing vaccines ahead of the State Government and offering financial support she noted.

Phillips takes great pride in her sister's service as a Cherokee Nation Supreme Court Justice but recalls a time when societal perceptions and stereotypes led many to keep their Native American identity private. "Many people still viewed Cherokee people as second-class citizens and those who weren't obviously Cherokee didn't advertise the fact," she said.

Living in Oklahoma as a Cherokee citizen has shown Phillips the importance of preserving tradition for future generations. She appreciates having a month set aside to highlight the different tribes across the United States and to remember as a nation that these cultures are thriving. "You don't realize how unique [being Cherokee] is until you get out of Tulsa and speak to others," she said.

Currently, there are 574 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes across the United States with unique cultures and individuals.

In contrast to her childhood experience, Phillips believes there is a newfound pride among younger generations of Native Americans. Her kids now say, "it's so cool that we're Cherokee! It's nice to hear that," she said.

Now back in Tulsa, Phillips hopes to take Cherokee language classes to support language preservation and expand her vocabulary to continue sharing with her co-workers. To learn more about the Cherokee Nation and history, visit their official website.

During National Native American Heritage Month, we honor American Indians and Alaska Natives and express appreciation for the contributions of our Soldiers, Veterans, civilians and family members. This year's theme, "Affirming Native Voices: Visibility, Leadership and Service," recognizes service during peace and war. To learn more about Native Americans contributions to the U.S. Army, visit the official website.