

Eulogy

Sacheen Cruz Littlefeather

1946 ————— 2022

by Olivia Gagan

'Hello. My name is Sacheen Littlefeather. I'm Apache and I am president of the National Native American Affirmative Image Committee. I'm representing Marlon Brando this evening and he has asked me to tell you, in a very long speech [...] that he very regretfully cannot accept this very generous award.'



Kim Komerich/Courtesy of Getty Images.

The Academy Awards, 1973. Sacheen Littlefeather, a little-known Native American activist and actress, stood on stage representing Hollywood titan Marlon Brando. She was turning down his Best Actor win.

On the night of the awards, broadcast to 85 million people, Brando had been expected to accept an Oscar for his leading role in *The Godfather*. Knowing he was the clear favourite, Brando decided to boycott the ceremony and asked Sacheen to go in his place. Her on-stage protest, in traditional Apache dress, became part of Oscars history.

It was a pivotal moment in raising awareness of the stereotyping of Native American people on screen and of the events at Wounded Knee: an occupation protesting corruption and failure by the US government to honour treaties with Native American people.

Born to a family of saddle makers in Salinas, California in 1946, Sacheen adopted her Native American name from an early age, becoming a student of both acting and of her heritage. She had become friends with Brando after learning of his interest in Native American issues and writing to him.

On the night of the Academy Awards, Brando

had given Sacheen many pages of text to read on stage when refusing the Oscar—but acceptance speeches were strictly timed at 60 seconds. Sacheen was forced to improvise her speech and to quickly condense Brando's reasons for refusing to accept the award.

'The reasons for this being are the treatment of American Indians today by the film industry—excuse me—and on television in movie reruns, and also with recent happenings at Wounded Knee. I beg at this time that I have not intruded upon this evening and that we will, in the future, our hearts and our understandings will meet with love and generosity.'

Despite her calm and dignified speech, Sacheen was booed and heckled by the audience; actor John Wayne allegedly had to be restrained from physically assaulting her. 'There were people there that were sheriffs and the police with handcuffs, and I saw them as I was coming off-stage,' she recalled later at a 2010 panel event. 'As far as I was concerned, I was going to be arrested or killed or both after I stepped off that stage.' Days later, visiting Brando at his home, she reported bullets being fired through his doors.

After her Oscars appearance, Littlefeather was largely blacklisted from Hollywood roles.

She continued working in local theatre and as an activist, becoming a respected member of the California Native American community and advocating for those suffering with AIDs and alcoholism. Later actresses credited Littlefeather with inspiring them to take part in non-violent protest; Jada Pinkett Smith boycotted the Oscars in 2016 to flag the lack of diversity in nominations, noting Littlefeather as an influence.

At an event in September 2022 celebrating her life, the Academy formally apologised to Sacheen for the harassment she suffered for making her 1973 non-acceptance speech on behalf of Brando. She called the apology 'a dream come true', adding that: 'We Indians are very patient people—it's only been 50 years.' Two weeks later, she died at home in California.