

Thomasina Jordan
1940-1999
Alexandria, VA
Native American Activist



Thomasina Elizabeth Maria St. Claire-Sanford Jordan, also known as Red Hawk Woman, was born March 20, 1940, in Maine. Orphaned at age nine, she was raised by her paternal grandparents, Elton and Hattie Sanford. They lived near Mashpee, Massachusetts, the home of the Wampanoag tribe, who met the Mayflower upon its arrival in 1620. Since the public schools barred minorities, she attended a Catholic preparatory school. Despite financial obstacles, education was a lifelong pursuit for Jordan. She earned a B.A. and M.A. from Bishop Lee College in Boston. She also studied dramatic arts at the American Academy of Fine Arts in New York City. While in New York, she met D. Wendell Jordan. They married and settled in his hometown of Alexandria. She later earned a master's degree in Indian Studies from Harvard University and an honorary doctorate in special education from Catholic University. Jordan devoted much of her life to the special needs of children. As a young woman, she taught children with learning disabilities and founded a puppet theater for autistic children. However, her greatest energies were dedicated to improving the lives of Native Americans. Always active in her native Wampanoag tribe, she took a prominent role in national Indian politics as well. She was cochair of the American Indian Alliance and the national chairwoman of the American Indian Cultural Exchange, which she started to help American Indians travel to Europe and China to share their cultural heritage. Because many Native American tribes lost their official status after World War II, they were not eligible for many educational, medical, and housing programs. While working on behalf of all Native Americans, Jordan actively pursued federal and historic recognition of Virginia's eight tribes. As a result of her efforts, she was named an honorary member of the Chickahominy and Nansemond tribes. Jordan never shied away from the political spotlight. When George Bush was elected president in 1988, she became the first American Indian to serve in the Electoral College. She frequently appeared before the U.S. Congress and the Virginia General Assembly appealing for better medical care, housing, education, and economic development for Native Americans. In 1999, she helped lead a campaign against plans to build a reservoir on the Mattaponi River, which the Mattaponi Indians regarded as sacred. Just five days before she died, she spoke before a committee of the U.S. House of Representatives, pleading for historic recognition of Virginia's eight tribes. At the time of her death from breast cancer in 1999, she was serving her second term as the chair of the Virginia Council on Indians. Her contributions to Native American culture and society were widely recognized. She chaired the annual Alexandria and Williamsburg Folk Festivals and co-chaired both the National American Indian Alliance and the American Indian Forum. Among her many honors, she received awards from Save the Children and the Strategic Defense Command. She was the Native American Virginia Cultural Center's outstanding American Indian Woman of the Year. Thomasina Jordan was a determined activist and champion of Indian rights. She once wrote: "We belong to this land. For 10,000 years we have been here. We were never a conquered people. The dominant society needed us to survive in 1607, and it needs American Indians and our spiritual values to survive in the next millennium. It just doesn't realize it yet." Such was the vision of one woman who dared.