



SHINING LAMP

A Bahá'í who served humanity with radiance

Chester Kahn (1936–2019)

By Susan Engle

There were no mobile phones, computers, or electricity in Chester Kahn's life when he was growing up. With no running water, the family filled water barrels at a natural spring and loaded them on a wagon to bring home.

Chester and his brother, Franklin, had an important job.* They herded sheep and kept the flock safe from coyotes and mountain lions. They helped lambs, rams, and ewes find enough to eat. Sheep provided clothing and delicious food for the family. Meals were cooked over an open fire.

During long days in the canyons of Arizona, when the sheep were settled, Chester and Franklin used charcoal from their fire to draw on the canyon walls. It was here that Chester began to develop his skills as an artist. He and his family spent their lives close to nature. These memories of Chester's childhood were sweet.

Then, at age 12, Chester was sent away to a U.S. government boarding school 1,000 miles (1,609 km) from home. His parents knew education was important, but they missed their kids terribly. Chester's memories of his school days were bitter. He was discouraged from speaking the Navajo language and exploring the religion of his people. After he finished school, he learned all he could about the Navajo way of life.

Family of Faith

Chester's grandfather, Jack Kahn, was a Navajo medicine man who carried out ceremonies. When Chester was in his twenties, Jack learned about the Bahá'í Faith and shared it with his family. They all

became Bahá'ís. In 1982, Chester was elected to the National Spiritual Assembly, the governing council for U.S. Bahá'ís. He served for seven years.

While serving the Faith, Chester worked as a painter, illustrator, and silversmith. He traveled widely and spoke about Navajo culture, art, and spirituality. He designed log buildings, including a circular structure known as a prayer hogan, at the Native American Bahá'í Institute in Arizona. "Praying is very, very important, because that's the way you communicate with what we call the Great Spirit. And by praying," Chester said, "He listens to us and hears our prayers and helps us."

Living Treasure

As his career developed, Chester won awards, including being named an Arizona Living Treasure in 2011. One of his biggest projects was a mural called the "Circle of Light," in Gallup, New Mexico. It shows 65 Navajo people who contributed to the community, including artists, musicians, lawyers, educators, tribal leaders, athletes, and scientists.

After many years of service and creativity, Chester passed away in 2019 at age 83. The Universal House of Justice, the Faith's global governing body, wrote, "His dedicated efforts to diffuse the teachings of the Faith among Native Americans are remembered with warm admiration." The National Spiritual Assembly praised his artistic skills as well as his work as "a devoted Bahá'í, firmly committed to the Faith's vision of a peaceful and just world civilization founded on the . . . truth that the human family is one."