



Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow McGowan

March 1, 1943 - September 13, 2021

Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow McGowan entered eternal rest on September 13, 2021 at the age of 78. Little Dove was born on March 1, 1943 to the late Chief Webster "Little Eagle" Custalow and Mary Lee "White Feather" Adams Custalow on the Mattaponi Indian Reservation in King William County, VA, one of the oldest reservations in the country (1646). Shirley was predeceased by her husband of 61 years, Olson B. "Mickey" McGowan; and two brothers, Dr. Linwood Custalow and Ryland Custalow.

Her proudest achievement above all else was her role as a loving and devoted mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, sister, aunt and friend. She is survived by her four sons whom she loved dearly, Richard "Red Hawk" McGowan (Darlene), John "Swift Hawk" McGowan (April), James "Falling Water" McGowan (Joyce) and Samuel "Running Deer" McGowan, Sr. (Amber). Our mother was blessed with 10 grandchildren, Crystal, Sarah, Tracey, Rachel, Travis, Isabelle, Emma, Curtis, Alexandra, and Caela. She also leaves behind seven precious great grandchildren; two brothers, Carl Custalow and Leon Custalow, Sr.; four sisters, Eleanor Canada, Edith Kuhns, Delores Salmons, and Debra Graciano; along with a host of extended family and friends.

Shirley was educated on the Mattaponi Indian Reservation and accepted Christ at an early age while attending Mattaponi Indian Baptist Church. She

was immersed in the rich history of her people from an early age by her elders. At the age of four she was given the name Little Dove by her grandfather, Chief George Forest "Tecumseh" Custalow, and received her mission in life, to travel in the direction of the four winds teaching the history of her people and to always see others through the eyes of the creator. Through hard work and perseverance, Little Dove became a respected historian who would spend her lifetime sharing the history of the Powhatan people to the world. Her living history programs reached countless people at museums, historical societies, schools, churches, festivals, and many other events spanning over 50 years. She was well known for her artisan skills creating traditional baskets, pottery, tools and regalia representative of her people. Countless newspaper articles and news stories captured her true mission to ensure that everyone would leave her programs knowing her people were still here among us. Shirley was interviewed as a resource on Pocahontas by the Washington Post, Japanese television, International Herald Tribune, New York Times, Richmond-Times Dispatch, Daily Press, Tidewater Review, BBN, CNN, Entertainment Tonight, PBS, and featured in motion pictures Mothers of America and American Princess. She served on the Board of trustees for the Jamestown – Yorktown Foundation, the Advisory Board for Virginia Historical Society, Colonial Williamsburg and Henricus College (1619) Inc. and a Native American Consultant for Disney's movie Pocahontas. Little Dove also left us with books, articles, collaborations, documentaries and movies that will continue to fulfill her mission and educate future generations.

Her life and legacy will be an everlasting testament to her unwavering faith in God. It gives us great comfort knowing that she is in heaven.

The family will receive friends in a walk-through visitation from 5 to 8 p.m., Thursday, September 23, 2021 at Vincent Funeral Home, 417 11th St., West Point, VA. A graveside funeral service will be held 12 noon, Saturday, September 25th at Mattaponi Indian Baptist Church Cemetery, 1409

Mattaponi Reservation Circle, West Point, VA 23181.

Cemetery Details

Mattaponi Indian Baptist Church Cemetery

1409 Mattaponi Reservation Circle
West Point, VA 23181

Previous Events

Visitation

SEP 23. 5:00 PM - 8:00 PM (ET)

Vincent Funeral Home, West Point Chapel
417 11th St
West Point, VA 23181
(804) 843-2550

Graveside Service

SEP 25. 12:00 PM (ET)

Mattaponi Indian Baptist Church Cemetery
1409 Mattaponi Reservation Circle
West Point, VA 23181

Tribute Wall

LC

“ *Leslie Cohen-Gee lit a candle in memory of Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow McGowan*



Leslie Cohen-Gee - November 14, 2025 at 07:54 AM

MW

“ *I was privileged to meet and share Shirley Little Dove's knowledge several times while teaching in Newport News schools. She was a blessing of information that stayed with me for years*

martie wills - November 18, 2021 at 10:46 AM

AW

“ *Avie Gerald Williams lit a candle in memory of Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow McGowan*



Avie Gerald Williams - October 01, 2021 at 10:14 PM

TR

“ *Little Dove, you are the real deal. You spoke the truth. You shared your love with Mother Earth, your family, your tribe, and everyone you met. Thankyou for serving the river, and all of us. Blessings on you, sister. Love to you. Hope you love your new home. Please send blessings from above. Love, Tom*

Thomas C Rubino - September 30, 2021 at 07:33 AM

TM

“ Shirley "Little Dove" was a beautiful person. She was a vital key to the success of the long fight to Save the Mattaponi River. When she spoke, you could hear a pin drop. We treasure many fond memories of Shirley. Reserve a quiet moment for her, a person who lived a life with grace, love and purpose.
--Tyla Matteson

Tyla Matteson - September 29, 2021 at 11:51 PM

AR

“ Shirley was a beautiful person, inside and out. Such a kind person. Her children are a testament of her sweet personality. She reminded me that all peoples need to be understood and loved. She loved everyone. Her teachings of the Mattaponi Indians were extraordinary. The world was a better place with Shirley in it. Love you and miss you. Love to the family.

Anita Roy - September 25, 2021 at 10:57 AM

BL

“ Prayers for the family.
I worked with Shirley for many years at Jamestown. She was a very nice person to work with. Very proud of being an Native American. We would talk for hours when she came into the foundation gift shop. Heaven have just gained an angel.
Sleep on Shirley and take your rest.
Rest In Peace My Friend.

Brenda Lee

Brenda Lee - September 24, 2021 at 08:08 AM

JO

“ Prayers for the Custalow family during this difficult time of loss. May your memories and love keep Shirley "Little Dove's" spirit alive in your hearts.



Joni Owen - September 22, 2021 at 11:20 PM



“ Prayers for her family during this time



Caryn Gallihugh - September 22, 2021 at 09:26 PM

MD

“ MaryEllen & Bobby Davis lit a candle in memory of Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow McGowan



MaryEllen & Bobby Davis - September 22, 2021 at 06:25 PM

JB

“ Janita Balderson lit a candle in memory of Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow McGowan



Janita Balderson - September 22, 2021 at 12:45 PM

SE

“ I first met Shirley at the Valentine Museum. I was struck by her calm and sweet nature, and her blue eyes! It was an honor to speak with her; I felt that I had gone back in time, and was learning about Virginia's past from someone who had lived it. Everlasting be her memory. Sylvia Evans

Sylvia Evans - September 22, 2021 at 12:11 PM

MS

“ Shirley and I knew each other through The Mariners' Museum. She brought grace and knowledge to programs and events, beginning, for me, with the opening of The Chesapeake Bay gallery. Her beauty and poise were only equaled by her pursuit of truth and knowledge. I am saddened to hear of her passing, a loss for so many.

Martha Stewart - September 22, 2021 at 11:57 AM

AD

“ I met Little Dove in 1996 when I was a counselor at Camp Chanco and she visited one day for the Native American camp we were having with some older children. She showed them how to build a traditional house, make bows and arrows, ropes from corn husks, beef jerky, and succotash. I loved talking with her and spending time with her. She was a lovely person who did very important work and she will be missed.

Andrea Drummond - September 22, 2021 at 10:41 AM

TE

“ Shirley Custalow was a beautiful soul, through and through. I still recall a wonderful moment when she spoke eloquently and resonantly at a Walkerton day festival about the need to protect the Mattaponi River from a water diversion project that would threaten the fishery that supported her tribe. As she spoke, an eagle appeared soaring out over the river behind her, blessing her with his magical presence. Shirley was deeply grounded, a true daughter of Mother Earth. God bless her!

Tom Ellis - September 22, 2021 at 12:46 AM

JB

“ when i had cancer she had Travis call me leave a message an pray for me 20 years ago so kind every time i will love her always

joan bishop - September 21, 2021 at 04:25 PM

JR

“ To the family: We offer our deepest sympathy in the passing of Shirley. She was indeed one of a kind. A beautiful lady!! The world has lost another Angel. RIP "Little Dove". Jim and Beverly Ross



Jim Ross - September 21, 2021 at 12:00 PM

JB

“ The Great Spirit has received a true Angel. She will be missed by all she has left behind, but she is sure to have a better place prepared for all. She was and still is able to calm the anger in people.

Jerry Blanchard - September 21, 2021 at 11:58 AM

SK

“ Shirley gave us all a treasure and her legacy will endure forever in our hearts. The family is a tribute to her beautiful life. She was loved.

Sue Kurfees - September 21, 2021 at 09:49 AM

BL

“ She spoke at Norfolk #1 Masonic Lodge years ago. Defending the water rights of her tribe.

Bruce Longman - September 21, 2021 at 09:35 AM

MV

“ I was deeply saddened to read of Shirley's passing. It was an honor to know her, and my deepest sympathy is extended to the Custalow family.

Madeline McMillan, Newport News, Va - September 21, 2021 at 08:33 AM

HS

“ Hank And Joyce Sellers lit a candle in memory of Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow McGowan



Hank and Joyce Sellers - September 20, 2021 at 10:39 PM

MJ

“ Mark & Pam Jackowski lit a candle in memory of Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow McGowan



Mark & Pam Jackowski - September 20, 2021 at 10:13 PM

RC

“ Roxanna And Larry Clore lit a candle in memory of Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow McGowan



Roxanna and Larry Clore - September 20, 2021 at 09:31 PM

SW

“ What a beautiful lady. My sincerest condolences to the family.

Stephanie Ware - September 20, 2021 at 06:25 PM

JT

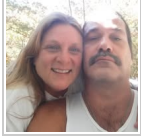
“ Shirley and I played together when we were young when my Mom and I visited my Aunt Hont and Uncle Dewey's. She will be missed by all who knew and loved her. I haven't seen her in years. Praying for her family and the tribal members. Sincerely, Janet Tupponce of Gretna, VA.

Janet Tupponce - September 20, 2021 at 04:36 PM

KE

“ Miss Shirley was known to many school children around Virginia. My children regularly looked forward to her living history presentations at their elementary school in Henrico. She was greatly loved and a strong influence helping our children see beyond the European history taught to them. With great appreciation, I remember her fondly.

Ken Edwards - September 20, 2021 at 03:29 PM



“ Joy Bishop lit a candle in memory of Shirley
"Little Dove" Custalow McGowan



Joy Bishop - September 20, 2021 at 01:30 PM

CK

I married into the Custalow family in the early 80's and was always struck by Shirley's calm and serene spirit. Don't think I ever saw her without a smile on her face. Beautiful inside and out. Her light will shine forever.

Cynthia Kuhns - September 21, 2021 at 03:16 PM

LC

I'm four years late writing something here, but I think of Shirley Little Dove often and decided to search for her online. I'm so saddened to know she's passed. She was, indeed, a beautiful person inside and out. I met her when I took my young daughter to a Mattaponi Powwow, and she impressed me so much that I got her to come speak to my classes at St. Catherine's School in Richmond, VA. Everyone loved her, and even after I left to stay home for a couple of years with an infant and toddler, St. Catherine's continued to have her as a guest. She was full of love and kindness and knowledge when she spoke. I'll always remember her.

Leslie Cohen-Gee - November 14, 2025 at 07:55 AM