



## Ernestine Ygnacio-DeSoto

August 18, 1938 - January 29, 2026

Santa Barbara's Ernestine Ygnacio-De Soto, Barbareño Chumash Elder, Dies at Age 87

Daughter of Last Native Speaker of Chumash Language Was Outspoken Advocate for Chumash Historical and Cultural Preservation

A devout Catholic, Ernestine Ygnacio-De Soto saw no conflict between her Chumash pride and her profound sense of faith.

After 87 years on planet Earth, Ernestine Ygnacio-De Soto — an indefatigable, joyous, and fiercely outspoken advocate for Chumash historical and cultural preservation — bowed out quietly at Santa Barbara's Cottage Hospital late last week surrounded by loved ones and well-wishers. Recently, she had received a framed papal blessing from Pope Leo, the first American pope, and a creole as well.

In recent months, Ygnacio-De Soto had been working on a project to install a series of Chumash Story Benches at a major UCSB restoration effort to bring back what was once the Ellwood Marine terminal.

In recent years, she performed on the stage of The Granada Theatre for the world premiere of the symphony *Wisdom of the Water, Earth, Sky* — a riff in six movements on Chumash mythology. Her presence was also conspicuous during the recent fundraising campaign to save a large chunk of the San Marco Foothills from development. Three years ago, she served as Grand

Marshal for that year's Fiesta Parade.

A devout Catholic, Ygnacio-De Soto saw no conflict between her Chumash pride and her profound sense of faith. When a statue of Father Junipero Serra — now recognized as a saint — was decapitated as a political statement in 2017, Ygnacio-De Soto condemned the act, saying that it was Chumash labor that built the Mission and it was up to the Chumash to hold the Mission accountable.

Three years ago, Ygnacio-De Soto led the charge to make and install a four-foot-tall statue of a bear and a Chumash Girl in the Mission's garden to acknowledge and commemorate the hundreds of Chumash who died there under Franciscan "care."

Ygnacio-De Soto would perform the lead role in a film and in productions staged around town. She would also write and draw a children's book called *The Sugar Bear Story*, based on a Chumash story her mother had told her.

Ygnacio-De Soto was born in Santa Cruz but grew up in Santa Barbara in a two-bedroom house inhabited by 19 people. Her mother, Mary Yee, was the last person to speak Chumash as her native language. Yee would collaborate closely over the years with noted anthropologist and linguist John Harrington. While Harrington was taking notes on Yee, Yee was talking notes on him, compiling 46 notebooks during their long collaborative friendship.

Ygnacio-De Soto — then in her teens — took a snifty view of Harrington, who she said returned the favor, regarding her as a meddlesome brat.

Ygnacio-De Soto would work 50 years as a nurse. It was while studying nursing at City College in the 1970s that she signed up for a Native American history class, thinking it would be easy. She never stopped studying.

Along the way she would encounter her own equivalent of Harrington in the person of John Johnson, the chief anthropologist with the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. The two were more than creative collaborators, they were co-conspirators and they were pals. Together, they put together perhaps Ygnacio-De Soto's most comprehensive contribution to Chumash history, a six-generation family history of Chumash women dating back to 1769.

Ygnacio-De Soto's nephew, James Yee, carries on his aunt's work as a linguist now working on his PhD at UCSB.

The public is invited to a memorial for Ygnacio-De Soto at the Old Mission on Tuesday, February 10. A viewing is scheduled for 9 a.m., the mass at 10 a.m., and a reception at 11:30 a.m.

# Cemetery Details

## Old Mission Santa Barbara

2201 Laguna St.  
Santa Barbara, CA 93105

# Previous Events

## Rosary

FEB 10. 9:00 AM - 10:00 AM (PT)

Old Mission Santa Barbara  
2201 Laguna St.  
Santa Barbara, CA 93105

## Funeral Mass

FEB 10. 10:00 AM - 11:00 AM (PT)

Old Mission Santa Barbara  
2201 Laguna St.  
Santa Barbara, CA 93105

# Tribute Wall

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“ Proud to see Ernestine in a place of honor in the 2023 Fiesta Parade.



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**Sherri West** - February 07 at 11:37 AM

LK

*What an incredibly inspiring human being. I'd say she's a fine example of the best of humanity. With her unyielding commitment to the Chumash, 6 generations of family history, fierce tenacity came to her naturally. She was perfect in this role . Her qualities , her ability to story tell , she was a force to be reckoned with. She knew her purpose in this earth and she did it justice. How wonderful it would be to have others like her in high numbers. These days, the needs of the world and its people and the division that's been ongoing for far too long. We could all stand to be taught lessons she offered. She is going to be missed in a big way. RIP Ernestine De Soto. Thank you for your gifts, your knowledge and your soul. . The difference has been you. And the torch has been passed.... With gratitude abounding! Gods blessings surround you and your many relatives living and passed. You will be missed beyond measure .*

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**Lisa Juliette Katnic** - February 26 at 09:24 AM