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Indian activist and popular author dies

Vine Deloria Jr. was a retired CU professor

By **Corey Dahl**, For the Camera

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Vine Deloria Jr. was considered one of the most influential American Indians of his time, authoring more than 20 books, including the best-selling "Custer Died for Your Sins."

Deloria, a retired University of Colorado professor and American Indian activist, died Sunday at age 72.

"He was one of our greatest leaders," said John Echohawk, executive director of the Boulder-based Native American Rights Fund and a longtime friend of Deloria.

Deloria suffered complications following surgery at Exempla Lutheran Medical Center in Wheat Ridge.

CU professor Charles Wilkinson, an expert on American Indian law, called Deloria "probably the most influential American Indian of the past century."

"He was also a wonderful human being, brilliant, biting funny and profoundly warm and compassionate, always willing to lend a hand or lift a spirit," Wilkinson said.

A Sioux Indian, Deloria was born in 1933 near a South Dakota reservation. He served in the Marines and graduated from Iowa State University.

He earned a master's degree from the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, initially planning to become a minister. He went on to earn a law degree from CU in 1970.

Deloria served as executive director of the National Congress of American Indians beginning in 1964.

"Deloria plunged into (the) job, writing op-ed articles, giving inspiration to Indian country, building coalitions, and, on Capitol Hill, fighting confiscatory bills and proposing reform measures," Wilkinson said in a prepared statement. "His leadership at NCAI and in the ensuing years marked a turning point in Indian policy."

David Rood, who teaches American Indian linguistics at CU, said Deloria "seemed to bridge the two cultures in a way that not many people can."

Deloria taught at the University of Arizona from 1978 to 1990 and then at CU before retiring in 2000.

He lived in Golden for the past several years and remained active on boards and committees until his death.

He is survived by his wife, Barbara, two sons and a daughter.

A public memorial will be at 3:30 p.m. Friday at the Mount Vernon Event Center, 17173 Mount Vernon Road, Golden.

Contributions may be made to the Vine Deloria Scholarship Fund, in care of the American Indian Scholarship Fund, Attn: Rick Williams, 8333 Greenwood Blvd., Denver, CO 80221.

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