



**Gila River Indian Community
Communication & Public Affairs Office**

PRESS RELEASE

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Gila River Indian Community Mourns the Death of Legal Icon and Tribal Leader Rodney B. Lewis

*First Native American to Practice Law in Arizona, First Native American to
Argue and Win a Case Before U.S. Supreme Court Passes Away at 77*

Sacaton, AZ. — Sacaton, AZ. — Rodney B. Lewis, a giant of the legal profession in Arizona and across Indian Country nationally, passed away Tuesday at the age of 77 years old. Known simply as “Rod” to thousands of fellow members of the Gila River Indian Community, Mr. Lewis was the first Native American attorney to be admitted to the State Bar of Arizona and the first Native American attorney in the nation to argue and win a case before the United States Supreme Court.

Mr. Lewis is survived by his wife, Willardene Pratt Lewis, and by three adult children: Stephen Roe, Governor of the Gila River Indian Community, John Blaine and Katherine Elizabeth.

“My father lived to serve our people in every way possible,” said Gov. Stephen Roe Lewis. “He spent 30 years of his life working on the Gila River water rights settlement, finally bringing that landmark agreement to fruition in 2004. That was only one of his proud moments. He was equally thrilled to have served as an Army Ranger during his time in the military and to have been appointed last year by Gov. Ducey to the Central Arizona Water Conservation District Board.

“No one loved his family, his community and Native American people more,” said Gov. Lewis, “or had a bigger heart when it came to helping Indian people better our lives and our communities.”

Mr. Lewis joined the U.S. Army Infantry in 1962. He received an honorable discharge in 1965, having become Airborne- and Ranger-qualified and rising to the rank of First Lieutenant. Throughout his life, Mr. Lewis was motivated to live by the Ranger creed: “Rangers Lead the Way.”

In 1962, Mr. Lewis earned a B.S. from Trinity University in San Antonio. He received his M.A. in History from Arizona State University in 1969. In 1972, he received his Juris Doctorate from the University of California, Los Angeles.

Admitted to the State Bar of Arizona in 1972, Mr. Lewis – the first Native American attorney in the state of Arizona and founding chair of the Arizona Bar’s Indian Law section – ultimately became a go-to attorney for tribal clients across Arizona and nationally. In a legal career that spanned nearly four decades, Mr. Lewis specialized in Indian law, tribal gaming compacts, water and energy law, and public policy matters.

In 1980, Mr. Lewis became the first Native American attorney to successfully argue a case before the United State Supreme Court. The case, *Central Machinery vs. the Arizona State Tax Commission*, resulted in a 5-4 vote in favor of the Gila River Indian Community. Justice Thurgood Marshall wrote the majority opinion.

Almost 40 years after this victory, *Central Machinery* remains critically important as the basis for granting Indian tribes the right to operate beyond the taxing jurisdiction of states.

Mr. Lewis served as the general counsel of the Gila River Indian Community for 30 years, beginning in 1978. In this role, he led the GRIC’s negotiations with the federal government, the state of Arizona, and more than 30 non-Indian parties. The Arizona Water Rights Settlements Act of 2004, Public Law 108-451, was passed as a direct result of these negotiations. It remains the largest tribal water rights settlement in the history of the United States.

In private practice later in his career, Mr. Lewis served as a consultant for the prominent Washington, D.C.-based law firm Akin Gump Strauss Hauer and Feld. His private practice work led to successful federal water rights settlements on behalf of the Crow Tribe of Montana and the Pechanga Band of Luiseno Indians in California, among many tribal clients.

A lifelong basketball fan and Phoenix Suns fan, Mr. Lewis was born to Sally and Roe Lewis in 1940. He is also survived by his brother, John, and by six grandchildren. Mr. Lewis was preceded in death by his brother, Robert “Bob” Lewis.

On Wednesday, Gila River Indian Community Lt. Governor Robert Stone requested that all flags in the Community be lowered to half-staff out of respect for Mr. Lewis.

“My father lived an extraordinary life,” said Gov. Stephen Roe Lewis, “yet he always felt like his signature accomplishment was being a great dad, a terrific grandfather and a loyal friend to so many of his loved ones and neighbors. He was proud, yet forever humble. He worked hard, but he always had time for you whenever you needed him. Being the child of Rod Lewis – nothing in life will ever make me or my brother and sister more proud.”

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Gila River Indian Community, located on 372,000 acres in south-central Arizona and home to the indigenous people of O’Odham (Pima) and Pee Posh (Maricopa). The people are known for their farms, deep traditions, basket weaving and pottery. The Tribe is comprised of seven districts, the administrative offices and departments are located in Sacaton, and serve the people throughout these seven community districts. 100% of its profits from gaming and 17 other Enterprises are utilized by the community providing services and opportunities to achieve the highest quality of life.