

Kotzebue's first transit driver honored

by Barbara Crane
for the Tundra Times

KOTZEBUE — Willie Jones, Kotzebue's first and only transit driver, was just sitting down to lunch at home when his phone rang. Could he come to the Senior Center immediately for an emergency pickup?

Jones was at the Senior Center in a matter of minutes, but there was no emergency. Instead, as he walked through the door, his friends, co-workers and Senior Center residents surprised him with a chorus of "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" followed by lunch, cake and ice cream.

March 31 was Jones' last day of work, and the people he had served for three years didn't want him to leave without a big thank you.

"When we call him, he's always here," said Doris Anderson of the Senior Center. "That's why we wanted to have the party here."

Kotzebue City Manager Mike Scott said the elders will especially miss him.

"He's bilingual so he can talk with them and tell them stories, and he knows all of their names," Scott said.

Jones talked about his experiences over the years and mentioned how difficult it had been to keep his van operating this winter when Kotzebue endured more than twice its usual snowfall and a windchill factor as low as minus 110 degrees.

Jones planned to leave for Candle the next day to begin his retirement. His wife Mamie will continue working for the Post Office for awhile and join him later.

"I won't do much for awhile, just hunt and mine a little," Jones said. But his friends don't believe he's ready for the rocking chair.

"I bet in six months he'll be busier than he's ever been," Scott said. "He'll never just sit around."

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Willie Jones

photo by Barbara Crane