

'I may not agree with what you say but I will defend unto death your right to say it' —VOLTAIRE

Alaska Federation of Natives proves effectiveness of unity

The Alaska Federation of Natives was born in 1966, five years before the historic Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was passed by Congress.

What this organization has proved in its 20 years of service to Alaska Natives is that a united and strong minority can make its voice heard and win big victories within the framework of the dominant Western culture.

Native American issues are not a key concern for the majority of the senators and representatives within the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. Alaska Native issues are even less important to most of these men and women.

And yet, AFN has proved is that Natives do not have to be a part of the non-Native power structure in order to make themselves heard. The tenacity of the organization has shown that Alaska Natives can be a player within that power structure, and that it can be influenced.

AFN has learned that knowing how the political structure works is the key to accomplishment.

And an important point to note is that a confrontational approach is not necessary. There are times when pressure must be brought to bear, but confrontation is seldom the answer. AFN has found ways to make changes within government by using government's own tools.

AFN's leaders — and they have been outstanding Natives through the years — have shown time and time again that the system can be made to work for Alaska Natives.

Those leaders themselves are worthy of honor and respect. They include Flore Lekanof, Emil Notti, Don Wright, Willie Hensley, Roger Lang, Sam Kito, Byron Mallott, Morris Thomspen, Frank Ferguson and Janie Leask.

These leaders have shown that a smaller culture within the larger system can exert leverage to make itself heard.

In these 20 years AFN has matured and changed. One thing, however, has not changed. AFN represents an extremely diverse group of people. The people of Hoonah have little in common with those in Point Hope.

The one thing that unites all Alaska Natives — whatever the differences — is dependence on the land.

It is the land that provides each of the different cultures a common base. Each group can retain its differences, and yet still share this common concern for preserving the land base.

It is unity that AFN offers Alaska Natives, and it is unity that will allow Natives in the future — whatever the proportion within Alaska's total population — to succeed in meeting important goals.