

# Juneau Tlingit Young Men in Initial Political Breakthrough

On October 7, Robert Loescher and Carl Nelson became the first Tlingit Indians to successfully seek office in the Juneau city government. Loescher, 22, and Nelson, 32, campaigned for the city council seats on a slate with James Austin, Jr., also a Tlingit.

The native trio ran on the theme "We must work together in these important times." The Austin-Nelson-Loescher effort was indeed a grass-roots campaign.

Operating on a combined budget of \$600, the men gained support from not only the Juneau native community, but from many other interested Juneau citizens who rang doorbells, let-

tered posters, and distributed flyers and position papers.

The Juneau native population numbers 1800 persons, representing 25 per cent of the city's population. Never before had an Indian won representation in the Juneau city government.

Winning the seats, Loescher and Nelson edged out incumbent councilman Felix Toner, chairman of the Southeast District Democratic Party.

Loescher received 816 votes, with Nelson having 796 of the total figure of 1400 votes. Austin president of the Alaska Native Brotherhood Camp number two, won 693 votes, coming within 100 votes of the top vote-getters.

Robert Loescher, 22, was born

in Juneau, graduated from Juneau High School and Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado. The youngest councilman ever to serve on the city council, Loescher is chairman of the Juneau Model Cities Citizens Participation Committee executive committee.

Loescher is a member of the Juneau ANB Camp Number Two and the Tlingit and Haida Council. He is employed as field representative and government liaison for the Southeast Alaska Legal Services Corp.

Carl Nelson, 32, is corresponding Secretary for the Juneau ANB Camp and Treasurer of the Juneau Tlingit and Haida Council.

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cil.

He is a graduate of Juneau High School and attended college at Western Washington, at Bellingham. He is employed as a console operator with the State Department of Administration.

Loescher told the Tundra Times he became interested in the city council post through his involvement in the model cities program.

"I thought it was important to have people on the council who represent the citizens, and not just the businessmen. Model cities is important, and the city council is important to model cities," Loescher stated.

Although he thought it was important to have native representation on the council, Loescher said that he and his running mates did not run on a native platform.

"We didn't run on the native cause," Loescher stated. "We had abilities, and we wanted to apply them toward the betterment of the community."

He added that none of the Austin-Nelson-Loescher team had any fantastic political background. They believed they had the ability to represent those

who supported them, that they had the interest, and they believed they should not be required to offer anything more.

Nelson, prior to working for the state, was employed as a data processing technician by the city. Having worked within the city structure, he felt he understood much of the city operation, and particularly where the city was lacking.

As does Loescher, Nelson has a deep interest in the model cities program. The model cities program, Nelson felt, has a dependence on the city council, so that he wished to have a voice on the council.

The Austin-Nelson-Loescher team represented a unifying nucleus for many of the Capitol City's citizens who had never before sensed a need for involvement.

The day of elections, the Juneau Empire ran a picture of an elderly Native man who had voted in city elections for the first time.

Yet there were still close to 300 persons who were turned away from the polls.

Due to a state law requiring pre-registration, many persons

who had not voted in a recent election or hadn't registered, who thought they were registered, or who even didn't know they had to register were not allowed to vote.

A matter of coincidence, or perhaps not, the great majority of those who were turned away were Alaska Natives.

The Juneau elections may perhaps be an indication of things to come, an event of such significance that, although the popular media may hail the September lease sale as the story of the year, it could be easily overshadowed with the story of two natives in surpassing massive obstacles to achieve what many thought to be an impossible task.

Yet the elections in Juneau are also an indication that much work must be done before Alaska Natives can fully participate in exercising their right to vote. Historically, as in Juneau, natives have been disenfranchised.

And until the state election laws are changed, or until native citizens are fully informed of how to go about exercising their responsibilities, natives may remain disenfranchised.