

Garrett and Kay

On Saturday afternoon July 12, I and all of the fishermen of the Bering Sea lost two close friends and dedicated allies. Kay Koweluk, Director of Fisheries Program at the Alaska Native Foundation and Garrett S. Aukon, Director of the Fisheries program for Kawerak Corporation of Nome and former president of Bering Sea Fishermen's Association, were among eight people killed in an airplane crash just south of Golovin.

Both Garrett and Kay centered their lives around the people they served and in doing so they were constantly traveling to the villages in western Alaska to work with local fishermen. It was during one of these trips that they lost their lives.

Kay and Garrett were playing host to a number of federal fisheries officials who were touring the fishing facilities of Norton Sound. This tour was the first stage in setting up a new federal program to assist Norton Sound fishermen. All those on board the chartered Cessna 402 were killed instantly on impact. In addition to Garrett and Kay the victims included the following:

James "Trip" Rendall of Washington, D.C., who worked on Alaskan projects for the fisheries development branch of the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

Doreen Feng of Washington, D.C., who worked on rural fisheries development projects for the Minority Business Development Administration.

Walt Jones who was head of the Alaska office of the fisheries development branch of NMFS.

Jack Wilburn, head of the Anchorage office of the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Diana Gardemer, who worked for KNOM radio station in Nome.

The pilot Lee Eckels of Unalakleet.

As well as being friends, both Kay and Garrett were also strong leaders working for the development of Western Alaska fisheries. The two were as different as day and night in their personal styles and methods of operating, but their goals in their work were identical. They sought to help their people—the people of Western Alaska.

Kay, who was originally from Wales, northwest of Nome, was known around Anchorage and around the state as a hardworking professional administrator. She had a degree in business administration and was head of the development department at Community Enterprise Development Corporation before coming to Alaska Native Foundation.

She operated in a rather quiet low-profile manner but was an extremely strong and effective lady. She was tremendously successful in establishing and operating economic development programs for rural Alaska villages.

More important however than her well-known professional competence was the fact that she was a wonderful lady. After working with her on practically a daily basis since last August, I can confidently state that she was one of the most pleasant, kind and dedicated persons that anyone could hope to deal with. She will never be replaced.

Garrett's home was Elim-God's country as he always insisted on calling it. Unlike Kay, he was not the kind of person that anyone would ever describe as low key or quiet. When Garrett was around, everyone in town knew it. He was constantly on the move, huddling with energy-talking, shaking hands, planning, making deals, raising hell and always promoting. He liked to describe himself as the best B.S.'er in Norton Sound. From the first day I met him he was promoting the Norton Sound region and the people who lived there. He was always looking ahead to the future of his region and of his people.

Knowing Garrett was an experience. He was the sort of person that you could work with, and argue with, and get mad at, and admire, and respect all at the same time. And through it all you had to like him.

A few days before his death, Garrett and I got into a little philosophical chat over beer one night. He told me, "I know that I am aggressive and loud and some people think that I come on too strong. I know that, but I act this way on purpose. I do it because I want to set an example for the young kids in my region - to show them that you don't have to sit back and always let things happen to you. You can go out and make things happen the way you want them to if you try hard enough."

Both Kay and Garrett set examples that the kids and also the rest of us can learn a lot from. We will feel the loss for a long time, but what they gave us will not disappear.

-David Hoffman
Bering Sea Fishermen

Memorial donations may be sent to:

Kay Koweluk Memorial
Scholarship Fund
c/o Les Schnick
P.O. Box 4225
Anchorage, Ak 99509

Garrett Aukon Memorial Fund
Kawerak Corporation
Box 948
Nome, Ak 99762