

Elder wisdom vital to future progress

There are times when the course of life seems very uncertain and we feel small before the challenges confronting us. The last two weeks have been like this, as several distinguished Native leaders have passed on, awakening feelings of sorrow and loss in their loved ones, as well as those in their communities who looked to them for wisdom and guidance. We add our voice to those grieving the loss of:

Peter Kalifornsky, Kenaitze, Nikiski

Father Ishmael Gromoff, Aleut Anchorage (St. Paul)

Ike Johannsen, Kenaitze, Kenai

William Lind, Aleut, Chignik Lagoon

As we struggle to preserve the continuity of past, present and future, the loss of elders is a reminder of how delicately woven are the diverse fabrics that make up Alaska Native culture. As Paul Swetzoff notes in his poignant tribute to Peter Kalifornsky, "If he had lived another 30 years, I know that he would have just scratched the surface of the layers of knowledge and wisdom he had to share with all of us."

Our elders are a critical link to our collective cultural wisdom as we look for our path to years ahead. Their gifts of remembering and sharing help transcend the legacy cultural torment that has grown throughout this century with the settlement of Alaska. As younger parents, today's elders made some hard choices about sending their children to boarding schools far from home, about adapting to change. Many of those young ones have survived the battles of land claims, self-determination and a hundred other onslaughts. They will be looked to as elders in their own right.

It is sad to say good-bye. But we may eventually be consoled by the knowledge that as long as there are elders remembering, and children listening, there is light in the future.