

We mourn a great loss

When a leader passes away most anywhere in the world, the people who relied on that man or woman for guidance, good judgment and some sense of moral direction are stung by their loss. The more practical immediately begin the search for a new leader; others nourish their pain a little longer, reluctant to let go of the cherished memory which is the only link to recent reality.

In the statewide Native community of Alaska, the loss of a respected leader weighs a little heavier on the spirit, squeezes a little harder on the heart. It is not a large community. For all their far-flung villages and new-found sense of political and economic independence, the Native community is small, and uncommonly close. The loss of a Native leader, even if he sat across the table from other Native leaders who disagreed with him, is felt deeply and with a sense that someone terribly essential to the common cause is gone forever.

The passing of Richard Janson last weekend, on the verge of assuming a new leadership position with Chugach Natives, provided startling proof of a point made at the Alaska Federation of Natives annual meeting only the day before. John Schaeffer hinted at the vulnerability of Native leadership when he reminded delegates that good leaders were hard to come by, that good managers and advocates, good thinkers and tacticians are few and hard to come by.

Last week, watching Mr. Janson lead the tiny Chugach delegation, it was more than apparent that he had a good sense of timing, a good sense of the priorities facing Natives statewide, combined with a good sense of humor. More than once, as tension put the nerves of delegates on edge, Janson rose with a comment or a motion that seemed to settle the troubled waters, if only for a little while. Clearly, unity for Alaska Natives was his priority.

We are certain that Mr. Janson's quiet manner, sometimes bordering on aloofness, concealed a deeper feeling of pride in playing a role in the achievements of his people.

Indeed, those who worked side by side with Mr. Janson during the tortuous years of the land claims fight will feel his untimely passing with special keenness. He was also highly respected by fishermen and boatmen of Alaska, of whom he was one for many years.

Those of us at the Tundra Times join other Alaskans in mourning Mr. Janson's absence from the battlelines of the ongoing struggle for Native rights. We also extend our deepest sympathies to his family, particularly his wife, Lone, who has worked long and hard by his side to inform Native Alaskans about the issues which they must come to grips with.

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