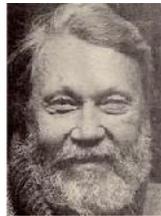


Niilo Emil Koponen(1928 - 2013)



Niilo Emil Koponen died Dec. 3, 2013, at the Fairbanks Pioneers' Home of natural causes at 85. Niilo was known, respected and loved by many because of his hospitality, grassroots activism, years as a teacher and principal, union and civic involvement, 10 years in the Alaska Legislature, volunteerism and prolific letters.

Born to Finnish parents Aune and Niilo William Koponen on March 6, 1928, Niilo grew up in a Finnish cooperative apartment building in the Bronx, New York, and attended the High School of Music & Art. He worked as an office machine repairman, warehouseman and in a shipyard with his father, and studied civil engineering at Cooper Union. In 1948, Niilo volunteered at a Quaker work camp in Finland helping World War II refugees from Soviet occupation. He was an active member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) for the rest of his life.

He graduated as the first white graduate from Wilberforce University/Central State in Ohio in social administration and sociology. Niilo loved to dance but once twisted his ankle at a folk dance at nearby

Antioch College. Pretty Joan Forbes wrapped his ankle with an Ace bandage, leading to a marriage of almost 62 years. Niilo and Joan drove to Fairbanks in March 1952. They summered in Olnes and wintered in College, learning the area and ultimately homesteading on Chena Ridge.

With five children born between 1952 and 1958, Niilo and Joan built and added on to their cabin, cleared land, gardened and grew hay, and raised horses, goats, cows, chickens and other animals. They got electricity soon but a well took 14 years. But Niilo installed a pair of surplus wing tanks to supply running water, often filled from drums filled on trips to the Fox spring. Neighbors were welcome to use the water to fill their "Jerry Cans."

Niilo's sociability, Joan's ability as a hostess and their generosity of spirit provided one of the underpinnings of the strong sense of community and identity found on Chena Ridge and beyond.

Niilo worked as an electrician's helper for the F.E. Company, as an electrician for the University of Alaska, as a surveyor and as an independent contractor with his dozer. He was shop steward for the Electrical Workers' union at the F.E. Company and helped organize the surveyors' union and the NEA in Alaska. Meanwhile, he earned a teaching degree at UAF and taught fourth and fifth grades in Fairbanks schools. Many of his students later said he made a real difference in their lives.

In 1958, Niilo studied anthropology for a year at the London School of Economics graduate school. Returning to teaching grade school, Niilo was also a part-time instructor sociology and anthropology instructor at UAF.

Niilo worked on his education doctorate at Harvard from 1962 to 1966. He served on the editorial board of the Harvard Educational Review and as book review editor. He was director of the Hartford (Connecticut) School District Desegregation Project, 1964-1966.

He returned to be principal at Barnette and University Park elementary schools, grants administrator for the school district and consultant for other projects such as the development of village high schools, director for Greater Fairbanks Head Start and a labor investigator for the Alaska Human Rights Commission.

Niilo was politically active from his youth, and on arrival in Fairbanks was active in the 1950s Alaska Party and campaigned for a seat at the constitutional convention. Niilo remained very active in local grassroots politics and helping organize or serve on local and state volunteer and service organizations: Chena Ridge Friends Meeting, Greater Fairbanks/Northern Schools (now Spirit of Alaska) Federal Credit Union, Chena-Goldstream Fire and Rescue, Tanana Valley Fair Board, Humanities Forum, Alaska Civil Liberties Union, Interior Democrats, Federation for Community Self-Reliance, Alaska Peace Center and Crisis Line.

Singing, reciting and writing poetry, sculpture, painting and cartooning were some of Niilo's expressive pleasures. He also was an avid collector of toy trains and railroad memorabilia and history.

As Finnish was his first language, Niilo said he failed kindergarten because of not speaking English well enough. However, he became a fascinating conversationalist. His speed reading was phenomenal, as was his ability to recall minutiae covering a wide range of interests: community, history, archeology, anthropology, linguistics, education, geology, agriculture, theater and politics. He said his way of remembering so much was by making the connections between all things, "like a spider web" that collected knowledge and insights instead of dust.

This enormous knowledge base served the people well when Niilo represented the Chena-University-Goldstream area in the Alaska Legislature from 1983-1992.

After Joan was seriously injured in an automobile accident in 1991, Niilo retired from the Legislature but continued to work on issues of human and civil rights, education, community, and peace and serve on various boards and commissions and help fledgling nonprofit organizations get started.

Niilo hit his head in early 2008, leading to his move to the Fairbanks Pioneers' Home in 2009. The family thanks the good people who took care of him there and the folks who gave support throughout the years.

Niilo was preceded in death by his parents, Niilo William and Aune Koponen, who lived for a time at Eielson Air Force Base.

He is survived by his wife, Joan; their children, Karjala, of Vermont, Sanni, of Ontario, Canada, Chena Newman and husband Gary, Heather, and Alex, of Fairbanks; grandsons, Peter Epstein and wife Anne-Lise Hassenklover and Danny Epstein and wife Congyu (Amy) Gao with step-daughters Leatitia Cheng and Sophia Cheng; grandchildren, Katya Epstein with daughter Callie, Saari Greylock and spouse Kristin, and Wendy, Colin, Matti, Max, Ben, and Dane.

A memorial gathering will be held at 2 p.m. Jan. 5, 2014, at the Pioneer Park Civic Center. Contact 479-6782 or koponenfamily@chena.org for information.

In lieu of gifts, please make a donation of time, energy or materials to the good cause of your choice.

Niilo believed that all of us can make a good difference in our community and world. As Niilo said, "Onward!"

Published in Daily News-Miner on Dec. 5, 2013