



*The Koponen family would like to thank:
Chena Ridge Friends Meeting
Fairbanks North Star Borough Pioneer Park
Fairbanks Peace Choir, Flyn Ludington, Paul Krejci
Scott Calder; Dave; Josh Bennett, SRS; Paul Tengan*

More info: koponenalaska.wordpress.com

Niilo Emil Koponen

March 6, 1928 - December 3, 2013

Memorial Program

Sunday, January 5th, 2014, 2pm

Pioneer Park Civic Center, Fairbanks, Alaska

Fairbanks Peace Choir

Dona Nobis Pacem, Finlandia/This is My Song

Master of Ceremonies..... Brian Rogers

Family..... Karjala Koponen

Education.....Karen Parr

Grassroots Activism.....Richard Farris

Legislature.....Sam Cotten

Quakers.....Charley Basham

Poems by Niilo.....Heather Koponen

Memories & Thoughts of NiiloYou are invited to share brief thoughts about Niilo. There will be additional opportunity to share stories with each other or in writing when we adjourn to the exhibit hall.

Vanhalla Tervahaudalla.....Dave

*Adjourn to the Exhibit Hall for **Slide Show, Refreshments, Displays, Memory Books***

*Elevator is accessed via the north doors; Ask an usher for assistance.
Child Care is Available in the Blue Room, on the 3rd floor.*

Finlandia Hymn

Music composed by Jean Sibelius, 1899

This Is My Land

Lyrics by Lloyd Stone, 1934

*This is my song, oh God of all the nations,
a song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is;
here are my hopes, my dreams, my holy shrine;
but other hearts in other lands are beating
with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine*

*My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,
and sunlight beams on clover leaf and pine.
But other lands have sunlight too and clover,
and skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
This is my song, thou God of all the nations;
a song of peace for their land and for mine.*

Niilo Emil Koponen

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-UAF-Ester-Goldstream district in the Alaska Legislature from 1983 - 1992, as he would see the varied and often otherwise overlooked impacts of legislation.



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

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 over the years. He died on December 3, 2013, of natural causes. He was 85 years old.

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

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; grandchildren Peter, Danny, Katya, Saari, Wendy, Colin, Matti, Max, Ben, and Dane, and great grandchild Calley.

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 he used to say, “Onward!”

For more, see koponenfamily.wordpress.com

Niilo was known, respected, and loved by many, due to his hospitality, grassroots activism, years as a teacher and principal, union and civic involvement, 10 years in the Alaska State 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. An only child, he was leader of a pack of kids exploring the city when a nickel for the subway showed them the world.



Niilo enjoyed the opportunity to develop his artistic and musical abilities at the High School of Music and Art. He wrote poetry, painted, and sculpted through the years.

He worked as an office machine repairman, warehouseman, and as an electrician’s helper in a shipyard with his father; he studied civil engineering at Cooper Union.

In 1948 Niilo volunteered at a Quaker work camp in Finland helping WWII refugees from Soviet occupation. He was an active member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) for the rest of his life.

He then attended and became the first white graduate from Wilberforce University/Central State in Ohio with a degree in social administration and sociology. He loved to dance but twisted his ankle at a folk dance at nearby Antioch College. Pretty Joan Forbes wrapped his ankle with an Ace bandage, starting a relationship that led to almost 62 years of marriage.

Inspired by his Finnish experience and the romance of the “Last Frontier”, Niilo and Joan drove a Dodge Power Wagon up the Alaska Highway, arriving in Interior Alaska in March 1952. They spent a summer in Olnes and a winter in College while checking out and filing for land. They ultimately homesteaded on Chena Ridge, their home since, with the exception of absence for graduate school.

With 5 children born between 1952 and 1958: Karjala, Sanni, Chena, Heather, and Alex; together Niilo and Joan built and added on to their cabin, added on again, cleared land, gardened and grew hay, raised horses, goats, cows, chickens, and other animals. They got electricity pretty quickly but a well took 14 years. But Niilo installed a pair of surplus wing tanks from Ladd AFB in the basement for running water,

often filled from drums filled on trips to the spring in Fox. Neighbors were welcome to fill their "Jerry Cans" with water when they stopped by. The sauna, built as part of the house, was a place for family and neighbors to clean up and engage in talk and song. He enjoyed joining with mostly bearded friends and neighbors armed with rifles to pose as the "Chena Ridge Militia".

Niilo's sociability and willingness to engage in discussion on any topic, Joan's ability as a hostess, and their generosity of spirit provided one of the underpinnings of the strong sense of community and identity 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 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.

In the meantime he was earning a teaching degree at UAF with classes in anthropology and linguistics, as well. He then taught 4th and 5th grades in the Fairbanks schools. Many of his students later said he made a real difference in their lives.

In 1958 Niilo took his family on a great adventure with a trip to England for a year of graduate school, studying anthropology at the London School of Economics. Returning to teaching grade school, Niilo was also a part-time instructor in sociology and of anthropology at the University of Alaska.

Niilo took the family away from Alaska in 1962 for four years to earn a doctorate in education from Harvard. During this stint 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, which provided the basis for his doctoral thesis.

Returning to Chena Ridge, he was 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, and Director for Greater Fairbanks Head Start. He



also served as a labor investigator for the Alaska Human Rights Commission.

Niilo was politically active from his youth in New York and on arrival in Fairbanks was active in the 1950's Alaska Party, and campaigned for a seat at the constitutional convention. Although not elected, he watched the convention with much intent. 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, Crisis Line and others.

Singing, reciting and writing poetry, sculpture, painting, and cartooning were some of Niilo's expressive pleasures.

Trains were one of his passions all his life as can be seen from high

school painting of trolleys. He was an avid collector of toy trains and railroad memorabilia and would trace out the abandoned rail lines wherever he was.

As Finnish was his first language, Niilo said he failed kindergarten due to not speaking English well enough. He must have gained mastery at some point, because he went on to be a fascinating conversationalist. He learned to read English by reading the comics, and 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 - not least - politics. He said his way of remembering so much was by making the