

Sam Cotton spoke on Niilo's Legislative activities. Sam served 8 years with Niilo in the Alaska House of Representatives

Fairbanks has produced some amazing political figures over the years and I've had the pleasure and honor to have served with many of them.

Niilo Koponen stands out as amazing because of his intellect, strongly held and consistently maintained values and his universally recognized integrity.

Before his legislative service, Niilo was active in politics as a delegate to the National Democratic Convention and had been an early advocate for statehood.

I served with Representative Niilo Koponen for eight of his ten years as a member of the Alaska Legislature. The 17th Legislature, ending in 1992, was the last for both of us.

Niilo was first elected in 1982 and served in the 13th Legislature as a member of the minority. His committee assignments were health, education and social services committee; labor and commerce and rules. He also served on the special committee on state loans.

In spite of his minority status in his first two years, he had success with some of the legislation he sponsored or co-sponsored. The bills and resolutions that passed dealt with health and safety issues with hospitals, tax benefits for disabled veterans and senior residents, services to pregnant women with social and economic difficulties and teacher scholarships for graduates planning to teach in rural schools.

Following his two years in the minority, Niilo rose to co-chair the House Hess committee for four years and then served on the powerful finance committee for four years as well, at times being the only member from Fairbanks on the panel. (Sen. Steve Frank was on Senate side.)

In his first term, and in every subsequent term, Niilo introduced joint resolutions calling for a nuclear-free Arctic and sub-Arctic as well as calling on the President and congress to halt nuclear weapons testing.

Throughout his tenure in the House of Representatives, legislation introduced by Rep. Koponen and passed into law dealt with helping people including expanding the student loan program, funding for child nutrition programs, removing asbestos from schools, improving access for the disabled to public buildings and facilities, workplace safety improvements, insurance coverage for mammograms, improvements of employment rights based on pregnancy and childbirth. Niilo was also the prime sponsor of the bill that licensed midwives.

A quote often attributed to Hubert Humphrey makes me think of how Niilo Koponen the legislator approached his work.

“It was once said that the moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped.”

Humphrey also said;

“Compassion is not weakness and concern for the unfortunate is not socialism.”

Niilo’s efforts in the Legislature helped Alaska meet that moral test.

Tip O’Neil’s remark that “all politics is local” comes to mind as well. Whether it was working with fellow Fairbanks legislators on Creamers Field or his special baby the University, Niilo was a strong advocate for his district, his university and his town.

But at the same time Niilo Koponen’s outlook was not a restricted horizon; he fought for fairness, (locally and globally), for work together elements of the frontier ethic and for open and rational public policy making that would have the support of the Alaska people.

Niilo, I think, took pride in his Finnish heritage. He along with Jalmar Kerttula and Fred Brown at various times made up the legislative “Finnish Caucus”.

Perhaps Finland, the first country in the world to give women unrestricted rights to both vote and stand for parliament, should be thanked for its influence on our friend Niilo.

Niilo’s legislative papers were donated to the UAF Rasmuson Library. The papers consist of subject files he kept during his 10 years in the Legislature, and their quantity is described as “76 cubic feet.” The depth and breadth of the subjects he researched are reflected in the legislation he proposed and/or helped to pass.