

In Memory of Herbert Nayokpuk, "Koonuk"

Lifelong Alaskan Herbert "Herbie" Nayokpuk, also known as "The Shishmaref Cannonball," died December 2, 2006, surrounded by family at the Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage.

A memorial service was held on Wednesday, December 6, at Anchorage Baptist Temple. A second service was held Friday in Nome, and his funeral and burial was scheduled to be held in Shishmaref Saturday.

Herbie's big smile, sense of humor and generous warmth and compassion touched the lives of countless people. He was well-known, highly respected and loved by many people throughout Alaska and different parts of the world. To accommodate the many people who couldn't attend the memorial service, it was broadcast live by KCFT FamilyNet Television and KATB 89.3 FM. KCFT FamilyNet was broadcast on Channel 35 and GCI Cable Channel 19 in Anchorage and the Mat-Su area and was also carried statewide in about 230 communities via the ARCS television system during the service.

Herbie Nayokpuk was born June 12, 1929, in Shishmaref to Elmer Nayokpuk and Annie Koonuk. At age 5, after his father died, he was raised by his grandfather and the elders of Shishmaref.

His family wrote: "Herbie was known as a man of great wisdom, humility and knowledge. From 1949-1953, he served in the Army and National Guard. He was self-employed and also worked as a heavy-equipment operator for the City of Shishmaref and Alaska Mining Co. Herbie lived and loved to mush dogs and practice a traditional lifestyle. During the 1950s and 1960s he competed in and won many local races, including the Shishmaref Christmas race nine years in a row."

Herbie was one of the original mushers to run the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race in 1973, when Joe Redington Sr. organized the first one. He finished fifth in the inaugural race in 1973, just behind George Attla. Herbie then competed in the Iditarod 10 more times, with his best finish, second place, occurring in 1980. In 1998 Herbie ran his final race and finished sixth and won the Iditarod's Most Inspirational Award. Later, he was inducted into the

Iditarod Hall of Fame and unanimously voted an Iditarod Icon by the Iditarod Trail Committee.

In 1981, he represented Alaska at the presidential inauguration of Ronald Reagan with Joe Redington and Col. Norman Vaughan. The famous wooden racing sled Herbie took to Washington to ride down Pennsylvania Avenue had a place of honor on the stage during the memorial service, along with a set of Herbie's gloves and mukluks. The sled was borrowed from its current owner, Raine Hall, former Iditarod director, who keeps it in storage in Eagle River.

"Herbie raised his family in the traditional lifestyle in Shishmaref," his family said. "He enjoyed living off the land. He especially enjoyed hunting and gathering food to share with family and friends. He was also a member of the Shishmaref Lutheran Church.

"Herbie was a loving husband and devoted father. His wife Elizabeth and he raised seven children. Herbie loved his 25 grandchildren and 19 great-grandchildren and took great joy in offering guidance, wisdom and love to all children."

He is survived by his wife of 53 years, Elizabeth; children and spouses, Shirley and Charles Newberg, Maggie and Mark Pollock, Mina Nayokpuk, Martin Nayokpuk, Mary and John Akin, Jeffery Nayokpuk, and Sadie and Tracy McGill; and sisters, Geraldine Kiyutelluk, Dorothy Bell and Alma Mullins; many nieces and nephews and a large extended family. He was preceded in death by his brothers, Walter, Lawrence, Warren and Roderick; and sisters, Virginia Nayokpuk and Holly Sockpick.

The board of directors and staff of Alaska Village Electric Cooperative extend their deepest sympathy and condolences to Herbie's family, especially to one of his nieces, Nina Sterbenz, who works for AVEC.



Photo: Anne Raup/Anchorage Daily News