



Wilbur Ternyik demonstrates how Indian chiefs held a tomahawk to signify power. His wife, Joyce, looks on during Thursday's tribute at the FEC.

Community gives tribute to a life's vision

The afternoon was about Wilbur Ternyik.

After all, he was the one bronzed for posterity in a statue brandishing a warrior's tomahawk.

But in characteristic style, Wilbur passed the credit on.

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY BRET YAGER
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"I was embarrassed when I heard about this and I'll tell you why," he said. "No single person ever accomplished anything by himself. It's impossible."

But that didn't stop a crowd at the Florence Events Center from giving Wilbur his just desserts in a tribute this

week to the pioneer of Oregon land planning and coastal resource management.

"A lot of the people I know remember when they first set eyes on Wilbur Ternyik," said Onno Husing, director of the Oregon Coastal Zone Management Association. "They speak to his force of character and individuality. True originals leave a deep impact on the world around them."

One by one, coastal leaders – some prominent and some from behind the scenes – spoke of political history



Lorenzo Ghiglieri's statue of Wilbur Ternyik

with Wilbur spanning 30 years and more, back to the murky days when land-use planning was in the throes of being born and Ternyik was leading a charge to keep coastal decision-making local. Close friends, family members, those who had been touched in some way by Wilbur's political orbit, sketched a picture of a craggy, tenacious man with a booming voice, a fearless and titanic character but also a man with genuine warmth, who presided over a varied and colorful political life with a leather

Indian jacket and a tomahawk.

And by the time they were done, you were pretty sure that Wilbur had strode across ridges, felling old growth fir with a single wipe.

"I'm not threatening you," Wilbur said in one verbal fisticuffs during those early days as he held his tomahawk. "This end is the peace pipe, this one is the business end. Which is it going to be?"

Wilbur, 80, was raised by his grandparents in Clatsop County, in "this great mix of Native American sensibility about the environment," said Husing. A direct descendent of Chief Coboway, who greeted Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery, Wilbur forged close ties with nature during long hunting,

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Ternyik

from 1A

fishing and trapping sojourns into the marsh worlds around the Columbia River. In adulthood, he built ties with power brokers both in Salem and Washington, D.C., counting former Gov. Tom McCall and former U.S. Sen. Mark Hatfield as close friends. He pioneered the use of beach grass to stabilize sand dunes and became a leader in wetland delineation and conservation. He secured funding for multiple coast projects and had a distinct Midas touch for bringing dollars to the port for dredging of the channels.

"Wilbur passed on a lot of knowledge of how to lobby for ports in D.C.," said Lucie La Bonte, OCZMA chairperson.

As development and conservation

stood increasingly at odds on the coast in the early 1970s, Wilbur heeded Gov. McCall's warning that the coast must do its own planning or it would be done by outsiders.

"There was only one man who got in his pickup and started driving up and down the coast, talking to cities, counties and water districts saying this was something they really need to get behind," said Husing.

Wilbur was instrumental in founding the Oregon Coastal Conservation & Development Commission, which he later chaired. He served multiple terms as Florence's mayor, 16 years on the city council and 29 years on the Port of Siuslaw Board of Commissioners, sometimes serving both the port and city at the same time because he wanted better communication between the two entities.

All of that came along after he had endured about 40 horrendous days on Okinawa during World War Two, when for him, the horror of battle ended with a leg wound that sent him home.

"That generation learned a lot about what it takes to build a community and build a society," said District Nine State Rep. Arnie Roblan. "They came back with a vision to change the world and the knowledge that they could do it because of what they'd been through."

In sometimes bittersweet tones, Wilbur's family spoke of his struggle to balance family life with the black-hole demands of political service.

His wife, Joyce, remembered Wilbur driving long hours on winding coast highways to return late,

sometimes sleeping only four hours before rising again and heading out.

"He was home every night," she said as the crowd listened attentively over the scattered remnants of cheese cake and half-empty iced tea glasses. "Bill (Wilbur's son) wanted his dad home every night. I felt sorry for Wilbur at times. He's quite a guy. I'm very proud of him."

In all, Wilbur was philosophical about the adulation and the bronze statue with the hawkish stare.

"I've listened to the nice things you're saying, and I don't need to read my obituary," he chuckled. "It's already here."

Wilbur has known all along how to have fun. Tales showed a gentler, playful side of the man, who sometimes drove with a pet raccoon named Patty astride his head – until she covered his eyes with her paws

while he was crossing the Siuslaw River bridge.

Countless wounded and orphaned animals were nursed back to health and returned to wildness under Wilbur's and Joyce's care. A young harbor seal hung out with them until it was just too much effort to catch fresh fish every day to feed the growing youngster.

They were all just things Wilbur

liked to do.

"Wilbur Ternyik never expected recognition," Sen. Hatfield has said. "His work was the tangible creation of his heart's vision."

A lot closer to home, Wilbur's son, Matt, has another way of saying it:

"You never tooted your own horn. I'm proud of you, Dad."