

By Jeromy Sullivan
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Last month, Billy Frank, Jr. passed away. He was 83.

Billy was a leader, a tireless advocate, a warrior, and a legend. His passion and energy will be missed by many, not the least of which the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission—a group he was chairman of for more than 30 years—as well as tribal leaders and fishermen across Washington state.

Billy was a force whose passing deserves all of the attention it has received. If you haven't already, I would encourage you to track down some of these tributes, especially if you have only a passing familiarity with Billy's struggles to help secure and maintain fishing treaty rights for Tribes in this state.

While there's little I can say about Billy that hasn't already been written, I do want to reflect a bit on the things that I've learned from Billy's work.

Stand up for what you believe in...even when no one else will.

Speaking your mind—especially if your opinion is unpopular—is a hard thing to do. The minute you open your mouth, you open yourself up for ridicule and arguments, but no one has ever gotten anything done or affected positive change by sitting back and accepting the status quo.

Of course, there's a downside to this: standing up means people will try to knock you down and, sometimes, they will. Like the old saying goes though, it's better to have tried and failed than to have never tried at all.

Treat people with respect even if you're on opposite sides.

If you put yourself and what you believe out into the open, inevitably, you're going to run into someone who doesn't agree with you. I've been in countless meetings where this has happened. For example, our Tribe's protection of Port Gamble Bay has come under fire on more than one occasion. Not because these opponents necessarily want to harm the Bay, but because their perspective is different or they put other interests above environmental concerns.

The thing I have found to remember is that disagreement doesn't invalidate your opinion. You have to have the courage of your own convictions, but understand that someone who thinks otherwise isn't necessarily your enemy.

It's the big and small things that can make your community a better place.

The “fish-ins” could have been dismissed as simple acts of defiance, but, today, over 40 years later, it’s clear how they changed the world.

There are examples like this throughout history. You probably have a few in your own experiences—an act of kindness or consideration that changed the course of your day or life. Sometimes seemingly small steps and actions can make all the difference.

Speaking of little things that can make a big difference: I want to invite you to participate in the clean up of Point Julia on June 14. Beginning at 9 am, our Natural Resources department will be leading a volunteer effort on what is the kick-off of the Port Gamble Bay Debris Removal Project. Not only will your involvement help to make Point Julia a safer place, but it will also impact the success of the ultimate goal of protecting Port Gamble Bay for the future of our community. You can read more about the debris removal project elsewhere in this edition.

In closing, Billy Frank, Jr. taught me a lot about the importance of standing up for what’s right and important. He fought for Washington’s tribes and helped many of us find a voice. In respect to his sacrifices, we must never lose it.