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State honors Elizabeth Peratrovich this week

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Dignified. Well-educated. Diplomatic. Beautiful.

This is how friends and admirers remember Elizabeth Peratrovich, the Alaska Native Sisterhood leader honored each Feb. 16 for her role in passing Alaska's Anti-discrimination Act in 1945.

"You just can't say enough about her," said Stella Martin, ANS Grand President Emeritus and a personal friend of Peratrovich. "She was every inch a lady, at all times. She could have carried it off herself."

Many are familiar with the story of how Peratrovich, a Southeast Tlingit of the Raven moiety, became upset with the "No Natives, No Filipinos, No Dogs" signs posted outside numerous Juneau restaurants, theaters, stores, hotels and taxi stands in the 1940s.

In partnership with her husband, Alaska Native Brotherhood leader Roy Peratrovich, the civil rights advocate convinced state legislators and Gov. Ernest Gruening to pass the anti-discrimination bill, preceding the National Civil Rights Act of 1964 by almost 20 years.

Removing the signs didn't end racism in Juneau, but it was a major accomplishment, said Robert Willard, of the ANB.

When Juneau residents come together Tuesday, they will discuss current Native issues that Peratrovich might also find offensive if she were alive today, Willard said. The recently passed English Only law, disparities in white and Native jail sentences and subsistence will all be discussed, he said.

The ANS will hold two events Tuesday. A women's luncheon, honoring 100 Alaska Native women for community service, will be held from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Former ANS Grand President Selina Everson, who also knew Peratrovich, will speak.

From 6 to 8 p.m. ANS will hold a surprise evening program, with stage performances, dances and refreshments, at the Tlingit and Haida Building on Hospital Drive. Stella Martin will speak.

About 400 people are expected, Willard said.

Martin, who has spoken publicly about Peratrovich in the past, doesn't know what she will say this year about her friend, who died in 1956.

So many things come to mind, she said. But Peratrovich's eloquent speech, commitment to her people and loyalty stand out.

“When she was your friend, she was your friend,” Martin said.