

Community mourns loss of tireless leader; Snitkin leaves social outreach legacy

By
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The Illinois Valley lost a beloved community leader when Barry Snitkin died on Feb. 5, 2015, after the sudden onset of an aggressive form of colon cancer.

Choosing to pay tribute while Snitkin could experience the appreciation of his accomplishments, more than 500 people packed an auditorium in Grants Pass last Jan. 30, at the opening of the 13th annual Siskiyou Environmental Film Festival, an event that Snitkin founded in 2002 to focus attention on environmental and social issues throughout our region and the world.

“It’s rare in our society to celebrate someone while they’re still alive. It’s special and I don’t think it is done enough,” said friend Joseph Vaile.

Snitkin touched many lives. While well known as an environmentalist, he was also a tireless advocate for people of color, the LGBT community, the poor and growing numbers of working-poor, according to friend Dave Toler.

“If injustice raised its head, Barry was there,” he said. “His compassion was always a real inspiration and his caring was an oasis that nurtured myself and many others as well.”

Snitkin, who moved to the Illinois Valley in 1983, was an active member of the Social Justice Alliance, Rural Organizing Project, the Progressive Coalition, and with the Democratic Party, he worked to get the vote out. He also volunteered many hours to help keep Josephine County’s community libraries open and served on the boards of several local and regional nonprofit organizations.

“Barry made his mark on all of us as well as the environment,” said dignitary Grandmother Agnes Pilgrim, who is grateful to Snitkin, and his wife, Meadow Martell, for helping her bring the centuries-old Salmon Ceremony of her ancestors back into existence in 1994.

In keeping with Native American traditions, the annual ceremony honors the river and shows gratitude for its life-force, and in recent years, has been attended by thousands, which helped generate momentum for the removal of fish-killing dams from the Rogue River, according to Pilgrim.

“I never heard Barry say a bad thing about anyone. He engaged with the world so honorably and gently,” Pilgrim said. “He was always gracious and considerate. Barry was such a God-send to us. We’ll miss him deeply.”

Many say Snitkin possessed a kind of “social genius.”

“Barry was that rare person who made everyone he knew feel they were a very special friend. I think many of us felt we had a special relationship with him and have come to find out we weren’t alone,” said friend Annette Williams. “But I’m willing to bet that he did love each of us, uniquely, for whom we were - and that is a rare gift of true attention that not many people grant others.”

Snitkin initially met many Valley residents during the eighties while working as a Realtor for Junction Realty in Cave Junction. Then, he put his talents to work at the Takilma-based Siskiyou Regional Educational Project (SREP), from 1992 through 2011, until SREP eventually merged with the Klamath Siskiyou Wildlands Center.

“Barry’s job was community outreach,” said Kelpie Wilson, former SREP Executive Director. “When almost every last road less area in the Siskiyou forests was scheduled for timber

sales and clear cutting, the only thing standing in the way was several small groups of activists. I don’t know how he did it, but whenever we needed people to turn out to a public hearing or a rally, Barry delivered.”

“Barry’s influence in our community shines everywhere I turn,” said friend Amy Schell-Lapora. “As a younger activist, I watched his patient conversations with people from all sides of the table and was inspired by how he earned everyone’s respect. People actually listened. His example taught me to listen and be respectful while staying true to my beliefs and working my butt off to make the changes we want to see in the world.”

“We need our friends, our families and our communities to understand the value in our natural environment,” said Vaile, who serves as Executive Director at Klamath Siskiyou Wildlands Center. “Without real people appreciating the value of a healthy planet to their everyday lives, we will never save what matters: a healthy planet with clean water and a diversity of life. Barry taught so many of us that it takes people - lots and lots of people - to save special places.”

Snitkin also possessed a deep love for kids and his embrace included not only his own children and grandchildren, but also, countless Valley children; and many of these kids - now adults - say their lives were enriched by Snitkin’s warm attention and wise influence.

“I loved Barry as much as a grandfather,” said Annabella Eisner, 11. “He’s played an important role in my life, especially since my grandparents live a long distance away. He always tried to make me laugh. Barry was one of the best people I’ve ever known.”

Also a dedicated organic gardener, Snitkin’s commitment to wholesome food and water systems free of pesticides and GMO’s was an expression of his concern for the health and welfare of both today’s children as well as future generations.

Several weeks ago, around 150 people gathered in a field in front of Snitkin’s house, forming a giant circle to show support for him. During his illness, countless volunteers kept vigil in his home, helping with care-giving, food preparation, chores, making music and providing overall support.

“I am so very grateful for the love and support the community has shown Barry and me during this whole process,” said Meadow Martell, Snikin’s wife and longtime partner of 21 years. “It was really a vital and very moving experience - and it was important to Barry. Now, I hope Barry’s open heart and passion for what he believed in can inspire all of us to be the best we can be.”

As often as he could, Snitkin indulged his passion for running the region’s wild rivers in his inflatable Sotar kayak. In one lifetime highlight, he rafted the Colorado River with friends; but always had a special spot in his heart for the wild rivers of the Klamath-Siskiyou region.

“Barry loved to be on the river. He was a consummate kayaker, skillful and wise. He boated the way he lived his life. Fearless, yet nonchalant,” said longtime river buddy Shannon Rose. “He always went straight into the big holes and aimed right for the tallest

waves, no skirting the edges for Barry. As a boating partner he was the epitome of kindness and encouragement. He’d say, ‘you’ve got this,’ even though I’d be out of my boat and under the water in the next minute. Now, Barry’s down the river for his final journey.”

During Snitkin’s transition, several friends quoted another wilderness and river enthusiast, the late author Ed Abbey, who wrote: “Night and day the river flows. If time is the mind of space, the River is the soul of the desert. Brave boatmen come, they go, they die; the voyage flows on forever. We are all canyoneers. We are all passengers on this little mossy ship, this delicate dory sailing around the sun that humans call the earth. Joy, shipmates, joy.”



(Courtesy photo for The Illinois Valley News)
Barry Snitkin preparing to kayak the Illinois River.

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