

Siuslaw News
P.O. Box 10
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Opinion

EXTRAORDINARY PEOPLE

CATHERINE J. ROURKE
 For the Siuslaw News

Wilbur Ternyik



He's got monumental achievements behind him plus a monument to prove it, with a life-size bronze bust standing in the Siuslaw Pioneer Museum.

Commissioned in 2006 as a tribute to Wilbur Ternyik's pioneering efforts in coastal conservation, it captures his native American heritage and essence as a tireless crusader and determined public servant, with his signature buckskin jacket and trademark tomahawk.

But for Wilbur, now 90, the dunes and wetlands represent the real testament to his work, holding more meaning and magic for him than any bronze statue.

"The plants are what really matter to me," he said. "They've been my best friend since I was a kid."

Despite a lifetime dedicated to managing coastal natural resources and land use, Wilbur simply views himself as man who loves nature — the flora and fauna, the waterways and wetlands, the dunes and the ocean.

"That little lake out there we call the Pacific... now that's really important," he said. "I don't have to see it every day, but I have to be close to it. That's probably from my Clatsop roots."

Wilbur's appreciation for the natural world began at an early age, fishing, hunting and trapping near the mouth of the Columbia River. Born in Astoria in 1926 and raised in Warrenton, he is a direct descendant of the famous Clatsop Indian chief who met the Lewis and Clark expedition in 1803.

His early connection with nature would later lead him to a profession

as a widely recognized dunes stabilization and wetlands consultant. He would eventually serve a total of 30 years as a Florence city councilor, mayor and port commissioner dedicated to making Florence a better place to live.

According to Wilbur, higher education had nothing to do with his achievements.

"I never even finished high school," he said.

Yet Wilbur would create a thriving landscaping business, work feverishly for dunes stabilization and wetlands restoration, initiate port improvements, hold multiple political offices, spearhead landmark legislation and become an influential advocate for Oregon coastal management. He often testified before legislative committees in Salem and Washington, D.C., in tireless campaigns to protect the coast's natural resources.

Instead of academia, Wilbur learned about life from nature. But before embarking on his coastal crusades, Wilbur faced another kind of battle at the tender age of 19, when World War II taught him lessons of a different kind.

As a Marine, he survived the brutal battle of Okinawa where 50,000 Allies perished in 1945. Wilbur hid for cover behind the dead body of a Japanese soldier but was later struck by gunfire. He endured nine painful hours on the open battlefield before rescuers carried him out on the very stretcher he had brought in to save others.

Purple Heart and a flag he had discovered in the helmet of the dead Japanese soldier.

But it wasn't until 56 years later that he would return it to the soldier's family in 2001 through a connection with the Japanese businessman who built the Sandpines golf course.

After cheating death, there's nothing left to fear in life. With the war behind him, Wilbur returned to the natural habitats he cherished from childhood and took a job stabilizing the migrating sand dunes in Clatsop County with the Soil Conservation Service.

After spending two years in the field working with native plants, he was transferred to Florence in 1946 where he established his own landscaping business, Wave Beachgrass Nursery.

And then came the turning point of his life when he met Joyce.

"The most important thing that ever happened in my life is my wife," Wilbur said. "We need to focus on our kids, families and seniors; they're more important than anything else."

Now married for 53 years, the couple raised five children together and still live in the same house they purchased shortly after their wedding. He and Joyce also spent 15 years rehabilitating wildlife, from bears and birds to turtles.

"I love the people here and I love the fishing," Wilbur said. "This is a great place to live. We have a great city council. We have beautiful lakes and so much natural beauty."

During Wilbur's 30 years as a Florence city councilor, mayor and port commissioner, he carried his peripatetic tomahawk as a gavel to restore order at public meetings.

"I almost broke it at one meeting," he said with a laugh. "I was making a point and slammed it too hard. It represents justice and doubles as a peace pipe. So if we can't settle our business, we can at least smoke a pipe."



PHOTO BY CATHERINE ROURKE

Wilbur Ternyik will carry his trademark tomahawk as Grand Marshal of the Rhody Fest's Grand Floral Parade on Sunday, May 22.

A visionary ahead of his time, Wilbur advocated for coastal land-use management in 1970, long before sustainability swept across America.

He established the Oregon Coastal Conservation and Development Commission to create a balance between land development and natural resource conservation, paving the way for landmark legislation on statewide land-use planning. Passed in 1973, it served as a leadership precedent for other states to follow.

A plaque at the bottom of Wilbur's statue features a quote from former Gov. Tom McCall's speech upon the passage of that law: "The interests of Oregon for today and in the future must be protected from grasping wasters of the land."

McCall must have had Wilbur in mind when he added: "Heroes are not giant statues framed against a

red sky. They are people who say: 'This is my community, and it's my responsibility to make it better.'"

The "Sand Man of Florence" will lead the 109th annual Rhododendron Festival's Grand Floral Parade as Grand Marshal this Sunday, May 22, at noon.

Give him a wave of appreciation for all he's done for Florence, for Oregon and for our coast as he waves his famous tomahawk at you.

Catherine J. Rourke is an award-winning writer, journalist and book editor who teaches creative writing at the Florence Regional Arts Alliance. She may be contacted at CJReditor@gmail.com.

Thanks to Bob Richardson of the Siuslaw Pioneer Museum and to Cindy Wobbe for their assistance with this story.

"The most important thing that ever happened in my life is my wife."

—WILBUR TERNYIK

"It's a weird thing being carried out on your own stretcher," he said. "The artillery, the mortars... it was incredible. I was the only one who made it out alive."

Wilbur returned to Oregon with a

LETTERS

Warm fuzzies

As artistic director of Children's Repertory of Oregon Workshops (CROW) for the past five years, there have been no shortage of warm and fuzzy moments in my life.

I've witnessed children come out of their shells through the power of the arts time and time again. I've watched as exciting new friendships have been forged, which are likely to last a lifetime. I've seen kids helping kids up and standing up for one another when the situation called for it.

I've seen kids struggle, and then achieve, and then struggle, and then achieve — much like how "real life" works. I've seen kids rise to the level of professionalism, respect and artistic achievement that we set, and then I've marveled as time and time again they've surpassed all of our expectations.

I've also witnessed many of these same things occur among our parents and volunteers who dedicate themselves to making our shows, projects and fundraisers possible and successful. All these things are valid arguments for why CROW does what we do.

But something else must really be mentioned. That is the simple fact that we could not do what we do if it weren't for you, Florence.

Florence has opened its arms to our arts program from the very beginning, supporting and bolstering our confidence through the simple acts of buying tickets, applauding our efforts and providing valuable and honest feedback. I'd like to personally thank everyone who attended "Shrek the Musical, Jr." as well as every single individual, business, grant-maker or organiza-

tion who helped make the dream come true for all of our children, cast and crew.

If I tried to name everyone who helped along the way, I'd need to buy the Siuslaw News. So, I'll just say that if you have ever donated to CROW, hung up a poster, attended a show, volunteered your time and help, sponsored an event or fundraiser, told your friends to come to our show, or even just sent us your kind thoughts from wherever you are, please know that I'm sharing my warm fuzzies with you.

Florence, you are a treasure of a town. Thank you for believing in us.

Melanie Heard
 Artistic Director of CROW, Florence

Give me a break

You have to be kidding me! Just a few months ago ODOT resurfaced Rhododendron Drive, now Florence is getting ready to tear it up to put sewer or some kind of line in. Genius, right?

I know, I know. ODOT resurfaced the road and didn't tell the powers that be of Florence. Florence had nothing to do about it, right? Somebody at Florence was aware that Florence was going to put some sort of line in Rhododendron before ODOT resurfaced it, right? Somebody at ODOT or Florence couldn't communicate with each other? Give me a break. Ridiculous.

I'm sure somebody from Florence City Hall or ODOT will have some lame-brain excuse. Then we wonder why our taxes are what they are. Waste! Waste! Waste! No excuse for it.

Carl Slusser
 Florence

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR POLICY

Siuslaw News welcomes letters to the editor concerning issues affecting the Florence area and Lane County. Emailed letters are preferred. Handwritten or typed letters must be signed.

All letters should be limited to about 300 words and must include the writer's full name, address and phone number for verification. Letters are subject to editing for length, grammar and clarity.

Publication of any letter is not guaranteed and depends on space available and the volume of letters received. Libelous and anonymous letters as well as poetry will not be published. All submissions become the property of Siuslaw News and will not be returned. **Write to: Editor@TheSiuslawNews.com.**

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