



We-at-mus-ta-ka-kite
Michael J. Penney

December 19, 1947 - November 28, 2020



N I M I I P U U T R I B A L T R I B U N E

Michael “Mike” Joseph Penney (We-at-mus-ta-ka-kite), 72, of Lapwai, passed away surrounded by his family, Saturday, Nov. 28, 2020, at his home in Lapwai. He was born Dec. 19, 1947, in Lewiston to Priscilla Pinkham and Frank Penney Sr.

On Dec. 3, 1966, Michael married Delores White in Cha-week-ta. They had one daughter, Michelle Rae Penney, born in 1966 in Lewiston.

Michael graduated from Lapwai High School in 1966. In 1967, he and his family moved to Salinas, Calif., where he attended Hartnell Junior College. In 1969, he received his Associate of Arts degree in electronics from Hartnell. In 1972, he graduated from the University of Idaho, with a Bachelor of Science degree in social work with a minor in science. His junior and senior years, he was on the dean’s list and was the president of the Native American Student Association at U of I. In 1974, he earned his master’s degree in business administration also from U of I.

In 1975, Michael moved back to Lapwai where he worked for the Nez Perce Tribe in numerous positions, including firefighter crew boss (’69-70), economic development planner (’75-80), planning manager (’86-88), administrative manager (’89-92), forestry and limestone manager (’92-97) and executive director (’97-04). He was employee of the year in 1989, received the Eagle award for his work on the establishment of the new BIA office building, honored with the Idaho rural practitioner award for his dedication and commitment toward developing the Nez Perce Tribe as forest products manager, and manager of the year award in 2003. He helped establish economic development planning function on the Nez Perce Reservation and the economic development document (OEDP), which set the economic development strategy for the Nez Perce Tribe.

From 1976 to 1978, he served as a member of Idaho Health Systems Board of Directors and the Nez Perce County planning and zoning commission. Michael was elected as General Council chairman for the Nez Perce Tribe from 1976-84.

Michael was the lead singer of the Waap qah qun Drum, aka Nez Perce Nation Drum. The drum has traveled throughout the United States to numerous pow-wows, ceremonies and celebrations. They sang at President Clinton’s inaugural parade and traveled to Belgium in 1994 for a cultural demonstration.

Mike had a unique sense of humor, infectious smile and bigger-than-life personality. He was known throughout Indian Country as an accomplished round bustle dancer and keeper of songs who had a way of bringing heart and life to songs from the past.

His favorite pastimes included he and Dee’s annual trip to Sturgis on their Harley, playing pool — even winning the league championship. He enjoyed playing football, softball, chess, sudoku and watching his daughter, grandkids and great-grandkids participate in sports.

He is survived by his wife, Dee Penney, of 54 years; his daughter, Michelle Penney, of Lapwai; his grandchildren, Alex Michael and Teeiah Arthur, of Lapwai, Valencia Ahtaleen Tapuro, of Lummi, Harley Rae Ellenwood, and Samuel E. Ellenwood Jr., both of Lapwai; great-grandchildren Anton Michael Arthur and Amaya Marie Arthur, of Lapwai, DeAndre Dmitri James, Celestine Irene James, Trene Ella James, and Everon James, of Lummi, and Genesis Eugene Tuane Penney, of Lapwai.

He is also survived by his brothers, Leroy L. Seth, Joel Binks Henry, Frank Penney Jr. and Wayne Penney; his sisters, Sarah Dee Harrison, Jana Henry, Jena Henry, Sylvia Mitchell, Loretta Higheagle, Mildred Penney, Roxanne Harrison Pierre and Vina Harrison; his uncles, Alfred Pinkham, Alvin Pinkham and Allen Pinkham. He is survived by numerous nephews, nieces and cousins.

He was preceded in death by his paternal grandparents, Stella Amera Penney and Benjamin D. Penney Sr., his maternal grandparents, Alex M. Pinkham Sr. and Annette Blackeagle Burke, his mother, Priscilla Pinkham; his father, Frank Penney Sr., WWII Veteran and survivor of the Bataan Death March; aunts Bernadine Pinkham Greene, Audrey Pinkham Redheart, Loretta Pinkham Alexander, Mildred Penney Wheeler, Jane Penney Jefferson; uncles Albert Pinkham Sr., Leroy Pinkham Alex M. Pinkham Jr., Henry Penney, Benjamin Penney

Jr., Reginald Penney, Elwood ‘Felix’ Penney and Guy Penney, his brothers, Edward Henry, Jay W. Henry, Phillip Eugene Penney and Del T. White

A traditional dressing service will be held from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 3 at Malcolm’s Brower-Wann Funeral Home in Lewiston, followed by a viewing from 2-4 p.m. If you are unable to attend, Malcom’s Brower-Wann will have a livestream available. Please wear a mask and maintain social distancing.

The family would like to extend a special thank you to the nursing staff and attending physicians at St. Joseph Regional Medical Center, hospice staff, his pow-wow family, the Nez Perce Tribe and all those who knew and loved him.



“Under Head Coach Jeff Wilson, the Lapwai HS football team wrapped up November 1965, Lapwai is undefeated, scoring 436 points and holding their opponents to 58 points for the season. Senior Mike Penney and older 1st cousin by 33 days, Vonley ‘Tank’ Weaskus are sizeable muscle on the team. The elderly family members fondly remember attending these football games and Grandfather Alex traveling over from the Yakama Reservation to watch his grandsons play Wildcat football.

Vonley passed away in 1994, a Nez Perce Nation singer and witness in the marriage of Michael J and Delores in 1966.

Michael J was a skilled three sport athlete, he was also selected as the Wildcat Call Editor, the paper’s highest rank in 1965.

Mike and Dee were devoted Wildcat fans through the years, watching their daughter, grandchildren, and many nieces and nephews.”

“I worked for Mike from January 1998 to March 2002 as his Executive Secretary when he took the reins of being the Nez Perce Tribe Executive Director from 1997-2004. He saw my ability and gave me a chance which ultimately led to a 17 year career working in the Nez Perce Tribe executive level offices.

Mike had such a high level of intellect, but he treated his staff with respect and appreciation and even with his aptitude for composure and professionalism, he shared many witticisms with us. We had such a fun work group that included Della Cree, Dodi Rode, Cass Kipp and Terri Calfrobe. There was always good humor and laughter in our office but proficiency in our job was required.

One particular moment we recalled often and laughed about was when he called me on the phone extension and said he needed "a cuppa coffee" to which I hesitated but I went ahead and made some fresh coffee. When I walked into his office where he was meeting with other managers carrying the carafe, he realized then I thought he said coffee but in fact he said "I need a couple copies" to which he thought more funny than insubordinate.

I have many fond memories not only while working for him, but even after I left his office, he provided guidance and historical information which helped in my job accomplishments which goes to show how generous and supportive he was for anyone working for the betterment of the Nez Perce Tribe.”

-- Yvonne Webb-Johnson



“Mike provided the leadership and was the driving force in pursuing and acquiring both the Marek Ranch and Potlatch lands in 1986 and 1988 on Craig Mountain for the tribe. These were the first significant land acquisitions, approximately 24,000 acres. Mike with the help of Rutger van Houten formulated a business plan that included using the Nez Perce Forest Products Enterprise to secure a commercial loan needed to acquire the lands. Payments with revenue from timber harvest on these lands paid off the loans and the lands now have more timber volume than at the time of purchase. After these acquired lands were paid for, the value of the timber on these land was used as collateral for securing loans needed to develop the casino.

The Henderson property was a truck stop prior to the tribe purchasing it.

The lands purchased back using FSA loans were primarily for buying up individual interests in allotments needed to keep the lands in tribal ownership and trust status. This has been very successful in keeping the lands in tribal ownership.

I often heard of Mike referred to as the 10th member of NPTEC. As head of Planning his position evolved into what is the Executive Director today. He was essentially the financial manager of the tribe when what is now the Finance Department provided both accounting and human resource services.”

-- John DeGroot

“It was my honor and pleasure to know and work with Mike as Executive Director for the Nez Perce Tribe. During my tenure as Chairman of NPTEC Mike was under my direct supervision and we met frequently about tribal issues. Mike was a dedicated worker and never sought praise or attention for himself. He provided great advice and wisdom and will be long remembered for his service to the Nez Perce Tribe. I always appreciated the Waap qah qun Drum being available for the Nez Perce War Memorials, events, and meeting. Hearing Waap qah qun sing the flag song made us all proud to be Nimiipuu.”

--Sam Penney



“My move home to work for the tribe in 1990 was triggered by the work the Tribe was undertaking such as buying land, reshaping timber sales, and building our own natural resource programs. Who wouldn’t want to be a part of the action? The team supporting NPTEC’s effort included my older brother, Mike Penney, along with Rutger Van Houten and Vinnie Carrao. Unfortunately, Rutger was losing a battle with cancer and during my first week on the job I visited Rutger in the hospital two days before his passing. Rutger gave me a handwritten note with advice about this team I was joining, and the note was also like a tribute to both Mike and Vinnie. Rutger was right about his advice and I still have his note.

Mike had vision, creativity, and determination so being on a team working alongside him required one to match his tempo. I really felt that tempo after I got elected to NPTEC in 1996. General Council demanded that NPTEC quit micro-managing so when Arthur Taylor, Carla Timentwa and I were elected that year we wanted to redesign how we operate. NPTEC shored up the personnel and finance manuals to delegate responsibility and create accountability and converted to an Executive Director structure to manage daily operations. Mike was a great choice to fill the new ED job since he had contributed much to the earlier administrative structure and could ably take the Tribe up to the next step. As Treasurer I was glad Mike was on our side negotiating in the best interests of the Tribe with the banks, the feds or working on a land deal—I knew that those on the other side of the table saw him as a force to be reckoned with. I credit him along with Phyllis Nash (Finance Manager) for their professional and moral support to help me get the Treasurer’s job done.

There were times when a Treasurer just needed a safe place to vent so Mike’s office became my usual and accustomed destination. While I’d vent he would keep working on some spreadsheet or scribbling some memo, and then ask “Are you done, yet?” When I was, he’d offer his advice—mostly tell me to quit letting it eat away at me—and then point me out the door to get back into the game.

I think back to our work together. It felt like a never-ending effort, but I believe Mike understood that. At least we could prepare this place for the next wave of leaders and employees, and pass along hope so our replacements could pick up the pace with new ideas to do good for the people we love, the places we cherish and protect what it means when we say we are Nez Perce.

Way back, as a kid on the dance floor I remember my older brother at the drum signing the old songs in the old way. Even in those early days I admired him because he was classy, witty and always teased me in a good way. And when I moved home in 1990, he made a place for me at the drum. We sang anywhere and everywhere including President Clinton’s inaugural parade and the European Horse Show in Belgium. Near or far, I cherish the times squeezing around the drum singing with the gang like Frank, Binx, Gordy, Otis, Alex, Wayne, Joe Buck, Clendon, Nakia plus so many others including those who have since passed on. We’d sing with our hearts and in between songs the humor was relentless and fun even if I was the target of the bantering, often being called “Two Songs” which was a reference to a former girlfriend who once—and only once—limited me to two songs before I had to leave.

Of all the many memories, the one that stands above the rest is when he and Uncle Horace led the Nez Perce portion of a joint Latvian-Nez Perce marriage ceremony with my wife, Tija. The ceremony was a creative blend of cultures and acceptance held on the banks of the Columbia River at Wood’s Landing. Of course, he and Dee made the trip over on their Harley.

I’ve learned that when someone passes, we offer testimony on their behalf through words, songs and prayers as they take their rightful place in the next world. I join many in testifying on Mike’s behalf. He made a lasting difference, and the evidence can be found in many places such as how we will continue to grow as a Nation, the land base he helped restore, and the songs our children sing.”

--Jaime A. Pinkham



“Michael J. Penney was a role model and mentor to many aspiring Nimiipuu professionals, including myself. I am forever grateful for the friendship, advice, direction, and positive outlook Mike instilled in me when I worked with him in my first professional position after college.

In the late 1980s conditions were much different than they are now. Resources were scarce, jobs were few, and need was great. Back then every decision the Tribal government made was a choice between critical needs in the community and among Tribal members. It was very challenging and there was much controversy and political intrigue.

Even in this environment Mike always kept (and shared) an optimistic and energetic attitude and rose to every challenge that came his way. He just kept pushing forward because he knew he was doing the right things for the right reasons. Personally, I feel that many of Mike’s actions on behalf of our Tribe were true Profiles In Courage. As an executive I strive to manage, teach, mentor, advise, and especially lead based upon the example Mike provided.

Thanks Mike, and thanks to Mike’s family as well.”

--Kermit Mankiller

“It’s difficult to put into words my thoughts regarding a man who in my view was larger than life in so many ways. He constantly challenged himself and those around him to always do more than you thought possible, to dream big and set a plan in motion to achieve positive long term results for the benefit of those yet to come.

He entrusted me first as an administrative and enterprise employee to go after grants, contracts, economic ventures that would benefit tribal revenue, enterprise employees and resources. Later while on NPTEC he challenged us as leaders to look long term and make hard decisions regarding our resources and our social and economic stability. I always appreciated he would give both the pros and the cons of every item presented for action.

Most importantly, his commitment to always show up for memorials, namings, ceremonials for the Nez Perce War, for family gatherings. He practiced the teaching of being there when called upon to help.

My husband and I were honored to witness true leadership in how he carried his life. And we were honored to share our songs and words with him on his final day at his home in Lapwai. qeciwyew for allowing me to share a few words regarding our Big brother, our elder. yox’ kalo.”

--Carla Timentwa



“Mike could have gone anywhere, but he came to the Tribe. He initiated and developed the current structure of the Tribe. He changed the 638 contracting process and the forest service selling timber. I was Chairman at the time. Mike was able to increase our income from timber sales by selling during peak times, which resulted in a 15% increase of our revenues.

He initiated purchasing land and individual allotments. Until then, we had never purchased land on or off reservation. He started talking to a couple people looking to sell property. It took a year to complete an agreement, but he was able to purchase around 23,000 acres of land on and off the reservation. In addition to that he was able to get two \$500,000 grants from BIA for economic development. This had never been done before by a tribe in the North West.

This happened in the mid ‘80’s and Mike was a large contributor. It put the Tribe in a significant position. He was truly an integral part of initiating this process for the Tribe.”

--Allen Pinkham



“He was instrumental in having the Tribe transition to its “Government” mode of doing business – with a government branch that is separate from the legislative (NPTEC) branch. I think he was also a principle author of the Tribe’s Human Resources Manual, along with the job categories/classifications. These organizational changes stemmed from his education as a MBA.

He was a professional, business-like Executive and a great supervisor for the 3 years that he was my direct supervisor. His interest was always in directing the Tribal government upwards, to take advantage of the opportunities that were then becoming available to Tribes and to make our government on par with the others that we interacted with. This was, of course, a struggle and not a given for us as tribal peoples.

He was an excellent choice to lead during this period of time.

Today, we work in his, and other leaders’, footprint. They set us on the right course.”

-- David B. Johnson



“For the past 40 years, from his date of appointment as NPTEC’s Administrative Manager, I was honored to work with Michael. Thirty of those years as a member of the NPTEC.

As a manager, his recommendations to NPTEC and the Tribal General Council came with alternative choices. He was always business like, never raised his voice in discussion or debate. He was respectful to everyone he worked with. He always looked up to people- not down at them.

He was also a dedicated cultural drummer, learning and singing all the old songs and mastering their meaning. His drum was always available for pow wows, veteran’s funerals and ceremonies honoring our ancestors.

Michael was dedicated and responsible. Most of all he was a great friend.”

-- Scotty- U.S. Navy (Ret.)

“Mike Penney was a trailblazer. He obtained a college education, and returned home to help the Nimiipuu people move forward in the business realm, while always staying true to the Nimiipuu traditions. He had a collegial way about him, staying positive and calm, even in times of crisis. This helped others stay calm as well.

I learned from Mike in observing his interactions with bankers and lenders who wanted to do business with the Tribe. He ensured that the Tribe was treated with respect and professionalism, that the Tribe was an entity to be reckoned with. He was well respected by lenders who had to compete for the right to do business with a growing leader in the business world. He knew how to develop the Tribe’s businesses and applied strategic planning to all proposed projects.

He was a mentor to me. I will miss him.”

--Julie Kane, Managing Attorney, Nez Perce Tribe

“Around 1963 or '64 he was a round bustle dancer. He was an outstanding dancer, during that time period in the '60's and also through high school, in the time period where he graduated. But the one time in La Grande Oregon, there was a man by the name of Arthur Junaluska and he was a Cherokee person and a drama play director. He reached out to a lot of dancers on the Umatilla reservation and Nez Perce reservation, I think Yakama as well. He reached out to Mike Penny and also Julia Davis, Wheeler now. Mike Penny was there, my sister Elena Halfmoon was there and they had what they called Dance the 12 moons and it was very well received there in La Grande. Mike was one of the primary dancers for that play, the act that they did down there to kind of give you an idea of how well respected he was with his cultural abilities. We didn't call it pow wow in those days, you got war dance abilities and he was chosen above all the others to be part of that and so was Julia and my sister Elena and they danced over there.

He was very athletic, during high school he was the football star and his girlfriend at the time was Dolores White. Yea, all through high school they've been together Dolores and him. She was the cheerleader, I think she's the cheerleader queen and Mike Penny was the football star. That's how long they've been together just to give you an idea about Dolores and Mike. They've been together so long, I mean high school sweethearts, literally high school sweethearts. That shows, even for that time period, for an Indian couple to be together I mean they're truly role models as far as your Indian couples loving each other in high school and staying together all these years. I mean that's a rarity, truly a rarity.

Mike though he was very, very well-known during that time period but I really got to know Mike when he was going to school at the university of Idaho. He's actually one of the first ones to get a degree there, he got his MBA. I'm not quite sure what year he graduated, I think it was '72. He really believed in furthering his education and coming back to the Tribe and he chose an MBA to be the lead off into his career into the Nez Perce Tribe. He was one of the few ones at that time period to really get a degree especially a higher degree as he did. That shows his determination and care for the Nez Perce Tribe and it was intriguing to me because during that time period after he and I really started chasing around during that time; we were always told to get an education and come back to work for the Tribe so that's what we wanted to do. The irony of the whole thing is that when we did go back to the Tribe, and Mike was a case in point, he ran the obstacles from the older NPTEC members. They didn't want the educated Nez Perce Indian to come back and work for the people they just said that was the soyapo's way and all that. Really it is a traditional knowledge as well traditional wisdom, but yeah we were told to go get our education. Mike, of all the criticism he received, he won people over. His personality won people over. That's how he worked his way into the Tribe

That gives you an idea of his determination to eventually become the Executive Director. His love for the Tribe was real. From the discussions he and I had in that time period, about getting an education, he truly believed in the strength of education to arm ourselves and to benefit the people.

Some of his ideas were not so popular. He ran into some issues, for instance the taxation issue. He would look at both sides of the issues and bring those back to NPTEC to make a decision. Sometimes they would make a decision he would not recommend, but he would back up the decision. If NPTEC made a resolution that passed through the table, he would support it.

In the early 70s is when the drum came to play for him. He and I used to drum together a lot, we learned from people like Sam Jackson, the Broncheau brothers (Oscar, Johnny, Leo), Jim Morris, Si Red Elk; men of that caliber, those were our teachers. We used to practice all the time and Delores was always with us.

Mike used to have a VW Van, one of those old time ones. He was known for his van, you see it and you knew it was Mike Penney and Delores. We would load the drum in the back of that van and drive up to the mountains and just start singing. That's how the songs came to us. That's how Nez Perce Nation came to be. We

had Frank Penney Jr. join us as well, Frank Weaskus, and later on Joe Henry and his brother, and Gordon High-eagle. We were the old Nez Perce singers.

Mike loved life, he loved life so much. He loved everything ever given to him. He was a well-known pool player, an excellent shot. Of all my years playing pool with him, I probably only beat him six times maybe not even that. He used to watch the old pool players like Lyman Scott and Rod Wheeler, and that's how he learned. He was the type of guy where if he wanted to take up a hobby he was going to go 100%.

He really enjoyed playing chess. Many didn't know that, but he loved playing chess. In our younger days, we all learned to play chess. One time we put together a chess tournament. It was a \$5 entry fee, winner take all. We must have had 15 or 16 guys show up. It was a bunch of Nez Perce guys! Boy that was a lot of fun. I can't remember who won it, one of the Jackson boys anyway.

We traveled a lot for pow wows. One time, it was Winter time, we were drumming over in Pendleton at the powwow. It was Saturday evening, pretty late probably 1:00 in the morning. We rode in Mike's van, and everyone was in charge of something. I was in charge of drum sticks. We loaded up and took off to Pendleton. We stopped to get something to eat. Then it dawned on us that the drum wasn't there, it wasn't in the car. Everyone was like “Hey, where's the drum?” “Who was in the charge of the drum?” Here no one loaded it, so we all jumped back in the van and blazed over there to Mission. Got to the parking lot at about 2:00 in the morning, right in the middle of the parking lot and there was our drum. We all had a good laugh.

He and I were close, called each other bother. We were good friends. He was older than me but we used to chase around together and get in trouble together. We had a lot of fun.

When I worked at the Bear Paw battle field, I'd contact Mike and he'd bring his drum over. They always supported me. Mike would always stick around and would say, “I know you want to come home with us but you are taking care of our ancestors. You have an important job.” He was always telling me that.

1991 we had a special drummer that sang with us, Hank Williams Jr. He drummed with us, and that was cool. We all sat there and passed around kous kous, everyone took a bite out of it. It got to Hank and he threw the whole darn thing in his mouth! He sat there making all kinds of faces, but he didn't know what to do. Mike was there and we all just kept looking at him sideways to see what he was gonna do. Later on you saw him reach up and slowly taking it out of his mouth.

I live down in New Mexico now. He came down and visited me one time. He rode his Harley Davidson, all the way down here, he and Dee. We had a lot of fun.

Manny Villalobos, he was a combat veteran and belonged to the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Club. They used to have a gathering every year, and one year they asked Mike to come and sing an honor song. So Mike and Dee drove over on their Harley to go sing an honor song for the combat vets.

Those are just a few of our stories. I will miss him, I will miss my brother a lot. He was a good man.”

-- Otis Halfmoon



“First and foremost, I would like to thank Mr. Penney for his dedication and the work he completed during his time with the Tribe. The people appreciate his work to strengthen the tribal foundations that were already in place when he began his work. The people are also grateful for the new foundations he built for the Tribe. The intent and goals behind those actions have been realized and are used within our tribal government today.

I would like to thank Mr. Penney for the traditional torch he carried daily to help continue a way of life invaluable to the Nimiipuu. It was always comforting and powerful to see him and the rest of the drum group at powwows and ceremonies. Their spirit and goodwill were shared with many people across Indian Country. The people will miss his voice at the drum along with the humor and laughter that came with it.

Finally, Mr. Penney’s kindhearted and charitable nature was always something that the people could count on. He was extremely generous when it came to helping causes and events around Indian Country.

The people will be forever grateful Michael J. Penney for the guidance, leadership, wisdom and kindness you showed throughout your life.”

-- Shannon F. Wheeler

