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 **Capitol View
Commentary by J.L. Schmidt**

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**We’re All Going to Miss Frank LaMere**

You probably didn’t know Frank LaMere, the 69-year-old Native American activist who was a member of the Winnebago Tribe of Northeast Nebraska. He died recently of cancer.

You may have seen his picture in the newspaper or on TV. Maybe you heard his name on the radio or in casual conversation. Even if you didn’t, trust me, he’s the kind of guy we’re all going to miss.

LaMere has been around a long time. He’s been a vocal opponent of: Keystone XL Pipeline; beer sales at Whiteclay; the in-custody death of a Native American man in Omaha. He’s been an advocate for: reform of the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs; federal loans for the Santee and Winnebago Tribes to buy back reservation land; keeping Native American children with their families and out of the foster care system.

He’s long been a Democrat, reelected last year as the first associate chair of the Nebraska Democratic Party. He served seven consecutive times as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention from 1988 to 2012

"Dr. Frank LaMere would often tell me, ‘We do our best for the most people’ and would immediately follow up with ideas for actions in the streets and in the halls of government," said Nebraska Democratic Party Chair Jane Kleeb. She called him the heart of the party and many grassroots fights across the country.

I like to think it was behind the headlines where Frank LaMere really shined. Former Nebraska Governor and U.S. Senator Ben Nelson told the Omaha World-Herald that LaMere was a "tireless" worker who was able to make a difference, not only for his fellow Native Americans but people from all

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walks of life. LaMere used friendship to build a following and find common ground.

"When he brought an issue to you as an advocate, it wasn’t an ‘Either (do this) or else,’ it was a ‘Can we work together on this?’" Nelson said. "Even when we couldn’t agree on something, he was always aware there was another day, another time and another issue."

But the relationship between the two was even deeper and more personal. LaMere had four children, including daughter Lexie Wakan, who died in 2014. Nelson said LaMere counseled Nelson when he lost his own daughter. "He was an exceptional person," Nelson said.

That was Frank LaMere. Not your typical headline-seeking activist. He was a civil rights leader who worked to “give a voice to the voiceless,” said John Maisch, who created the documentary "Sober Indian Dangerous Indian" featuring LaMere.

"His work to elevate the discussion on issues such as Whiteclay, Native child welfare and the environment will carry on through all of us," Maisch told the Omaha newspaper.

When a 20-year-battle to close the beer stores in Whiteclay finally happened in 2017, LaMere said “it will take a generation for us to truly understand the deep wounds that we have inflicted upon the Lakota people at Whiteclay. It will take a lifetime to heal them.”

Millions of cans of beer and malt liquor were sold each year in the tiny, unincorporated village in northwest Nebraska, home to about eight permanent residents. Much of that beer ended up on the nearby South Dakota Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, where alcohol is banned. In April 2017 the Nebraska Liquor Control Commission denied renewal of the four beer stores' licenses.

Most recently, LaMere voiced concerns about the interaction between Omaha police officers and a mentally ill Native American man from Oklahoma in June 2017. Zachary BearHeels died after police allegedly punched and

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repeatedly shocked him with a Taser. A coroner determined that the 29-year-old died of “sudden death associated with excited delirium, physical struggle, physical restraint and use of a (Taser).”

After one Omaha police officer was found not guilty of assault by a jury and the Douglas County Attorney's Office dropped charges against another, LaMere called on the U.S. Justice Department to investigate BearHeels' death.

“If there was injustice anywhere in Indian Country, Frank LaMere likely had a voice in demanding better treatment and justice,” said Winnebago Tribe chairman Frank White in a statement. “The Winnebago Tribe of Nebraska as well as Indian Country in general has lost one of their staunchest advocates with his passing.” ​

Guys like Frank LaMere don’t come along very often. Let’s remember him for the way he often asked, can we work together on this? We could use a lot more of that.

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