



### **Richard M. Swarner: Shaping the Future Leadership Grant**

Richard “Dick” Swarner was a founding member of ALASBO and served as President in 1979. Dick was a lifelong Alaskan, born and raised in Fairbanks. He graduated from Lathrop High School in 1960 and the University of Alaska in 1965. In 1968 after working as a carpenter, an accountant for the Fairbanks School District, and credit manager for Nerland’s Home Furnishings, Dick and his wife Judy moved to the Kenai Peninsula with their two oldest children.

Dick retired in 1997, after 29 years with the district, as Executive Director of Business Management for the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District. Dick continued to actively support ALASBO until his death July 22, 2007 that resulted from smoking cigarettes (Dick insisted that this fact be made known). Dick was the past president of ALASBO, Alaska Municipal Finance Officers Association (now AGFOA), and Soldotna Rotary. He was a Boy Scout leader, a member of the Fairbanks Carpenters Union, Jaycees, Kiwanis, Igloo No. 4 Pioneers of Alaska, and the Soldotna Elks Lodge. Dick was an avid youth hockey supporter and was instrumental in getting the Soldotna Sports Center built, where he announced Kenai Peninsula hockey games for over 20 years.

He was a consummate storyteller and was tender hearted, no matter how hard he tried to portray otherwise with his big voice and bigger laugh. When he got on a roll with his stories, all one could do was just sit back and enjoy; he should have written a book! The stories of hunting with his dad and things that happened at work or with family and colleagues were priceless and rivaled Patrick McManus’ and Tom Bodet’s story telling. While Dick was the business manager at the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District, he handled life insurance claims for employees and their families. His compassion and thoughtful caring manner toward the bereaved was exceptionally comforting and touching to witness.

Dick loved the shock value of practical jokes. A group of ALASBO members were getting ready to go out one evening during an Association of School Business Officials conference held in Nashville, Tennessee when Dick had a chance to let loose. Those of you who have had the opportunity to visit the Opryland Hotel know how big and upscale that hotel lobby is. A colleague, Tammy White, worked at the Pribilof Island School District at the time; needed to replace her nylon knee-high stockings before we headed out. Everyone was in a hurry so Dick convinced Tammy to just sit down and put on her stockings in the lobby – only an Alaskan would do something like that! While she was trying to make the change discretely, Dick in the loud voice known to many said, “Blank, blank, blank, we can’t take you anywhere - get you off that rock and this is what you do.” Every head in that lobby whipped around to see what was happening. He laughed for the longest time over that one.

Dick's philosophy of dealing with people was exceptionally straightforward; he called a spade a spade. He was interested in everyone who crossed his path and treated everyone with respect and courtesy, until he got to know them!

Sometimes his outspoken manner caused him (and those close to him) a little heartburn. During a budget meeting in the mid 1980s, Dick announced to the assembled group that he had good news and bad news. In those days, Dick and the superintendent didn't always see eye-to-eye. Dick delivered the bad news first, the salaries for one of the schools had been omitted from the preliminary budget document. He never got a chance to deliver the good news. This tactic resulted in the superintendent immediately terminating the meeting. In time, however, mutual respect developed between those two. A cardinal rule we all learned is 'don't surprise the boss!'

In a situation like the budget problem, Dick believed what had happened was ultimately his responsibility. Once he had the information about how it happened and who was involved, all he wanted to know was how it would be corrected and how a similar problem could be avoided in the future. He never mentioned the situation again in a manner to make anyone feel bad.

Dick's negotiation philosophy was one of fairness; he often negotiated for the other side when they couldn't see the long-term ramification of what they were asking. That is an art; trying to seem like you are opposing what is being asked, while guiding the discussion to a different outcome that is ultimately better for the employees. He was masterful at it. Dick had the reputation of hiding money and some faulted him for it; he just did his job well!

Dick not only served the students of Kenai for 29 years, he worked on behalf of all the students in Alaska. He understood the need for a sound education system for the State because of its importance to our economy and way of life. He understood why it is important to educate students in rural Alaska who live very differently than we do in our more urban setting. Dick was not afraid to go toe-to-toe when necessary, even with legislators, to prove his point.

Dick helped write various manuals and then traveled throughout the State assisting school districts in implementing the changes. He was instrumental in developing and implementing a standard statewide Chart of Accounts to address the concern of school districts generating 'bad' data.

Dick was a phenomenal businessman, economist, financial strategist, and politician. He became one of Alaska's foremost experts on education funding by working in the 'back room' through many funding formula development processes. Dick continued to follow education funding after he retired from the Kenai Peninsula Borough School District by testifying, as appropriate from his perspective, before the legislature.

Dick's legacy is clearly one of shaping the future. All of us in Alaska, especially school children, are better off today because of his commitment to education. The foundation he helped build is one that today's business managers continue to use in taking education forward in Alaska. Dick's family has chosen to support education and ALASBO with a donation in his name to provide the opportunity for committee members to participate in their first ALASBO Summer Leadership Conferences in 2009-2011.