

# ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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## **SPONSOR STATEMENT HB 217**

HB 217 will designate November 14<sup>th</sup> as “Dr. Walter Soboleff Day,” recognizing Dr. Soboleff as a respected Tlingit elder, scholar, statesman, storyteller, and business man who affected the lives of many Alaskans throughout his dignified career.

A member of the Yéil (Raven) moiety, L’eneidí (Dog Salmon) clan, Dr. Soboleff was a translator and scholar of Tlingit language and storytelling, and was the first Native Alaskan to be ordained as a Presbyterian minister, and travelled on Shipboard Mission work throughout Southeast Alaska from 1940-1962. As a scholar, the University of Alaska Fairbanks honored his contributions to the University of Alaska system with an Honorary Doctorate in Humanities in 1968. Dr. Soboleff then started the Alaska Native Studies undergraduate degree program at UAF in 1970, providing opportunities to this day for young Alaska Native students at UAF to learn more about their cultures and histories. The University of Alaska Southeast named a campus building after him in 1976. Dr. Soboleff also was a trustee of the Sealaska Heritage Institute starting in 1985, and served as its chair from 1988 until May of 2011, when he “walked into the woods” at the age of 102. Dr. Soboleff also served as President of Kootznoowoo, Inc., a director of Sealaska Corporation, and Grand Camp President of the Alaska Native Brotherhood. He was the first Alaska Native to serve on the State Board of Education, for which he served as chairman.

The Sealaska Heritage Institute broke ground on the Walter Soboleff Center in August 2013. The center, located in downtown Juneau, will be devoted to the study of Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures. The building will also house the Sealaska Heritage Institute, where Dr. Soboleff devoted so much of his life’s work. It is due to be completed by the end of 2014.

Dr. Soboleff’s contributions to the state of Alaska are on par with Elizabeth Peratrovich of civil rights fame. Elizabeth Peratrovich, a Tlingit woman from Petersburg, Alaska, has been honored with a day of recognition on February 14<sup>th</sup>, the day the Alaska Territorial Legislature passed the Anti-Discrimination Act making discrimination against Alaska Natives illegal throughout the territory.

I urge your support for this legislation on recognizing the important contributions to the State of Alaska the late Dr. Walter Soboleff has made, to be held annually on his birthday November 14<sup>th</sup>.