



Indian Country lost a longtime proponent for Native American rights and programs Aug. 25, as former U.S. Senator and Presidential nominee John McCain died at 81.

The Navy veteran served Arizona in Congress since 1982, serving his first two terms as a Representative and the later terms as a Senator. Throughout his time, he created a reputation for charismatically defending various issues, including those related to Native American tribes. McCain worked to improve federal-tribal relations up until a few months prior to his death by serving on the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. Such actions included creating a bill to expand Amber Alert systems on Native American reservations, honoring the Navajo code talkers, sponsoring bills to protect cultural sites and artifacts and fighting for tribal education rights and initiatives.

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Navajo flutist Jonah Littlesunday. (Courtesy photo)

This tireless relationship he developed with the Native American community was honored at his Arizona memorial service on Aug. 30 at the North Phoenix Baptist Church. Navajo flutist Jonah Littlesunday, who has competed on "America's Got Talent" and has won several Native American Music Awards, performed a hymn as tribute to the Arizona senator. Cindy McCain, the Senator's wife, and Meghan McCain, his daughter, asked Littlesunday to perform after meeting him at an event April 4 that honored Sen. McCain and the late Rep. Morris Udall for their work helping the Grand Canyon.

Littlesunday said on his Facebook page that "funerals are heartbreaking" and that being asked to play at Sen. McCain's memorial "made his heart drop."

"It means the world to me. Especially when they are friends. Cindy and Meghan McCain treated my wife Pauline & I so very well in the past, that they won our hearts over. We call them friends and will stand by them," he wrote Aug. 28. "... It is such a heartbreak for this family to lose a father & husband, but I will help heal their loss in any way I can for this beautiful family."

This was not Littlesunday's first memorial service. He has performed dozens of times for fellow Navajo members and others, a task that is accompanied with significant preparation. Before any service he performs at, he goes through a traditional process of protection, which entails Littlesunday praying for protection and cleansing for himself and his family. Even though it takes a lot of time on his part, he said that performing at a funeral is a "high honor."

"I saw this as any other Navajo family in mourning and I would do anything in my power and my heart to help heal and comfort them," he said. "The family is a good family; we've seen that firsthand. So to help honor John McCain and to comfort the family, that's kind of where I was focused on."

Littlesunday started to play the song "An Expression of Love" at the service alongside fellow Navajo Nation member and drummer Aaron White, but as they played on stage, Littlesunday later said that much of the performance was improvised because he and White became caught up in "the power of prayer."

"Growing up in Navajo culture, prayer is embedded in everything we do," he said. "I pray while I play, so I can identify the power in the essence of prayer; you can really feel it. In that room it was powerful. People were actually praying and I wasn't just feeling it from inside the room I was feeling it from the outside. ... you could feel the heartache that was in there. It was amazing. I was really astounded by the love that John McCain had. It wasn't just his family, it wasn't just the community and it wasn't just the state; it was the nation that was mourning."

Although Sen. McCain was not always in agreement with tribes - he helped sell Apache cultural site Oak Flat to mining companies in 2014 - Native leaders paid their respects to the politician as well.

Russell Begaye and Jonathan Nez, president and vice president of the Navajo Nation, respectively, also attended the memorial service. Sen. McCain regularly worked with the nation and nationally commended the tribe for their efforts in combatting human trafficking in their area.

Littlesunday explained that part of Navajo culture is not speaking ill of the deceased, especially about politics.

"An enemy or a friend, they all gather together to honor the person. ... We don't hold grudges and those that do, that is on their own, but as a people we always honor and that's just something that's part of our ways," he said.

The Navajo Nation issued a statement Sept. 5 to share a similar sentiment.

“We had our differences and we shared common goals. In all, he was a respectable man willing to sit down with the Navajo Nation to hear our concerns,” the statement read. “He was a man of courage who served the country with valor.”

Sen. McCain was buried Sept. 2 at the U.S. Naval Academy Cemetery in Annapolis, Maryland.

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