

FROM THIS CORNER

BY

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CHIEF NELIS CAPTAIN

I am not my father. I am not my father. It was a phrase Nelis Captain often repeated. And he was not nor should he have been expected to be. The eighth Chief to serve the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma following its reorganization as a modern tribe in 1939, Nelis Captain (Second Chief) became Chief on May 18, 1996 when his father George J. (Buck) Captain resigned in a special General Council meeting. Buck died one year and one day later, May 19, 1997.

Nelis, more commonly referred to as Neil, and his father Buck would be a study of contrasts. Neil worked at a fast pace. He could whip out a grant seemingly effortlessly. Ask for a letter, and you didn't leave to come back later because his response was "I'll have it for you within five minutes." And he did. He wrote fast, worked fast, made decisions fast. Buck, on the other hand, was methodical, pondered over the words he chose, labored over his decisions, mulled over his thoughts. They demonstrated these traits in the minutest of tasks. Take for instance mowing the yard. Buck would take all afternoon to mow a lawn; placing the gear in slow mode, he would take his time to mow it to perfection. Neil, however, would get on that mower, put it in high gear, and he was off.

Neil was high energy. It was as if he had unlimited tasks to accomplish, but limited time to complete them. Born July 5, 1948 in Roswell, N. M. to George (Buck) and Betty (Cole) Captain, he was the second of two sons. His father was career military and Nelis Sandy Captain became an Army brat. Later he joined the U.S. Army himself during the Vietnam War and built a distinguished record. During his service Neil received a National Defense Service Medal; Vietnam Campaign Medal with 60 device; Vietnam Service Medal with one bronze service star; Combat Infantryman's Badge; Bronze Star Medal; Army Commendation Medal with first oak leaf cluster with V device; and a Purple Heart.

After leaving the military, Neil settled in Colorado. There he married Lillian "Lee" Carlson on April 26, 1974 who survived him. He was employed as a firefighter and fire inspector for the Aurora, Colorado Fire Department and was a member of the American Legion in Denver.

In 1987 Neil and Lee chose to relocate to Miami, OK to be near his parents and his son Scott from a previous marriage. Buck had retired from military and he and Betty returned to Ottawa County, the area where both of them grew up, both had parents living, and both of them called home. Prior to serving as Chief of the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma, Neil was first employed at the Miami Nation as Director of the Title VI program (equivalent to our AOA Nutrition Program) and then as grant writer. Later he became a full time employee as grant writer for the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma.

Ron Kaiser, Wyandotte Planning Director and longtime best friend of Nelis Captain, indicates, "I met Nelis in 1987 when I wrote a successful Housing Rehab Grant for the Eastern Shawnee Tribe. At that time I worked at the Intertribal Council. Nelis asked me what the secret was for getting grants, I answered, 'Just follow directions and listen to what the federal line staff has to say.' I was being smart but Nelis thought it was funny. That conversation began our friendship.

Nelis was the kind of person that could solve problems and would help anyone. Early one Saturday morning when a renovation project went so wrong at my house it was Nelis who came to the rescue. Over the years that followed, my wife Mary and I became part of Nelis and Lee's family spending Holidays and meeting a broad range of local characters."

Elected Second Chief when the tribe adopted its new constitution in 1994, Neil served as day-to-day tribal administrator as his father Buck chose not to make the Chief's position full-time. Buck enjoyed his retirement as well as his travels and did not want to work full time. Thus when Neil became Chief, he was the first Chief of the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma to serve in a full time paid position. It was one of many firsts for Neil. His first day as Chief, he made changes in the staff, a practice that is often times unpopular but also not that uncommon with the changing of the guard. It just hadn't been done before at the Eastern Shawnee Tribe. Being Chief was a learning process for Neil as he and the Business Committee struggled with the balance of power between the executive branch and the legislative branch as outlined in the new constitution. He was the first Chief to sue the Business Committee. It was a complicated and trying time for everyone but particularly the Captain family. Having a Captain as the Chief (Neil) and two Captain family members (Sandy and Danny) on the Business Committee made it even more difficult on them and the extended family as well.

Although Neil Captain was Chief for only 17 months, he used his high energy to achieve two extremely important milestones that affect every Eastern Shawnee tribal citizen today: designation as a Self-Governance Tribe which continues to enable the tribe to select more program options at a time early enough to make a meaningful long term financial impact; and secondly a joint venture in Bearskin Clinic, co-owned by the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma and the Wyandotte Nation. An additional contribution is that it was Neil Captain who was responsible for naming the Administration Building the BlueJacket Center and it was Neil who did the landscaping for this building

Nelis resigned in October 1997, the first Chief in modern times to do so. Sadly, just as his tenure as Chief was brief, so was his life. Nelis Sandy Captain died Tuesday, April 18, 2000 at the age of 51. Chief Nelis Sandy Captain (1948-2000) was the son of Chief George F. (Buck) Captain (1922-1997) who was the son of Chief Thomas A. Captain (1884-1990) who was the son of Chief Tom Captain (Nan-na-ha-ya-be-nuck 1853-1920), who was the son of Chief Captain (Wau-a-ha-gu-ma or Nan-ho-gom-we), dates unknown. What a lineage! What a history! The Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma would not be the tribe it is today without each of these Chiefs.