Mark Awakuni-Swetland dedicated much of his life and almost all of his career to preserving a language and a culture not his by birth. By most accounts, he did so with humility and grace, always asking for permission from the people he worked to help before taking any significant action on behalf of the Omaha Tribe. So it came as no surprise that his family spent nearly all of a three-hour memorial service Thursday thanking the people that Awakuni-Swetland served rather than lauding his accomplishments. The 58-year-old University of Nebraska-Lincoln associate professor of anthropology and ethnic studies died Monday after a nearly 15-year fight with leukemia.

“This is what my nephew wanted,” his adopted uncle Malcolm Tyndall said during a prayer ceremony shortly before a meal at the Lincoln Indian Center. “He wanted to eat with all of you.”

Awakuni-Swetland’s accomplishments were many and likely will have longstanding impact on the Omaha Tribe.

He was hired by UNL in 2000 after earning bachelor’s and master’s degrees in anthropology, history and Great Plains Studies from UNL and a doctorate in anthropology from the University of Oklahoma.

At UNL, he created a Native language program and assembled a team to design instructional materials for the Omaha language. He partnered with Omaha tribal leaders and researchers at Wayne State College and UNL to develop an Omaha-Ponca digital dictionary and other reference materials for the Omaha language.

At the time of his death, he and his team were completing an Omaha language textbook to be published by the University of Nebraska Press.

“It’ll be done soon,” his wife, Donna, promised those gathered Thursday. “Something that was dear to his heart was the Omaha language.”

Awakuni-Swetland wasn’t born Omaha but came to know an Omaha couple, Charles and Elizabeth Stabler, who adopted him as their grandson.

Not all Omaha tribal members supported his efforts, however.

In June 2010, two Omaha tribal members urged the University of Nebraska Board of Regents to fire Awakuni-Swetland for claiming to be an Omaha tribal member in order to gain employment.
at UNL and win lucrative federal grants.

Three other Omaha tribal members told regents at the same meeting that Awakuni-Swetland had never claimed membership in the tribe but had served a vital role in preserving the Omaha language.

Barbara Salvatore was among those who benefited from Awakuni-Swetland's instruction.

In 2011, she packed her bags and flew 1,100 miles from her New York home to Lincoln after being urged by Awakuni-Swetland to come learn the Omaha and Ponca languages from him.

Salvatore now works as a Ponca language educator for the Ponca Tribe. Recently, she wrote a poem about her former professor:

“\[And I hope the words / the seeds / that went with his soul / come back to us / come through us / to the children / words remembered / forward for generations / to come.\]

In addition to his wife, Awakuni-Swetland is survived by sons Micah and Keali‘i Swetland, and six brothers and sisters.