

Schaeffer: Making a difference

by **Holly F. Reimer**

Tundra Times writer

Mary J. Schaeffer, 47, born in Kotzebue, has served on many different boards statewide and has helped make a difference in rural education and cultural activities.

She has accomplished many goals

that she's worked hard to achieve.

Schaeffer served on the regional school board for the Northwest Arctic School District for 11 years, and she has been a member of the State Board of Education for the last five years.

She worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs for 11 years, the Legislative

Affairs office in Kotzebue for three years and the Indian Health Service for two years.

She was also a member of the Kikiktagruk Inupiat Corp. for three years, and she volunteered for the selective service board when they were recruiting for the Vietnam War.

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• Schaeffer serves on board

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In 1982, she was appointed to the State Board of Education, shortly after former Gov. Bill Sheffield was elected. He asked her to sit on the board to represent rural villages, and she was appointed to a two-year term at that time. Schaeffer was elected for another term, and her current term ends in 1989.

Schaeffer has strong feelings about education in rural areas.

"I really like it a lot," she said. "It's a lot of work, and there's a lot of pressure."

With many recent budget cuts, Schaeffer has to take into account the many different areas of education in rural villages.

"It's nice to have programs like a lot of the electives that the kids like, but this is an area that needs to be consolidated," she said. "We have to look at what is more important, and that's the academic programs."

Besides her work with the State Board of Education, Schaeffer worked for Maniilaq, the nonprofit arm of NANA Regional Corp.

She eventually became the vice president of operations and was involved with the development of many social service programs. Today, there are almost 47 social service programs in the NANA region. She led these programs until January.

The wife of Maj. Gen. John Schaeffer, the commissioner of the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, she moved to Anchorage when her husband was appointed to his new position.

Schaeffer said she has been through a difficult time in recent months with family illness.

"We've never had anybody sick in the family, but this year it really hit us," she said.

The Schaeffers' youngest son, Augie F. Viveiros, 20, died of leukemia earlier this year.

She's still active, however, in statewide issues. Besides being on the State Board of Education, Schaeffer recently was appointed to the Native American Science Education Association.

Schaeffer has also been a leader in the development of the NANA Region's Spirit Program. It involves elders teaching youths the Inupiaq values. They include: Knowledge of Language, Sharing, Respect for Others, Cooperation, Respect for Elders, Love for Children, Hard Work, Knowledge of Family Tree, Avoid Conflict, Respect for Nature, Spirituality, Humor, Family Roles, Hunter Success, Domestic Skills, Humility and Responsibility to Tribe.

The elders go to the schools, focusing on one or two of the values to teach to a class. The elders discuss the values with the young people. That discussion is followed by a general assembly: all the youth gather together with the elders and discuss the values they have learned.

The elders speak in Inupiaq, so translators, including Schaeffer, are needed.

"The kids compare with the elders things of the past and things that are present, such as means of transportation," she said. "They even have an Inupiaq 'Trivia' game."

Another program for the students is a mandatory one-year Inupiaq

language course.

The Spirit Program also has a special "adoption" program, stressing unity between elders and youths.

"Kids go to the Kotzebue Senior Citizen Cultural Center and adopt grandparents. This involves pre-school and high school students, alike," Schaeffer said. "The NANA Region has unity. It's how we utilize our elders. They tell stories, and the kids ask questions."

Most recently, Schaeffer has begun to involve herself in support activities for the Alaska National Guard. The Air National Guard has a program called the "Family Support System." It helps wives of guardsmen who have relocated or those who have just joined.

She plans to help re-start it, with the help of other wives of the battalion commanders.

"The wives of the commanders are like information bases. They help get information out to each other, so they don't feel left out or alone," she said.

For example, if a wife lives close to another wife they can help each other by taking children to the doctor, paying regular bills and other family support activities.

Besides being involved with her own interests, Schaeffer also accompanies her husband to many different Guard activities.

And she's learned how to entertain on a moment's notice.

"John would call me up and say that he's bringing 10 guys home for dinner. I had to learn how to make quick meals," she said. "I work it out in my own timeframe. What I can make — fish and steak is quick," Schaeffer said.