

Native alcoholism commission honors Nicolai for many years of work

By BILL HESS

Tundra Times Staff

Patience, understanding, a knowledge of tradition therapy and the ability to work under criticism were a few of the qualities attributed to Stewart Nicolai of Glennallen during a luncheon held last week in his honor.

Nicolai, an Athabaskan, was honored by the Alaska Native Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse for over nine years of service on the commission's board.

"This is the first time our organization has ever recognized a board member for performance and excellent representation of Native people," explained Daisy Mae Lamont, President of ANCADA.

"Stewart has represented the Copper River Native Association for all these years," Lamont boasted, "driving all the way to Anchorage, more than 240 miles one way, and not even being late!"

Nicolai received praise for more than punctuality. Lamont recalled how she had first met him 10 years earlier. "I was young and I was just starting out in leadership. I said to myself, 'I want

to be like Stewart. He is a young person.' " Lamont said she has watched Nicolai closely for the past ten years, and has learned much about Native leadership and humanity.

Lamont presented Nicolai with a traditional necklace made by Maggie Isaac of Dot Lake.

Peg Engwall, of Ruralcap, who found herself working as Nicolai's "boss" as he worked as a counselor, noted that it took her a while to realize that Nicolai was an expert in the traditional counseling of alcohol and drug abusers, and that the best thing she could do was to give him physical support and let him go to work.

George Irwin, another former boss of Nicolai's, echoed her statements. "It took me about six months to figure out that there was nothing I could teach Stewart," Irwin noted.

"He knew more about what he was doing than anyone else I have ever met. The best thing I could do was to provide help, salary, and travel, then leave him alone. He was doing

personal counseling with natives and non-natives in a traditional manner which was very effective."

Of his past experience, Nicolai said nothing stood out in his memory more than the "time when I was a drunk and how I was mistreated when I was drunk," "This is he became a councilor, a member of the ANCADA board, and why he was willing to travel miles and miles for board meetings. "I was just trying to help others to sobriety."

Yet, Nicolai does not believe he can convince anyone to stop drinking. In those cases where people he worked with actually reformed, Nicolai declined the credit. "I don't feel that I did it," he explained. "Someone has to help himself to stop. He has to make up his mind. All I can do is help. I can not stop anyone from drinking, nor can anyone else."

"The way I took to sobriety was from an old Native culture. When I was a kid, they would tell you if you were broke, and you have no money, don't put your hat

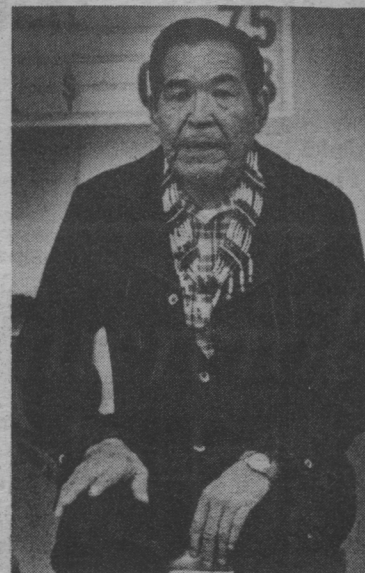
down. Look up. A human being can change.

"They would point to an old dead tree: that dead tree can't never change! It's going to stand there dead until it rots, and falls down! A human can change. That's what got me to sober up." Nicolai said he spent between 30 and 40 years of his life as 'a drunk.' No matter how bleak it looks, he expressed a belief that as long as anyone still lives, there is hope for them.

"They've got to admit they have a problem. "When they're addicted to alcohol, that alcohol gets them 'happy.' Some are ashamed to admit they have a problem."

"Oh, sometimes I get pretty mean and mad," Nicolai explained his own reaction to the criticism, "but I keep my temper. Yes, it hurt. Sometimes it burns you out; it's frustrating. Yes, sometimes I feel like quitting. But I stayed, because I wanted to help someone."

Robert Marshall, President of the Copper River Native



Stewart Nicolai

Association, sent along a letter praising Nicolai.

"A person who can work to help solve problems only to have a client or discontented constituent complain or berate them . . . Your determining to meet and deal with the always difficult and sometimes frustrating issues of Alcoholism in Alaska is for us inspirational . . . Thank you for your dedication."