

# Early life included tents, dogs and trees

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KOTZEBUE — In the month of May when the ice was breaking up, I came into this world and was named after a man called *Paniyavluk* but never was told why.

## OPINION

### Inupiat Paltot People's Heritage

I grew up in a reindeer camp called *Napuaqtulik*, a little ravine northeast of Selawik Lake. In the camp, there was a house I recall where *naluagmiutag* or "whiteman's food" was stored. In the woods, there were other tents, dogs and trees, as well as children to play with.

I remember my parents traveling by dog team during the winter, and I have fond memories of my mother at *Napuaqtulik* being a humorous and happy woman while my father relaxed smoking Velveteen tobacco.

My favorite memory was following *Iqulik*, my brother, down to the clear, frozen river to hook for grayling. We lay on our stomachs and looked through the ice to watch the fish swimming.

During our early childhood, we were properly clothed with fur and nurtured by my mother. But later, she was constantly in the hospital. An incurable cancer took her life in early fall of 1958, leaving my father, brother and two sisters.

We moved to Selawik where our formal education began and where our grandmother, *Nayruduk*, took responsibility for our care. Separated from her abusive husband, she lived independently in a little sod house.

I recall a year later in the fall, our father once traveled upriver by *qayuaq*. He then rafted down river with logs and rebuilt our grandmother's sod house.

After ice breakup, my brother and I would always follow our grandmother as she ventured off to camp in a little rowboat. Sometimes we rowed the boat or pulled it along the shore, but my favorite was sailing it on lakes.

As we sailed, I watched my grandmother enjoy a Camel cigarette and smile as she exhaled the smoke. Oftentimes, I would sneak a cigarette, imitating her way of smoking, but the tobacco was very strong.

I enjoyed my years with Grandmother, but in 1962 my brother and I got sent away to boarding school 4,000 miles away! I cried the first several nights away from home in this strange environment — Wrangell Institute in Southeast Alaska. To me, it was a cultural shock.

After that, I went south every fall to attend Mt. Edgecumbe High School and returned home each spring. I got used to traveling back and forth. The

more time I spent away from home, the less I used the Inupiaq language.

Our language was not Inupiaq, but "cool man" language. Listening and dancing to rock'n'roll music was the "in thing." We dressed in the '60s style, including wearing bobby socks. We raffed and sprayed our hair to hold it in style.

We looked forward to going home each spring when school let out in May. As we saw our home village from the plane, some of us got emotional and some got excited. When the villagers at home heard of our arrival, the whole village would rush to the airport to greet us.

My grandmother would wait at home. I'd cry when we were reunited because I missed her.

I completed high school in 1969. A man in Selawik asked for my hand in marriage through a letter seeking my father's permission. Luckily, I decided to go to Alaska Methodist University in Anchorage. My father respected my desire.

During my first years of college, I experienced difficulties living an independent life. But I enjoyed cross-country skiing and tumbling, and I met foreign students from Nairobi, Samoa and Japan as well as others from Alaska.

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There was a pitch black male student from Nairobi who asked me, "If you had to choose between a black man and a white man, which would you marry?"

I responded, "Perhaps an Inupiaq (Eskimo) man." His eyes and teeth gleamed as he laughed at my utterance. Today, I still wonder exactly what he meant.



Hannah Paniyavluk Loon grew up in a reindeer camp in Northwest Alaska.

Much to my surprise, I met a man who came from New Hampshire but whose parents taught in our region of Alaska for many years. We were in the same class: Human Behavioral Sciences.

We got married, but he lived in New Hampshire, and I lived in Selawik. We could not live together in either world. For a short period, though, we ventured far and wide in Alaska and on the East Coast, which was how I learned to drive all kinds of cars. Today, I value his friendship and companionship. We separated nicely. He is now remarried and living happily in California.

Nowadays, I enjoy camping and listening to the birds and loons. I like the smell of trees, Labrador tea and plants budding in early spring. I like to see miniature plants growing on the tundra. Other than listening to and watching nature, there is much work to do at camp such as getting firewood, checking the nets for fish, picking berries

and riding in my cousin's 12-foot river boat with a 15-horsepower Evinrude outboard motor.

When I am not at camp, I am independent just like my grandmother, raising four children. I also spend my time working for the Subsistence Division of the Alaska Department of Fish & Game. But above all, my biggest reward and joy is returning back to the same spot where our grandmother first raised my brother and me.

She is no longer there, but her spirit lives on. And yes, I may light up a cigarette, except now I don't sneak them.

*Hannah Paniyavluk Loon is an Inupiat Eskimo who balances working in Kotzebue and raising a family with subsistence hunting, fishing and gathering. She wrote this piece in a writing class at Chukchi, a branch campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Chukchi News and Information Service is a writing project of Chukchi Campus.*