

We must stop the deaths of our youth

by Margaret (Semaken) Wilson
from the City of Nulato newsletter

This is dedicated to the memory of Julia Stanley who died recently. She was a quiet unassuming young woman who was unknown except by the people of Kaltag and maybe a few in Nulato. She leaves behind a 1-year-old son. This is also dedicated to my cousin Mathew who died in a fire last November, to my cousin Bingo who shot himself — and no one knew for more than 24 hours — and to my brother Kenny who shot himself five years ago.

Den Nena Henash Our Land Speaks **OPINION**

This is not an area of my expertise, but because of events that have occurred over the past year, I feel compelled to address this issue.

I want you to know that I am speaking from my heart, my heart that is deeply touched.

Recently, I did something that may seem very trivial to most of you, but that act has given me so much food for thought, and I have thought about it a lot.

On a recent Saturday, I went to Fred Meyers to buy two hinges and four handles. I was going to track down my cousin Harold, since he would know exactly what was needed, but I was running out of time because these items had to be on the plane to Kaltag by 12:30.

Since I had been with Harold when we had to purchase these very same

items recently, I felt fairly familiar with what to buy and where to buy them.

You're sitting there thinking, "So, what's the big deal? Anyone can purchase them." You're right, but how many of you know which type to get for a home-made coffin?

Yes, a coffin.

I know because I've had to help with purchasing items such as these or for arranging funerals for people whom I have known for the past year.

The majority of the deceased have been younger than me. Yes, most have been deaths relating to alcohol abuse, and quite frankly, I'm sick of arranging funerals for young people.

You, in your hearts, may feel the same way, but are you going to stand by, wringing your hands and shaking your heads? Or are we going to do something about this?

How much longer do we stand around and let this happen? How many of us, when 5 o'clock rolls around don't want to be bothered anymore? How many times when seeing teens drink did we avoid berating them, not letting them know that they are breaking the law?

Yes, it is illegal in this state to drink until a person is 21. How many of us turn the other way when we see a Native person staggering down the street? How many say nothing when others laugh or talk about easy pickings on Two Street?

I am as guilty as anyone who has not done anything or said anything, but I don't want to be a part of that silent majority any longer. I can't afford the stress or despair of burying another young person from Kaltag anymore.

You know, our organizations put

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subsistence and land high on the priority list and, to a certain extent, I will agree with that.

But what are we to do with all this land and with no young men to hunt on the land and no young men to teach their children how to hunt or subsist on that land.

We are killing ourselves without any outside help!

You know, we are called "A People in Peril." People have won awards and made money off our plight.

Anchorage newspapers have won awards for splashing our misfortunes on paper. We are pictured and written about in *National Geographic*.

I am not putting these things down. I'm saying to you that it is time to pull ourselves up by our boot straps and do something about what is happening to our people.

It is not normal to have young people shoot or hang themselves. It is not normal for young people to die from drowning or from being thrown or hit by a fast moving ATV or snow-machine.

By allowing this to happen over and over again, we condone these actions. We are saying it's OK. You know, the first question we ask after hearing

about a death is, "Was he/she drinking?" How normal is that?

You have an opportunity to make a difference because you will be working with young people. A lot of these youngsters need some direction and you already have taken some responsibility by being here.

We have to save our people. We have to teach our young people that what is happening is abnormal. It is not normal to beat up on each other, to drink until your mental ability is gone.

It is undignified to wake up in a bed other than your own; it is undignified to know that your kids didn't eat this morning because you were hung over.

I am not saying abstinence is the only way; enough people are saying that. Alcohol will always be here, and we have to deal with that. Banning alcohol does nothing to change behavior.

We have to start taking control of our lives, stop allowing things to happen to us and take responsibility for ourselves.

This was written by Margaret (Semaken) Wilson for a recent workshop. She works as a health educator for Tanana Chiefs Conference Inc.