

Home contact crucial to college students

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Ted Mala has returned to the Alaska he knew very little of while he was growing up, to "give back" to his Alaska Native people in the hopes of making their lives better.

Dr. Mala, the son of the first Eskimo actor, and the third Alaska Native doctor from Alaska, returned to Alaska recently to "relearn many things in my culture," and to work in public health care in the hopes of bettering the health of all of his people.

Dr. Mala is now an assistant professor at the University of Alaska working for the biology department teaching classes that will lead students to a medical career.

He also is going to be a field co-ordinator for a state-funded study of drug and alcohol abuse throughout the state.

Mala's return may not be called miraculous but was one which might not have been expected.

Mala was orphaned at the age of 7 when his father died

of heart problems. His mother had died one year later. Mala was the son of the Eskimo actor who starred in the first movie produced about the Inupiat.

After his parents died, Mala was sent to boarding schools where he spent most of his life, year in, year out, gaining an education rich in the offerings that lead to a successful career but poor in elements of Mala's cultural past.

During those years, Mala said he read everything he could get his hands on and still enjoys the academic life. His office at UA-Anchorage is in the same building as the Consortium Library and he says he spends much free time browsing through the long shelves of books.

Of particular interest to Mala at the library is the library's Alaska room which has copies of almost everything written about the state.

His early years are remembered as being very lonely for the young transplanted Eskimo. People knew little if anything of Alaska Eskimos and

Mala was brought up more or less in the dominant culture. Now that he is back, he says, "I have lots of things to relearn about my culture."

He is a shareholder of the NANA region.

Mala said he started working in health fields from the bottom up. First working as a hospital orderly, he slowly began improving the job position he held. "There always was some goal that I could never reach. I was an orderly, then an operating room technician, then a physician's assistant. Someone finally said, go for it . . . become a doctor."

Mala was 26 years old when he started his medical school training, far older than most of his fellow students who had been preparing for medical school long before they were out of high school.

He took training at the Alaska Native Medical Center and the Alaska Native Clinic in Fairbanks, and at University of California in Los Angeles.

Mala says that despite his becoming a medical doctor he



Ted Mala

feels he can have more impact on improving conditions for his people if he stays out of a doctor's general practice.

"I believe that if you really are serious about changing the course of health in Alaska, you have to put yourself in a position where you can do the most good. It was satisfying to see 12 to 15 patients per day yet I felt I wasn't doing anything to change the course of health care in the state.

"I felt it would be best to get a degree in public health administration and eventually go into some branch of health administration where decisions are being made to affect a majority of the people."

Mala took his training for the public health administration at Boston University.

He feels that his current job of studying the effects of alcohol and drug use and abuse in the Bush will be one way of helping out his people.

The study which Mala will be field coordinator for is called a baseline study and is the first time that such a program has been conducted in Alaska.

It is an official attempt to find out just how much alcohol and drug use and abuse is going on in the state. No figures have been completed on this matter to date and such figures and statistics are necessary when any programs are started to try

to stop alcohol and drug abuse, said Mala.

Such studies were conducted on various animal populations before oil development at Prudhoe Bay was started. Now, any studies of, for example, the caribou herd, would have a "baseline" figure to compare population numbers to.

The studies will be done in Barrow, Fairbanks, Kotzebue, Bethel, Tok, Anchorage and Juneau.

They will not focus on Native versus non-Native statistics but will study all members of the general population.

The study will include junior high school and high school students and the adult population and will "attempt to get a grip on the severity of the problem. Everyone knows alcohol and drugs are bad but we don't know the depth of the problem," says Mala.

In addition to his love of Alaska and his Native people, Mala said he returned to UAA because he enjoys teaching. The softspoken 35-year-old says that being able to teach in the health and public health fields is a good experience for him.

But as he is enjoying his new form of academic life, he looks to today's students, primarily those from rural Alaska and Alaska Native students, and worries.

One of the most important things about going away from home to go to school, says Mala, is knowing that someone back home cares for you. He says that even though he had a little contact with his family, the feelings of loneliness and aloneness never left and he felt alone in an unfriendly world at an early age.

That aloneness could have led to his never returning to Alaska and his people, says Mala.

"My friends all asked me why I was coming back . . . what's there? I told them 'This is where my family is. There is something here that you don't get anywhere else. It might be a cold, frequently dark place but, as the Irish say 'The blood in the land is

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Students need to know they are wanted, remembered at home

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calling me back.”

But Mala recognizes that he has changed radically and he has words of advice to others who hope to help their student friends and relatives who are students far away at school.

That advice is basically to not forget them and where they are.

Students today must have a home support system and goals to know why they are at school. If not, says Mala, their education will be much harder to obtain because in addition to fighting to learn the subjects and to compete in a world of education, they will be fighting loneliness, fighting to keep their sense of worth, and starting to wonder if they should go back home.

Frequent letters from home, filled with news of whatever is going on at home down to writing about the meal for supper the night before, is the kind of contact that people at school need desperately, he said.

But it doesn't end there, he says. That contact must assure the students that they are wanted at home or there will be a tendency to stay away, he fears.

Those people who do go out for an education — be it at the UA-Fairbanks or a school in the Lower 48, must also be accepted back home. And people must recognize that there will be changes but the basic person won't have changed.

“There is room in our culture for people to choose not to go for education. There has to be a balance in the community for those who seek education and those who seek the

traditional. The value of education and living in the villages is a new occurrence,” he said.

“The importance of the village's support and the support for people who go out for education is crucial because if a graduate feels the support system is there and even if the loneliness is there, they'll come home. But if there is no support system and they feel alone, then what is there to come back home to?”

And he warns that if Native students do not retain that link with home and have to be totally out on their own financially and morally, it will be easier for them not to return home, he said.

He also warns students to not be absorbed into the dominant (white) culture and lose their cultural identity. “Learn all you can about the dominant culture but maintain individuality,” says Mala.

With all these problems — loneliness, alienation, potential loss of identity — Mala still believes fiercely in the importance of education.

Speaking as a man who had to and has to make it in a white-dominated profession, Mala says that education is what is important to Alaska Natives in the villages, in Alaska, and in the world at large.

“In Alaska (Natives) have some uniqueness. But once you get out to the rest of the country you lose that uniqueness. They want to know what you have done, where you went to school.”

“You have to be equal or better than the others otherwise you are looked on as a country bumpkin,” said Mala.

But the benefit of an education to Alaska Native people

is more than just the increased job possibilities for individual members, he says and he makes a point that many people have felt for years — education gives people the power to control their destinies.

“Today the strongest need

and perhaps the greatest danger to society is not the cold and the elements as in the past but it is the people outside who come in and make decisions for the community . . . Unless we represent ourselves and not just lay back and allow the people

to make decisions for us, we will lose control of our destinies.”

Mala said education gives us the ability to choose options, to shape our futures and that is one thing that hasn't been allowed in the recent past.