

Youth Conference: Dynamic, serious

by Jenny Alowa
for the Tundra Times

The seventh Alaska Federation of Natives Youth Conference was the most dynamic and serious conference I have witnessed in five years.

Inupiat Paitot People's Heritage **OPINION**

The 500 high school students from all over Alaska gathered at the Egan Center in Anchorage Oct. 22-24. The conference theme "Alaska Native Youth — Leadership Begins Today," was an appropriate theme as the 13 regional delegates exercised their leadership role for three days.

The youth delegates from rural and urban schools expressed their concerns on subsistence, drug/alcohol problems, teen pregnancy, suicide and others by discussion in small groups.

The 26 resolutions were submitted to the main conference for debate and adoption. As one would sit through their caucus meetings, one would feel the intensity and strength of these delegates.

Many students asked what happens after the resolutions are adopted. Where do they go? Their commitment was to make positive changes. They took their leadership responsibilities and status seriously.

What impressed me most was the spirit of the conference. The students were excited. They were highly verbal, sophisticated, unafraid, bright and able. They were at ease with the affairs of modern urban, non-Native life. Yet, they were very respectful and dedicated to the traditional ways of

Alaska has the second highest rate of teen-age pregnancy. Four regions submitted resolutions on this issue.

Other resolutions were adopted on language and culture, Alaska Native Leadership training, internship programs, child abuse, adequate education for Native students, family violence, funding for higher education and others. The ease with which these students grappled with issues that would have made earlier generations uncomfortable really impressed me.

Several plenary panel sessions were held. The subsistence panelist discussed the importance of subsistence for our Native people. Some of the views expressed were:

•Rachel Craig, Kotzebue — "Subsistence symbolizes sharing in our culture. It is our Native culture. We teach our children to share."

•Walter Soboleff, Tenakee Springs — "Young people are thirsty and hungry for Native values. We as elders must teach them. If we lose the right to subsist, we lose our health. Native food gives us strength."

•Walter Charlie, Interior — "Subsistence is what comes to our table. It is our health and well-being."

The majority of the students are angry about the current subsistence law. Their reaction is that subsistence is their identity, livelihood, cultures; in short, an integral part of Yupik and Inuit world.

The participation of the elders is always a key ingredient of the youth conference. Their smiles, wisdom, warmth and strength bring a positive air to the conference.

Howard Siwooko, an elder from St. Lawrence Island and Unalakleet, spoke to the Bering Strait youth caucus on the ill effects of drugs and alcohol. He said drugs and alcohol rob our Inuit and Yupik spirit. Our people are different when they drink.

District, which received \$1,000 to address the alcohol and drug abuse problem. Their proposal calls for students to develop a television commercial that will be aired on the Rural Alaska Television Network.

Their message to teenagers across the state will be that alcohol and drugs don't answer problems, but rather create and exacerbate them. Several other small schools received grants for problems in their communities.

The seventh AFN Youth Conference provided a stimulating and positive experience for attendees. The 13 regional representatives hosted a

very professionally run conference.

George Irvin, Ralph Eluska and Dolores Padilla deserve tremendous applause for their achievement.

The AFN Youth Conference of 1990 was a great success. The young Native leaders conveyed their concerns openly, honestly and confidently. The only discouraging aspect of the conference was not seeing enough adult attendees, especially our Native leaders. I believe they would have learned from this group.

I left the conference energized, inspired and assured that our leaders of tomorrow are a powerful group. I am smiling.

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The conference was also a learning experience for the students. They learned proper parliamentary procedure from Perry Eaton, president of Community Enterprise Development Corp.

The floor microphones were continuously occupied by delegates. There was energy and excitement as the resolutions were presented. For example, Resolution No. 90-11-Teen-age Pregnancy created a lively debate.

Another elder said that what makes our people strong is the Inuit and Yupik love, which is the essential ingredient to our way of life.

Mini-grant awards were given to the selected school in each of 12 regions by the U.S. Department of the Interior. The criteria for the mini-grants are based on the social needs of each region. Problems such as teen alcohol and drug abuse, teen suicide, teen pregnancy, AIDS, family violence, school dropouts and runaways are addressed by these grants.

One recipient was the Nome School