

School experience led to life's work

By Linda Lord-Jenkins
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Eva Merrifield was a young schoolgirl far from home when the seeds for her future career formed in her mind.

Sent away from her home and family in Unalakleet in the 1940s to Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, the young girl experienced all the fears and uncertainties of growing up far from the loving and supportive hands of family and long-time friends to guide her.

She was lonely and confused in a world much larger than her home but she found her way.

Now, as a counselor for the Cook Inlet Native Association, Merrifield has been working for more than five years to provide some guidance to other young students facing uncertainty in the world presented by Anchorage.

Mrs. Merrifield recently was recognized for her life's work when she was named Social Worker of the Year at the Fifth National Indian Child Conference sponsored by the Save the Children Foundation.

Fellow CINA workers helped Mrs. Merrifield celebrate the honor recently with a surprise party of cake, coffee and roses. She was surprised and deeply touched.

"I am humbled by this," she said with a happy smile. "These folks are really super."

Mrs. Merrifield was the oldest of a large family in Unalakleet and left home for school when there were still babies in the house. Her sister, June Degnan, is executive director of the Unalakleet Native Association and the Degnan family is well-known in the area.

She travelled to Sitka where she attended Jackson High School and Sheldon Jackson College.

Her experiences at those schools "made me committed

to work for students who are away from home," she says.

She started volunteering at schools in Sitka and saw the need of students at Mt. Edgecumbe for loving and guidance help.

She realized the need to look at a youngster as not just a student "but as a total person. If a youngster is to make it in school you can't just work with him. You've got to work with everyone he is involved with."

She left Mount Edgecumbe more than 10 years ago and began working at the Cook Inlet Native Association. Today, she says, she is working with young people who look very familiar. And often they are. They are the sons and daughters of those students she helped at Mt. Edgecumbe.

These youngsters are facing problems much more complex than those faced by their parents, says Merrifield.

From video games to drugs, the distractions of Anchorage all have a great deal to do with confusing the young person of today, says Merrifield, who adds that the frequent lack of extended family also can cause problems for a youngster.

"Youngsters are exposed to so much more now. The problems are horrendous here in town. They get discipline problems. It has a lot to do with cultural disruption, I don't know what else to call it.

"If a young person comes in from a village of 60 to 100 persons, to attend school and then gets thrown into an Anchorage school with a school population of 1,000 he is confused.

"When we work with them and explain the things they will face, they adjust pretty rapidly," says Merrifield.

"There are just too many of the wrong kind of people trying to hit the kids -- pimps,

drug pushers," she says.

The basis for Mrs. Merrifield's work with young people is to get all their adult contacts and youth contacts to act as a support network. That includes teachers, counselors, parents, who care about the youngster.

She says that when traditional family supports such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents are taken from youngsters who move to the big city with their parents, the same problems can occur.

Eva Merrifield, Social Worker of the Year, was honored with a surprise celebration and a dozen roses by her co-workers recently.

PHOTO BY TOM BIRDINGROUND

"Usually when folks come into town they lose that support of families so organizations like CINA step in with different programs. We're not a real good substitute but we do the best we can."

Merrifield says she draws on her own childhood of family support when she talks with young people. "I think about things my grandparents and parents talked to us about, things I learned in school and depend a lot on the spiritual when I talk to the young.

"I tell them to have pride in themselves and their culture. We were just thrust into western culture that has had a thousand years to evolve. We had to live with immediately.

"We tell about the contributions that our people have made. Once they just feel good about themselves their problems are over."

Merrifield has been helping youngsters for years and is the mother of six children and grandmother to eight, most of whom live in Anchorage.

