

# She thought the "I can do it" of life

By Patricia Oakes

*The following was excerpted from a speech given at the dedication of the Merrelene A. Kangas School in Ruby on Nov. 7. Although the speech is intended to apply to one village and to speak of the attributes of one special person, we feel that the message of that speech and the values taught by this woman are messages of importance to people throughout the state.*

As we dedicate this school building to Merrelene A. Kangas' memory, it is appropriate to think a bit about learning and about schools. We sometimes need to remind ourselves that learning is a lifelong process—that the world itself is our learning center. A school building, such as this, plays a small role in the total process as the focus of more formalized learning in a community.

But learning takes place far beyond the walls of the school building — and learning puts us all into both the student and the teacher roles throughout our lives.

Knowledge, like the mighty river, must flow freely. One of the great beauties of the Bush situation is that the older and more experienced so actively lead the younger learners — people's knowledge flows easily, instead of being pigeon-holed or specialized as it tends to become in urban situations. Whether on the riverbank, at the fish camp, in the schoolroom, on the trapline or in the mining cut, the learning process takes place, as a matter of survival and with joy in learning and doing.

The limits of an isolated Bush situation are reached, however, when there are no older, more experienced people with the particular knowledge needed to meet specific challenges of a fast-changing world.

For many of our daily living and survival activities, we

have the experts right here in our community, among us. Yet for other activities, we must bring in the experts — to share their knowledge and experiences with us. Or we must send out our own young people to gain knowledge and experience to bring back to share with us. These young people who venture forth to become the experts, to "bring home the bacon" of knowledge for us, must be capable and confident.

A hungry village would not send forth to bring back a moose a young man who had no knowledge of tracking, of weapons, or of the country. The village would try to select a strong hunter who had been successful in nearby hunts. They would equip him with the best possible weapons and gear, because he would then go forth with the best chance of success — to bring back the meat needed by hungry people.

And so it must be — if young people are to go forth and bring back new skills and ideas, they must be well prepared — must have the best learning experiences the whole community can offer. Learning experiences are not only the responsibility of the school — they are the responsibility of everyone: village elders, parents, older brothers and sisters, friends. For by direct contact, we all teach.

But in a more subtle way, we also teach by example. At times, this is an uncomfortable thought — it reminds us that even when we are not at our best, when our self-control is shaky, some young person may be watching the example we set. Whether the learning that occurs is good or bad depends on what we are doing — and on how that child interprets what we are doing.

Do you remember the

poster that we had in the classroom a few years ago?

GIVE ME A FISH AND  
I'LL EAT FOR A DAY;  
TEACH ME TO FISH AND  
I'LL EAT FOR A LIFETIME.

Teaching a child to get along with people, to be capable in whatever he sets forth to do, to have pride in a job well done, to acquire new skills and to excel in the traditional ones — that is teaching a child to fish. Helping a child develop imagination and curiosity, helping him gain the skills to use his full potential as a human being — that is teaching a child to fish.

In the past three years, Ruby has been numbed and shocked by the tragic deaths of so many fine young people — the do-ers, the leaders, the potential leaders. This has thrust a heart-aching burden of sadness upon us all. We mourn; we grieve, we ask WHY? Yet around us, life goes on, whether we feel like keeping up with it or not. The gaps left behind by these young people seem impossible to fill, at first.

But there is no turning away from the fact that these gaps must be filled — that our young people must be encouraged, must be trained to face the future confidently.

The world is changing frighteningly fast. Parents everywhere share our fears and hopes about the future, worry about such negative influences as drugs and alcohol on young lives. Young people everywhere are concerned about what their future holds.

Throughout our state and nation, thinking people share concern about the loss of individual freedom which can occur when people delegate their responsibilities to various

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# Merrelaine Kangas exemplified teacher, leader, caring human

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government agencies. They are realizing that young people must have the training and knowledge from their homes, schools, and communities to do things for themselves, to accept responsibility, rather than asking government agencies miles away to handle their lives for them.

Today we are gathered to dedicate this school building to the memory of a young woman. Merrelaine exemplified throughout her life tremendous qualities as a teacher, a leader, and as a warm and caring human being. From her home, school, friends, community and the world itself, she learned — she absorbed knowledge as the moss soaks up the melting snow of spring. What she learned, she shared — and she shared, because she cared.

Merrelaine respected the past, enjoyed the present, and was challenged by and prepared for the future. And she did this with enthusiasm, eagerness, enjoyment.

I recall my first encounter with Merrelaine—she waved vigorously from the cut at Long Creek where she was operating the giant. She was not confined by playing a traditional women's role, although she ap-

preciated this role fully. I recall her tackling construction of her own home — her enthusiasm in putting together a spot of her own. I recall her avid curiosity at the use of the abundant educational hardware in her first teaching job — her joy at mastering these tools which could be used to help her students learn.

She had confidence and the willingness to tackle new things, new roles, new places with enthusiasm, imagination, curiosity and tenacity. She had a bubbling zest for life, an abiding faith in people. With these attributes, she broadened her own horizons and expanded her skills — and shared her experiences with others. Thus she was a great person and a fine teacher.

In 1974, Merrelaine was substituting at the Ruby school. She had been working out of Galena for the regional corporation for several years, helping pioneer the organizational work of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, but seemed at an unsettled point in her life. "I think other people need to take over some of the jobs I've been doing," she told me. "More people need to take on these responsibilities to understand what is involved."

We valued her as a substitute teacher, for she communicated well with the town, parents and students. Teaching in one's home town is never easy; yet a hometown person has a special sort of understanding that outsiders seldom acquire.

She worked impressively with the youngsters; she encouraged, she prodded gently — and sometimes, very effectively, she ranted and raved. Often she looked a youngster in the eye and said firmly, "You CAN do it. I know you can." She had confidence in the ability of people and expected them to put out their best efforts.

At this time, she lacked just one math course to complete her teaching credentials — and worried that she'd never make the grade in the course. We discussed this often, for I felt strongly that we needed Merrelaine in our school system as a fully-accredited teacher. One afternoon, as we shared a cup of tea after a hectic day, I encouraged, prodded, ranted and raved — and she resisted. At this point, I flung her words back at her, "You CAN do it; I know you can."

As you know, she completed that math course and became a teacher in the formal sense of the word. Our lives

are all richer because she did. She continued to learn, to share, and to serve her community in many ways.

For some people, life lasts many years; for others, time on this earth is brief. I've asked myself what sort of message my friend Merrelaine would want me to transmit to you. Through the sadness and the warm memories, this thought kept repeating itself:

*Remember me in the warm*

*glow of the sunset, in the pastel shadows of the winter trail.*

*Remember me when you see something I didn't quite have time to finish up — and get the job done.*

*When something comes up that I could have helped with, remember me by getting in there and doing it. The time for grieving and mourning is over. Go forth into your lives, enjoying the best out of each day — and try to make tomorrow even better.*

*"You CAN do it; I know you can."*