

Leaders discuss 'change with cultural integrity'

by Jeff Richardson
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JUNEAU, AK—Scores of village leaders poured into the state capitol during the last week of March to buttonhole lawmakers and celebrate the 30th birthday of the Rural Alaska Community Action Program. The gathering enacted a pile of strongly-worded resolutions on rural issues and heard speeches from a host of state officials and Native leaders.

Speaking to the theme of the conference, speakers said it was not only imperative but possible to maneuver through the hardship of social change without sacrificing cultural integrity. In fact, many invoked rigorous, time-tested traditional values as the foundation of successful change.

Mary Beth Solomon, a village corporation and tribal leader from Fort Yukon, said sacrifice is part of meeting modern challenges, especially in areas like child-rearing.

"As parents, we must enjoy our children as they grow up," she said. "We must spend time with them. It's important."

She suggested that even traditional social taboos, such as those surrounding subsistence hunting and fishing practices, have modern application because they typically are based on concepts of extending respect to community members and the land.

"All people have to be respected and treated fairly. If you want to be respected, you have to respect others," said Solomon.

According to Solomon, it's important to learn new skills to cope with change. She cited the benefits in her own life of advocacy of taking classes in English, grantwriting,

note-taking, how to improve study habits and build reading skills. While new experiences sometimes lead to unhealthy temptations, a commitment to traditional values allows a person to manage change, rather than being overwhelmed by it.

"We need to learn from each other, that's the way we taught. We have to take care of ourselves if we're going to take care of others. We do things together. That's our life," said Solomon. "I remain faithful to my culture and my values. I made a commitment to my people and I stood by that commitment."

In a powerful presentation, George Ahmaogak, mayor of the North Slope Borough acknowledged that change is often frightening and unsettling, but there is no excuse for failure in the Alaska Native community.

"I think we have to stop apologizing for our culture. I didn't stop being Inupiat when I started driving a snowmachine," said Ahmaogak. "Our cultures are under daily siege from the outside influences of TVs, movies, radios and newspapers. Our children are growing up in a world we never knew. They are flooded with information from a western culture that has little relevance to the daily life of their indigenous culture. If we are to have any hope of keeping our cultures alive and healthy into the new century, then we must find a way to reach these children and create in them a strong, positive image of the Alaska Native in the modern world."

Noting that elders have fought valiantly, and often successfully, to preserve cultural values against steady attacks by missionaries, government functionaries, economic changes and other genocidal forces, Ahmaogak issued a challenge to the audience:

"If they could do that with little

help or support, surely we can do not less. We have more money than they had, we have political power, we have corporations and governments that will support our efforts. We have no excuse to fail. Every problem we face today, from drug and alcohol abuse to domestic violence and family disintegration, can best be resolved by going back to our cultural roots and making those roots the base for our future," he said.

"If we fail, we lose our culture. It is up to us to carry out the task of translating our culture to the modern world. It is a task we can do. But we must start now and we must involve our youth. We must make sure that each and every one of us makes the commitment to passing these values on to our children in our home. We must speak to them in our language. We must help them see how they can use our traditional values to resolve modern problems. We cannot depend on schools to do this for us. This must come from our hearts. Our children are the future and they must embrace our values and traditions if those traditions are to survive into that future."

Tlingit teacher Sheila Blankenship echoed a similar theme.

"As an educator, I have had the opportunity to work with our youth. Whenever possible, I relate classroom material to our Native culture. It is my goal to inspire and encourage them to take pride in their culture, to believe in themselves and to further their education," Blankenship said.

She added that healthy, cohesive Native families are the best defense against cultural erosion, especially with the help of elders.

"I see too many friends and relatives

allowing their traditions to die as they confront numerous obstacles. We must realize these obstacles are not impossible to conquer," said Blankenship. The elders are rich with knowledge which we should learn from. We need to practice the traditional ways of storytelling, as they did, to teach respect in all aspects of life. Although we boast of our Native lands, our behavior contradicts our words. For example, we clear cut majestic mountains and dispose of trash along the road.

"The building we are gathered in is built upon Mother Earth. As you look around, she is everywhere. She is the paper we write on, the fresh water we drink, and the animals we hunt. One day we will be placed back into her arms. We must re-learn how to respect our land or face the outcome of our disrespectful behavior."

Col. Glenn Godfrey, director of the Alaska State Troopers and an Alaska Native from Kodiak Island, described several public safety programs that offer successful models for meeting modern needs in ways that support local cultural values. One of the

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best known is the Village Public Safety Officer (VPSO) Program, designed to train and employ individuals in the village to

provide initial response to public safety emergencies in law enforcement, search and rescue,

medical treatment and evacuation, fire protection and boating safety.

"There has been an average of 94 officers who have handled nearly 10,000 calls for service each year," said Godfrey. "The presence of these officers has had a significant impact on improving the quality of life in the participating villages."

He also described the formation and success of the Community Problem Solving program, directed at reducing alcohol and drug abuse and the resulting loss of life and criminal activity in some villages. Founded in 1993, this cooperative effort between State Troopers and VPSOs, has already had positive impacts.

"There has been a measurable reduction in alcohol and drug-related problems in the test villages where the program has been introduced," said Godfrey. "Participating villages, which once resented Trooper presence, have resolved their conflicts, and are now working with Troopers to address local issues involving public safety. There has been an increase in the interaction between leadership groups, youth and elders, public service providers, and school and church groups. Apathy has been replaced by community action and volunteering."

In a statement that summed up much of the sentiment expressed at the Village Participation Conference, Godfrey noted:

"The ability of these villages to take self-initiated action at determining the well-being of their community based on cultural beliefs and tradition, has been infectious in the region and has confirmed that village residents can take responsibility for establishing accepted behavior in the spirit of self-determination," he said.