

# Discrimination battle remembered at graduation

by George Owletuck

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Distinguished guests, fellow graduates, families and friends, welcome! It is an honor to join you today in this celebration of the largest Native graduating class at the University of Alaska-Anchorage. We are also celebrating our culture, our families and our friends. We have come a long way since the civil rights challenges faced by the Alaska Natives in the 1940s.

In December 1941, the Alaska

Native Brotherhood wrote a letter to Governor Gruening calling attention to discrimination against Alaska Natives. The letter pointed out the signs on Alaskan businesses that read "No Natives Allowed." Governor Gruening always used his influence to fight discrimination. However, he knew the final outcome of the battle rested with the Native people themselves.

The final battle to legalize discrimination came with the anti-discrimination bill introduced in 1945.

It was opposed by several senators, one of whom said, "Far from being brought closer together, the races should be kept further apart. Who are these people, barely out of savagery, who want to associate with us whites with 5,000 years of recorded civilization behind us?"

According to legislative custom, anyone present could voice their views during debate. Elizabeth Peratrovich, the well-educated president of the Alaska Native Sisterhood,

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rose and stood before the all-male, predominantly white legislators. The packed gallery was tense with expectation. Clearly, the passage of this bill would spell profound social change in Alaska.

"I would not have expected," Elizabeth said, "that I, who am barely out of savagery, would have to remind gentlemen with 5,000 year of recorded civilization behind them of our Bill of Rights." She told of how the painful experience of discrimination "has forced the finest of our race to associate with white trash." There was an awesome silence in the packed hall; the opposition was forced to a defensive whisper.

When she was finished, there was wild applause and the Senate passed the bill on Feb. 8, 1945. Reflecting on her efforts, Gov. Gruening stated, "Had it not been for that beautiful Tlingit woman, Elizabeth Peratrovich, the anti-discrimination bill would have never passed." Thanks to Mrs. Peratrovich, a new era in Alaska's racial relations had begun. She took the challenge, she made a difference, and made that change!

Today we are faced with our own challenges. A 1994 Alaska Natives

Commission Report summarizes: "Whatever words are chosen to depict the situation of Alaska's Native people, there can be little doubt that an entire population is at risk...of leading lives, generation to generation, characterized by violence, alcohol abuse, and cycles of personal and social destruction."

Alaska Native lives were not always this way. In his book, "Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being," Harold Napoleon describes how prior to the arrival of Western people, the Yup'ik lived in a complete, harmonious world. They were ruled by customs, traditions and spiritual beliefs. This unwritten law was called Yuuyaraq, "the way of the human being."

Yuuyaraq defined acceptable behavior for all members of the community. It defined correct behavior between parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren, and cousins. It determined which members of the community could talk to each other and which members could tease each other. It outlined the protocol for every situation human beings might find themselves in.

Yuuyaraq defined the correct way

of thinking and speaking about all living things, especially the great sea and land mammals on which the Yup'ik relied for food, clothing, and tools. Yuuyaraq prescribed the correct method of hunting and fishing and the correct ways of handling fish and game. This was in order to honor and appease their spirits and to maintain a harmonious relationship with them.

Yuuyaraq outlined the way of living in harmony with the spirit world. To the Yup'ik, the land, the rivers, the seas and all that dwelled within them were spirit and therefore sacred. The Yup'ik were not only born into a physical world, but a spirit world as well. When the Yup'ik traveled out on the tundra, the river, or the Bering Sea, they entered the spiritual realm. Thus, Yuuyaraq was the law in which the Yup'ik lived, in harmony with themselves, their environment and the spirit world.

This peaceful existence was nearly destroyed when Western explorers introduced various epidemics that decimated 60 percent of Alaska's Native population. This Great Death wiped out whole families and villages. It fatally wounded Yuuyaraq, the old Yup'ik culture, and other Native cul-

tures. That is why today we are faced with a new battle — the challenge of rebuilding Native society.

As Gov. Gruening realized in a different struggle 50 years ago, the final outcome of the battle will rest with us Native people ourselves. We must all work towards the healing of our culture, our families, and ourselves. Fellow graduates, it is our duty to take the challenge and lead this effort of healing and change.

- Let us call on our village councils to pass ordinances protecting children from parental neglect, physical, emotional, and other abuses.

- Let us call on our villages to develop culturally relevant alcohol and substance abuse programs.

- Let us call for reform of Native health care: to integrate spiritual health with physical health and encourage healthy lifestyles.

- Let us call on our friend Chancellor Lee Gorsuch to name Building K after Mrs. Elaine Abraham. Elaine has spent over 20 years advocating for improved services for Native students at this university. Thanks to her efforts, we have improved access to higher education today.

- Let us also call on this univer-

sity to name the new business building in honor of Mrs. Elizabeth Peratrovich. Honoring these leaders, Mrs. Abraham and Mrs. Peratrovich, in this manner will instill pride into future generations of UAA's students. We will take their example and know that we, too, can take the challenge, graduate, and make a change.

- Let us all call on each other, that we may follow the teachings of Yuuyaraq — to live in harmony with each other and all races, so that truly we may live the way of the human being.

We may feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenges facing society today. However, we have already proven we are capable of overcoming challenges, for many of us are graduating, just as many have and many more will. Also, we may turn to the examples of Elaine Abraham and Elizabeth Peratrovich, who proved to us that one person can take the challenge and make a difference, that we too can make a change.

Chancellor Gorsuch, fellow graduates, families and friends ... this is our call to action. Take the challenge, make a difference, and make that change! Qu yana. Thank you.