

Renowned weaver shares her knowledge

by Mike Rostad
Kodiak Area Native Association

KODIAK — She's a renowned weaver who's created baskets, hats and other works of art that represent countless hours of painstaking labor and adept skill, and she has shared her knowledge of basketweaving by teaching classes in Canada, the United States and Germany.

Yet, Delores Churchill modestly claims, "I still don't know anything about basketry."

Delores recently taught a two-week class which covered every aspect of spruce-root weaving, from the root-gathering to the climactic moment when the weaver breathes a sigh of relief to signify that the work has been completed.

*'That poor basket
must have been woven
20 times. . .'*

—Delores Churchill

The weaving class and a workshop on soapstone carving, taught by Fred Anderson of Naknek, were part of the Kodiak Area Native Association's arts and crafts program. The classes are an example of the type of program KANA plans to offer at an arts and crafts training center which will be part of the proposed museum.

Churchill, a Haida Indian, grew up on Queen Charlotte Island and later moved to Ketchikan. Although as a little girl, Churchill and her friends helped roll up the grass as the elder women gathered roots for baskets, she didn't start studying basket weaving until 1972.

At the time she was a bookkeeper at a hospital in Ketchikan. Fearing that Haida basketweaving would eventually die, her husband encouraged her to continue the tradition, mastered by her 84-year-old mother, who was teaching a class at the community college.

As Churchill walked into the class, her mother asked what she was doing there. When Churchill said she wanted to weave, her mother told her to go home.

"I didn't know what to do because I never disobeyed my mother," says Churchill.

But Churchill got accepted into the class when the head of the art department convinced the elder that because the enrollment was low, they needed her daughter's registration.

Churchill learned through trial and error.

"That poor basket must have been woven 20 times because every time I'd take it home, I'd have to take it undone."

Traditionally, people were taught one-to-one, says Churchill. Those taught by the elders learned by watching and experiencing.

"Didactic teaching is very foreign to Native people. (Learning) is more by exploration," she said. "They don't say, 'This is how it is done.'"

Churchill uses a combination of the traditional exploratory approach and the didactic method, in which the teacher instructs through explaining. She talks to her students as they work on their own.

Churchill guided her students through every stage of weaving. On the first day, the class gathered roots in a mossy woods near the Kodiak Community College. Churchill compares this process to Easter egg hunting.

"When you start finding roots, you

get excited. . . There's big fights over roots," she laughs.

The more slender feeder roots, which are attached to anchor roots, are used in basketry. Churchill explains that taking them does not harm the tree.

After the novice weavers gathered bundles of roots, they went to Aber-

crombie State Park and burned the roots in a bonfire. Burning makes it easier to rub the casing and offshoots from the roots and it treats the wood.

Once the exterior layer was rubbed off, the weavers split the roots into fine strands that they wove into baskets, hats and other items.

A camaraderie developed as the

weavers discovered the fun, frustration and joy of producing Alutiiq art. And all the while, Churchill was in their midst, coaching them, showing them with a word of advice, but never telling them, "Now this is how it's done."

The class hopes that Churchill will return to Kodiak this spring.