

# Ahwinona thrives in Washington as congressional staff member

by Jeff Richardson  
*Tundra Times staff*

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When Cynthia Ahwinona got a call at 5:30 one morning in 1981, she was not amused.

"He said, 'This is Don Young.' I said, 'Yeah, right,' and I hung up," Ahwinona recalls.

One slight problem: It was Don Young, Alaska's only member of the U.S. House of Representatives. He was trying to offer Ahwinona a job, but had forgot-

ten about the time difference between Washington, D.C. and Anchorage. Unfazed by the rebuff, Young had another staffer call Ahwinona at her office at the Alaska Federation of Natives and arrange a meeting.

Ahwinona, an Inupiat born and raised in Nome, worked for Young for the next six years as a member of his personal staff. After a two-year break, she became Young's staff member on the House Resources Committee.

Now, as her boss assumes chairmanship of the renamed Committee on Public Lands and Resources, Ahwinona is about to see her level of responsibility rise accordingly. But she's ready, having long ago come under the spell of Washington's fast pace and excitement.

Ahwinona's work in Washington actually began with a four-year stint as a receptionist for Sen. Mike Gravel in 1976. After sev

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eral years working on the trans-Alaska pipeline, at Coldfoot Camp, Pump Station 5 and other assignments, she was looking for something new. She spent a summer working construction in Nome, then moved on to Anchorage, where she heard about an opening in Gravel's office.

"I had no interest in Washington, D.C. or in politics," Ahwinona says. But friends and family had other ideas. One friend in particular "called me every day for two weeks trying to convince me to move to D.C." Her former construction supervisor in Nome also pressed hard.

"He took me to lunch. He told me this was an opportunity of a lifetime, I shouldn't pass this up. He was really very excited for me and said I should grasp this," says Ahwinona. She finally relented and signed a six-month contract. "It was very smart of them. I hated it there."

But in those six months, things shifted and she adjusted to the city and its frenetic pace. By the time she returned to Alaska in 1980 following Gravel's election defeat, she had an equally hard time adjusting to the much slower rhythms of Anchorage. When she and Young finally met, she was "very receptive" to his job offer.

Ahwinona signed up as recep-

tionist, which involved not only the front office contact, but also helping conduct interviews of Alaskans seeking Young's nomination to the nation's military academies. In this role, she made several trips on Air Force Two, the vice-presidential jet equipped as a virtual flying condominium. She continued with Young's personal staff until 1987, when she again returned to Alaska and worked with the Bering Sea Fishermen's Association. Again, Washington called her back and Ahwinona became Young's staff member on the House Resources Committee working on Alaska Native legislation. In this capacity, she writes legislative language, fields calls from Native organizations, conducts research, answers questions from other members of Congress on proposed bills and works extensively with other staff members building the level of consensus that eventually results in bills being passed.

"I like writing, traveling, and convincing an opponent that they should go with our language," she says.

Ahwinona vividly recalls the day when "her" first bill came up for a vote on the House floor, a series of amendments to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

"I was amazed the first time I went on the floor with Don Young. I thought, 'This is where it happens. This is where we affect

people's lives.' It was mind-boggling," she recalls. "It took all of two minutes for the debate on the House Floor, and that was after two years of preparation. But it was exciting."

Her years of experience on Capitol Hill have shown Ahwinona both the strengths and weaknesses of American democracy; a system she feels is not as broken as some people think. She sees it as a thoughtful, deliberative and inherently stable process.

"People aren't aware of how long a process it is, but to introduce a bill that will pass, we have to work out everything. Our working relationship (at the staff level) is fairly organized and cooperative," she says of her current committee assignment.

Although summertime in Washington is still hard for Ahwinona because she must miss her family's trips to fish camp, she tries to make an annual pilgrimage home for berry-picking season. Now that Young has taken over as head of the Committee on Public Lands and Resources, there's no question in Ahwinona's mind about continuing her sojourn in the nation's capital. She's eager to get back to work as the new session begins this week.

"Hopefully, we can move the Native bills a lot faster now that Don is chair," says Ahwinona.