

Finding a balance between two worlds

by Eileen MacLean
for the Tundra Times

As our traditional Native lifestyle in rural Alaska is affected by outside influences, it becomes necessary for us to become advocates on behalf of our people, to interface with and educate other cultures and insure the needs of our people are represented.

Recently at the Western Legislative Conference in Anchorage, where legislators from Alaska and other Western states gathered to explore regional cooperation, I was asked to sit on a panel and talk about my personal experience of interacting in an urban environment, so vastly different from my home in rural Alaska.

In discussing my history, I remembered this difficult transition and the challenge of working in a complex state bureaucratic system.

I was born in Barrow, then a small Inupiat village of 500 people where I spent most of my early years. At that time, Barrow had very little contact with the outside world, other than sporadic air service and yearly barge delivery. There was no piped water so the one vehicle in the village was used to haul ice during the winter.

At age 14 I was encouraged to attend Mount Edgecumbe in the community of Sitka in Southeast Alaska. There was no alternative available for Natives from the Northern region to obtain a high school diploma at that time, so I left home to live with students of different cultural backgrounds from other areas of rural Alaska.

We couldn't go home except for two months every year during summer break unless we dropped out, which many did.

The experience away from home

Inupiat Paltot
People's Heritage

OPINION

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was very difficult for me because Inupiat families are very close. We do not think of ourselves singularly but as part of a group.

Without my family near I felt displaced from my cultural roots, unsure of my identity. I struggled to improve my English since speaking our Native languages was discouraged. Choosing my words wisely was something I cultivated during that time.

Although it was initially difficult for us to live together — our ancestral histories involved clashes between Indians and Eskimos — I am grateful to have formed strong friendships with Natives from different cultures.

Today, many of my fellow students are prominent leaders of Native non-profit organizations, of state, borough and city governments and well respected in the Native community and among non-Natives alike.

Our confinement allowed us to develop strong friendships and gave us the educational tools needed to strengthen the Native movement.

However, the main disadvantage of separation from the people of our culture is that we lacked parental role models during critical developmental

years. As a result, some of us have not been successful parents. The youth of today are in need of involved parents.

Although Mount Edgecumbe familiarized us with the dominant non-Native culture and gave us structure

and discipline that has served us well in our various professions, it separated us from our people and in some cases our cultural values. We now struggle to regain those values and instill their importance in our children.

Admittedly, when I was exposed to urban luxuries during those years away from home and witnessed other ways of living, this increased my expectations — sometimes making me discontent at home.

Like many living in rural Alaska who are exposed to the media or have spent time Outside, I became more militant about the right to basic services in rural Alaska.

As a rural legislator working with many leaders from urban areas, I find I constantly have to educate people about the differences between the two regions of the state.

Some legislators as well as state officials from urbanized, densely populated areas have never been to rural Alaska, so they aren't sensitive to the differences in cultural practices and ways of living nor the needs, such as basic necessities like running water and sewer systems, roads and airports.

These are basic needs taken for granted in urban areas.

Some of the legislation passed and policy implemented discriminates against rural Alaska and does not fit the needs of the people there.

An example of this misunderstanding is in the area of adoption. In the Western society, adoption is approved by the courts, whereas in many Native

cultures children are communally raised, adopted out to relatives or close family friends.

It took many years of legal battles to persuade the Department of Health and Social Services to adopt regulations to legalize our way of Native adoption. Still, we have to fill out paperwork for adoption, abiding by a Western law.

Though I've learned to interact in the urban world and to understand and appreciate the differences from my culture and region, I'll never forget where I'm from — where my home is and the people I love and can best identify with.

When I'm home I feel at peace. I speak, think and dream Inupiaq. It feels good to be myself. I don't have to interact in the complex bureaucratic system, so much a part of urban life that was initially so unfamiliar and difficult to master.

My people depend on me to act as a bridge between them and the outside world. There are two sides of me: One that reaches back to my cultural spirituality and the other that tries to change things in the external world to improve the lives of my people.

There are elements of my culture to be protected. The sustainability of future Inupiaq generations depends on that protection.

The strength and unity of our state needs to be protected as well. The gap in services and opportunity between urban and rural Alaska has created a division that weakens the state as a whole.

We need to work toward closing this gap, acknowledging and respecting the different cultures within our state, so we can emerge joined and sure of our future.