



*Elder Peter Kalifornsky, Native storyteller, talks to a group of children.*

*The circle is bigger now. It holds many children and teens, includes the elders and the tribal teachers, and its light shines brightly.*



*Timothy Joseph, above left, takes time out at the climbing tree during the camp. Jesse Kanutak, above right, shares a string game with others.*



## *Camping on the Kenai leads to bonding*

by M.E. Lee Coray  
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KENAI — The van was so loaded we couldn't see out the back window. It bounced and rattled down the twisting gravel road, farther and farther into the woods and away from the towns of the central peninsula and the crazy pace... the peak of tourist season and commercial fishing.

With the distance came silence and some concern on the part of the staff. "What have we gotten ourselves into now?"

What followed were long days, rain, 16 pre-teens and teens and much learning for the staff and the youth. We all grew. We all learned.

We thought at one point that maybe it wasn't OK. Maybe we had missed the point and were not connecting in the way we wanted to with these children. Then we had our closing ceremony. We joined together to honor each other and share as a group for the final time.

As the children spoke, we realized we had accomplished our goal. They hugged each other and spoke in positive terms about the camp, the time together, the things we had done as a group and the wanting to return for a camp next year.

Seven of these reluctant campers returned the following week to work as junior leaders for the younger

children. They had a bond with each other and ties with the staff that grew the following week as they learned to help the younger ones to be responsible and to take one more positive step toward adulthood.

For a second time we gathered in the circle for closing ceremony. We had more sunshine this week, a little this day. The junior leaders had worked hard. They were tired.

A well deserved surprise awaited them as part of the closing ceremony. After the ceremony for the little campers, we presented each of the junior leaders with a beaded and bone necklace to acknowledge their accomplishments and effort. They, in

turn, honored us by giving each of us a name they had chosen for us.

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*The Kenaitze Indian Tribe's child protection team — Yaghenen "A Safe Place" — offered four weeks of camp this year. This article refers to the two weeks of overnight camp. Because of the diversity of the population in the area, the children served represented Native people from throughout Alaska.*

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