

Two stories reveal Inupiaq courage

by Ben Brantley

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KOTZEBUE — I was 5 years old in June 1965. Something scary happened that year I will never forget.

Inupiat Paitot People's Heritage **OPINION**

My family and I were living in Yakutat. Our home was a double-wide trailer. I remember playing outside one day while inside my mom was fixing me a fishing pole out of a thick willow branch, about 4 feet in length. She wrapped the fishing line around the tip of the branch and used a safety pin for a hook. Also, she gave me red meat for bait.

With pole in hand, I started walking toward the creek; however, the boots I was wearing were five times too big, and they covered me up to my waist.

Above me, the evergreen trees were standing tall and the eagles were flying high.

Finally, after walking about 300 feet, I reached the creek. I lay down on a culvert around 5 feet wide. I watched the creek flow through the culvert and hung my head over it to look at the salmon swimming up the creek. Then I started fishing.

In the meantime, my mom was feeding our pet deer, Bambi, and my brother Frank and my three sisters were washing Mom's apple-red Datsun near the trailer. I was by myself fishing at the creek.

All of a sudden, I saw a big brown bear standing in the middle of the

rocky road, about 100 feet away. The bear's eyes looked angry as if it were going to charge.

My heart started to pound. I could hear and feel the thump through my ears.

I dropped the fishing pole and began to run frantically over the potholes and big rocks in the road. My boots kept twisting and making me trip, so I took them off and ran as fast as I could barefooted back to the trailer.

I shouted at my mom, my sister and my brother, "Hurry up and get inside the trailer because there is a big bear and it might maul us!"

Once inside, I locked all the windows and doors, so the bear wouldn't be able to attack us. We were safe, but still I knew I wouldn't wear boots that were too big for me ever again.

Portrait of Laura Geffe

Laura Geffe was born Aug. 18, 1957, in the village of Kiana. She lived there until she was almost 5 years old. She has two brothers, Victor and Edmond. Her mom's name is Maime and her grandma's is Bessie.

Kiana is a small Eskimo village. When Laura lived there, there was no electricity, no water or sewer; they used kerosene lanterns for light and woodstoves for heat. The houses were small, for instance, 12 feet by 16 feet. Most of the townspeople used dogsleds to go hunting and trapping and to get ice for drinking water during the winter months.

In those days, there were few motorized vehicles.

In the summer of 1961, Laura was 4 years old and Edmond, 7 years old. They were playing outside on a clear sunny, warm day.

A terrifying accident happened that

day she'll never forget.

They walked down the hill, through the high willows and grass to the trail that is alongside the Kobuk River. About a quarter of a mile upriver, they came to dusty hard bluffs and started to climb them.

There were sparrow nest holes all around. They looked inside for eggs. When they got to the top, they slid down.

He yelled, 'Bend over that branch, and go get Mom!' Edmond tried to pull himself up with the branch, but the current was too swift and strong for him.

Laura and Edmond played there most of the afternoon. They were getting really dirty, wondering if they were going to get a spanking.

Since it was getting late that afternoon, they decided to trudge down the winding trail; Edmond was leading the way. All of a sudden, Edmond tripped and yelled as he fell into the cold, swift river.

Laura screamed and reached for her brother's hand. She held on really tight, so the current would not take him away.

He yelled, "Bend over that branch, and go get Mom!" Edmond tried to pull himself up with the branch, but the current was too swift and strong

for him.

Laura ran home as fast as she could. Finally when she made it up the hill, she shouted at her mom, "Edmond fell into the river!"

Laura's mom at the time was hanging clothes outside to dry. She dropped everything to rescue her son.

The next year, Laura and her family moved to Kotzebue, but every summer for several years her Uncle Leo

would fly them to Kiana for the summer. They would pitch their tent alongside the swift flowing river where Laura, as a little girl, saved her older brother's life.

Today, Laura is a true Christian who will assist anyone in the time of crisis.

Ben Brantley is an Inupiaq Eskimo who lives in Kotzebue, where he is working toward a bachelor's degree. He wrote these stories in an English composition class at Chukchi College, a branch campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Chukchi News and Information Service is a writing project of Chukchi College.