

Fairbanks embroiled in West Valley High calendar dispute

Tundra Times

Residents and students of the Fairbanks area — Native and non-Native alike — have protested the sale of a West Valley High School calendar containing a picture described as "defamatory" to Native people. The local school board has decided not to stop distribution of the calendar or require the substitution of another less controversial photo for the one in question.

Organizers of the Thirteenth Annual Festival of Native Arts in Fairbanks February 16 gathered outside the West Valley High gymnasium and collected over 400 petition signatures in one day calling for the recall of calendars already sold, and a ban on their further sale.

The senior class of West Valley High originally conceived of the idea to sell calendars as a way to raise money to replace a cage which holds three stuffed wolves inside the school's main entryway. The wolf is the official mascot of the West Valley High School.

Larry Martin, principal of West Valley, reportedly told the organizers that the calendar would have to be approved by the school's Home/School Liaison, Ron Manook. But students apparently had the calendar printed without Manook's approval, and when complaints surfaced about one of the "humorous" photos included in the calendar — showing several students with Native 'street people' outside the Savoy Bar — Martin had the sale of the calendar stopped.

"Many of the students came to me wanting to know why the picture was published," Manook told the *Tundra Times*.

The local school board became involved when student Bret Carlson, son of a former school board member, complained to his mother of "censorship." Mrs. Carlson — who herself was accused of censorship several years ago when she campaigned to have books banned from the school

library — carried her son's complaint to the board.

In a closed meeting, students and school board members met for over an hour and discussed the propriety of using the photo and whether they should allow continued sale of the calendar. The board decided to allow the continued sale of the calendar including the offensive photo.

The *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* castigated the board, and described the members' decision as "teaching bad lessons." *The News-Miner* first cited the school board's violation of Alaska's Open Meeting Act, which requires reasonable public notification of all public meetings. Principal Martin was not notified of the meeting.

Under Alaska's Open Meeting Act, school boards and other public bodies can only close their meetings to the public for the discussion of financial matters, "the immediate knowledge of which would clearly have an adverse effect;" personnel matters; and legal matters.

Lastly, many felt the board should have backed up the principal's instruction on proper administrative procedure, i.e., that disciplinary action should be taken regarding the students responsible for having the calendar printed without the approval of the Home/School Liaison.

Community groups which have protested the calendar include Doyon, Ltd., the Tanana Chiefs' Conference, the NAACP, the Urban League, the Fairbanks native Association, and the Native Programs department of the University of Alaska.

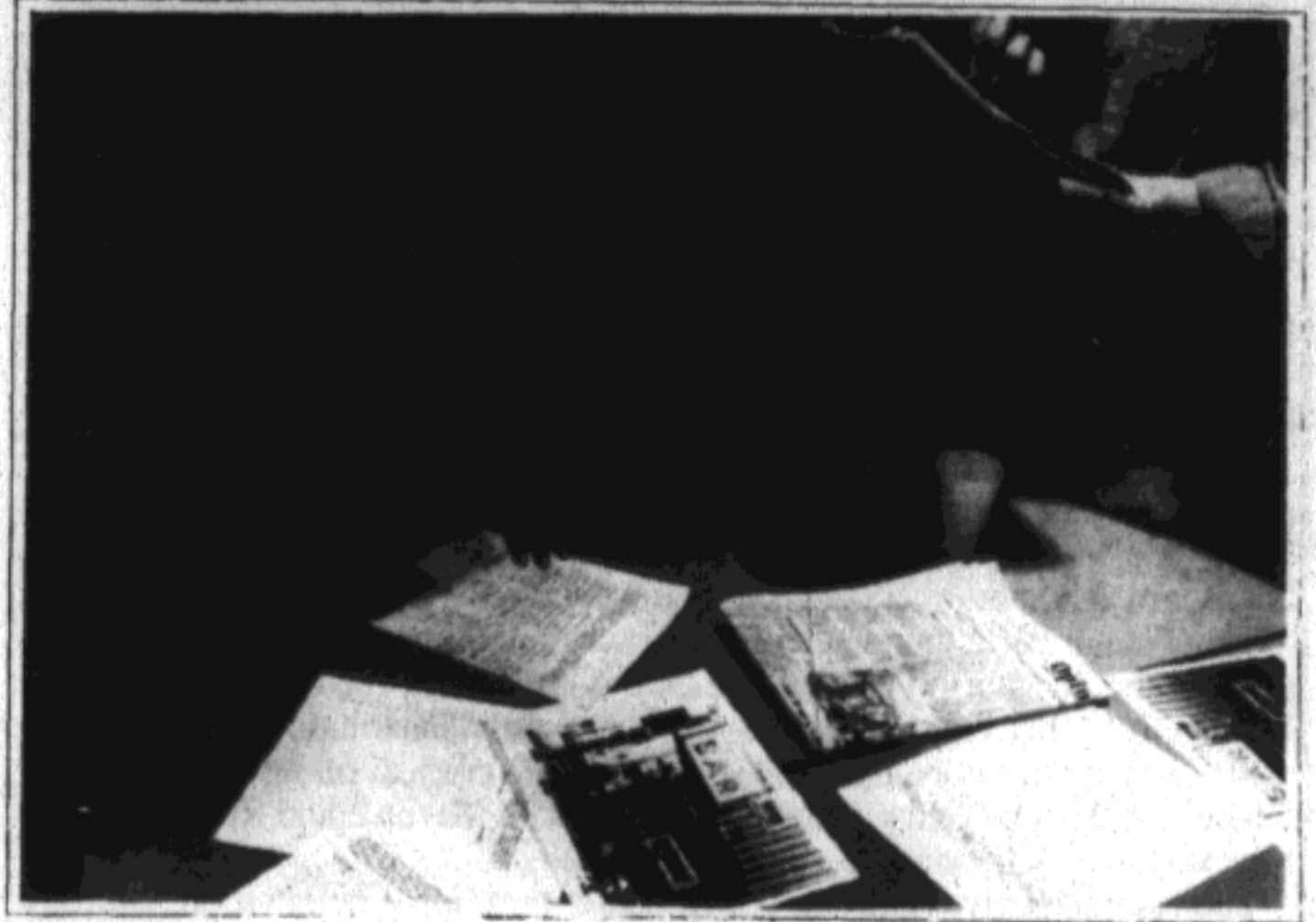
"The photo reflects bad taste to an already sticky issue; it contributes to the present low esteem and reinforces an unfair stereotype Native students have lived with," said Manook.

In the calendar's written introduction, its editors say that it is meant to be humorous, "as it is important that every one of us takes time to reflect on and laugh at the many small foibles of life we live."

Manook says the issue probably won't go any further, a decision made by his students, who thought that enough had been said and done to make the point. It was mostly parents that wanted the issue pushed further, says Manook, although he admits

some of the school board members were also dissatisfied with the body's decision.

"I think the school board will be more sensitive to these issues in the future," said Manook.



Students collected over 400 signatures in a single day calling for a ban on the sale of the calendar. Many thought it in bad taste. photo by Steve Kakaruk