

Commentaries

Thanks to an old friend from school

by **Kadashan**

It was 1944. I was 7 years old and living in Juneau. In those days, there were three main educational systems for the youth of Alaska: territorial schools for non-Natives, BIA schools for Natives, and private, Christian schools.

Because the schools were segregated, and because the Natives wanted their children to have the best education possible and because

they were supposed to be regarded as citizens, Natives believed the schools should be integrated. The battle to win this fight had been going on for many years by the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood. The two individuals I remember who were in the middle of this were Roy Peratrovich and his wife, Elizabeth.

But there was one individual who made the difference.

My father took a job with a

construction company and moved us from Yakutat to Juneau that year. I don't remember much about the political battles that took place in those days, being only 7 years old. I read about them now and hear people talk about their experiences. But there was one incident that I remember - an event that changed my life and probably many Native youth thereafter. And it involved this one

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special individual.

We lived on Ninth Street in a brown house my father rented near the Juneau-Douglas bridge.

Moving from Yakutat to Juneau was a new experience for me and my 4 year-old brother, but we got acquainted with the neighborhood in a hurry. Frank See and his wife, Bessie, and their children lived a couple of houses from us. We became close friends. Across the street and up a ways from us lived Shirley Allstead. She was a beautiful half-Native girl. I remember my parents being proud

when she won the crown as Fourth of July queen.

That summer was a great one for me. I remember playing with my friends, getting into mischief and getting grounded and spankings for more serious crimes. But the summer went by much differently. I remembered the many activities we were involved in. I remember going to baseball games in the park where the Federal Building now stands, to a soap box derby on the Fourth of July, and to the movie "Bambi," when it was first released.

Those were fun days. It seemed

that when one looks back on his earlier years, one always remembers the good times, never the bad. I always seem to remember the sunny days - those sunny days when we enjoyed picnics and outings that were never really designed to remember, never the sad, rainy days when we had to stay inside and be bored. I'm sure there were many of those days, but you know, I can't remember days like that.

There was this one day that I remember. Roy and Elizabeth Peratrovich had come to see my parents. My father wasn't home from work yet, but they made an appointment with my mother to come visit us that evening. Roy and my father got along well. I guess, more so because they both had a great sense of humor and were able to tell jokes and stories to one another and not feel threatened.

When they arrived that evening, Roy got right down to business. "John," he said, "as you know the ANB and ANS has been trying to get the BIA and territorial schools integrated. It has been a hard battle, but I think we can win. What we are trying to do is get some parents to register their children in the public schools this year. We are asking if you would be willing to do this with your child?"

Without hesitation, my parents accepted the challenge. And so instead of my mother taking me

to the "Indian" school near where the Alaska Native Brotherhood hall is now, she walked me up Ninth Street, up a steep hill, past the Governor's Mansion, and to the huge school behind the territorial building.

I was going into the second grade that year. It was strange because I didn't see any of my friends on the first day of school. Frank See had a daughter about my age. Her name was Spunky. She and I became very good friends. In fact, she was probably my first girlfriend and if I'd stayed around for high school we probably would have gone steady. Anyway, I looked for her but couldn't find her anywhere. I found out later that I was one of the three Indian students that showed up for school that day.

My teacher was nice to me. She did what she could to help me feel comfortable. Still I kept pretty much to myself.

That was until recess.

We went outside to play and the teacher was trying to get me to play tag with the other kids. I didn't feel like playing tag so I sat by myself.

The teacher tried to get me to play on the swings and on the seesaw, but I didn't want to do either of these things.

I just wanted to sit by myself.

If Spunky showed up I'd play

with her with no hesitation.

"Hi," the high voice said. I looked up. There was this girl who had red hair in pigtails. She had these freckles and eyes that were blue as the sky. She looked down at me and smiled. She had no front teeth, but the smile was friendly. "My name is Amy. Wanna play some jumping jacks?" she asked.

Instantly the ice melted. We played jumping jacks until the bell rang.

We were regular partners in jumping jacks after that.

The next day we played on the swings and seesawed and played tag. It wasn't long before the other kids were in there playing with us.

Today I wonder about Amy and what she is doing.

I can say, however, and with much pride, that I was one of the first to be accepted into the public schools when much prejudice was felt in every part of Alaska.

But Amy, you were the first to accept someone who you recognized wasn't very different from you by any long shot. Your attitude made a great difference and set the tone for what was to later come. I thank you, along with a host of other people like you, who made it much easier for people like me during a period of difficult times.

Editor's Note: Kadashan is Tlingit author Bertrand J. Adams, Sr. from Yakutat.