

She helps victims of sexual assault

By Linda Lord-Jenkins

Tundra Times

Rape.

It is often said that there is no word for rape in the Native tongues.

There may be no word for the act but Native women are being raped and sexually assaulted in alarming numbers and at least one woman is now working to help Native women and all women to work out the problems they encounter after being victim to this most violent and emotionally disabling of attacks.

Michelle Davis, a Tlingit with roots from Southeast

Alaska who has lived in Anchorage most of her life, is entering her fifth month working as a crisis advocate for Standing Together Against Rape, (S.T.A.R.) the rape crisis counseling agency established in Anchorage.

Davis is completing her school work for a degree in psychology at the University of Alaska, Anchorage while she works as one of two advocates for the agency.

She also has worked at the Alaska Women's Resource Center as a contractor and as a surveyor with Alyeska pipeline.

As an advocate, Davis does crisis counseling for victims when they call on the S.T.A.R. Crisis line. The telephone number is 276-STAR (276-7827).

An advocate immediately tries to find out if a victim is in danger, if he or she has gotten away from the attacker and is in a safe place. If the victim has been injured or beaten, the advocate does what is needed to insure that medical care is obtained.

In order for a successful rape prosecution, victims must have medical tests taken and

(Continued on Page Three)

Victims need help to heal scars of rape

(Continued from Page One)

the advocate will accompany the victim to the hospital and police station and through the court system if the victim requests.

They are a unique and understanding and non-judgmental friend who gives loving support. And, because advocates are aware of the problems of rape, they are a good and knowledgeable sounding board for the victims' many emotional stages of recovery.

Davis says she joined S.T.A.R. because it will give her an opportunity to help women from all walks of life at a time when they need help most.

While her Tlingit heritage may make it easier for Native victims to talk to her, she says that may not always be the case and she says that if a victim would be better helped by another, non-Native advocate, she would refer them.

But, her Native background can be invaluable to her in many dealings with rape crisis victims, says Michelle.

One traditional method she plans to use a traditional talking circle for a group of victims to meet and talk about their feelings.

The talking circle differs from most modern "group therapy sessions," in that group sessions have people talking as they desire and holding conversations with each other.

In a talking circle, says Davis, participants start at one person in the circle. That person will discuss his feelings about the assault or after-effects of the assault. Then the next person talks.

Then, circle members must wait at least five seconds before responding to the talker, says Davis. In most conversations a three-second period elapses before a response.

The longer waiting time allows people to think more about what they are saying. It also allows the person talking to add to what he says if he chooses.

It is an adaptation of the Indian sweat baths, says Davis, who has scheduled the first session in July. She will also conduct a "female significant other" training session for July.

That session will train women who know rape victims or one day may know a rape victim, how to act and how to help their friends, sisters, daughters, who have been raped.

Davis says that training people how to react when their loved ones are raped is important to how the victim recovers from the trauma of the act.

The victim must understand that she did nothing to provoke the attack, that rape is a crime of violence and not a crime of sexual passion.

Victims also must understand that, although they placed

themselves in a potentially dangerous situation — going into a bar or hitchhiking — they should not feel guilty for an attack.

Their families also must understand that and stand by victims with love and understanding.

Davis spoke of one elementary school-aged village girl who was raped then shunned by her schoolmates who didn't know how to deal with her.

Davis said the one thing she always wants to tell victims is "there is always someone who will care about her and love her."

"Maybe her mom and dad can't talk about it with her but there will be someone who can help."

Reported rapes of Alaska Native women have dropped from 1981 to 1982, according to S.T.A.R. statistics but that drop is believed to be due to an increase in other rapes of non-Natives and perhaps a drop in reporting.

Michelle is now the only Native working for S.T.A.R. Fran Chugach, who now lives in Old Harbor, was formerly an advocate.

S.T.A.R. used to do a great deal of "outreach" to the Native community but that has dropped off in the past years. Bonnie Finkler has been hired to start community education and outreach into various groups.

Many barriers present themselves to Native women who are assaulted, in the reporting and coping with that assault.

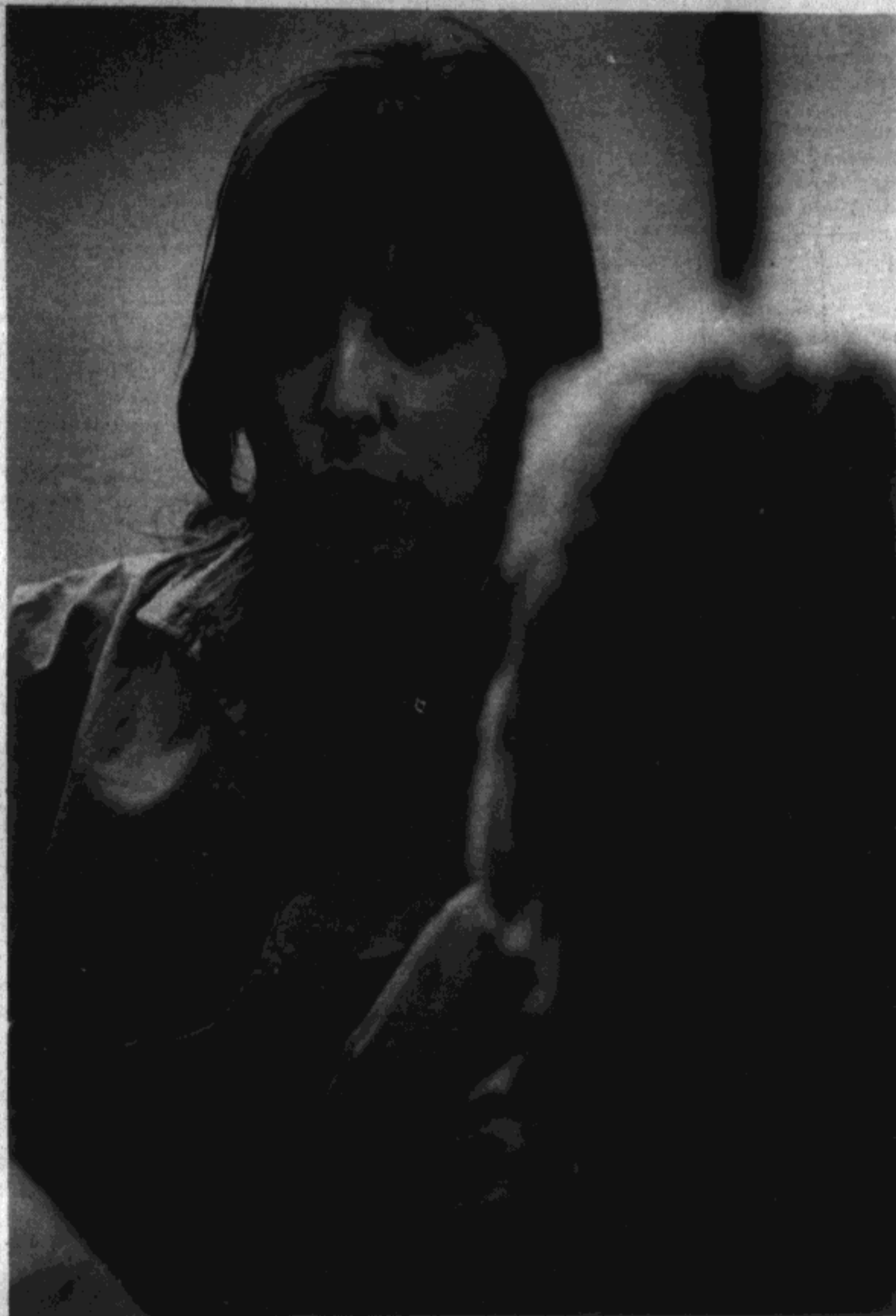
If a victim chooses to report the rape, she must talk to a police officer who is usually male and white. A Native woman may find that discussion of something so intimate — something the victim may naturally want to put from her mind — is difficult when faced with a white male.

Language is another barrier to the victim who, if victimized while in Anchorage, Fairbanks or another large village may not speak English as well as she would like to. The language barrier was made evident in the movie "No Word for Rape," in which a prosecutor talked of a Native woman who was testifying about her rape.

She didn't know a word for rape and called the act of forcible sexual intercourse "making love." She meant that her attacker had forced her, but by calling the act "making love," she shot the whole case, said the prosecutor.

The film, which is loaned to groups which wish to see it, features women who have been assaulted and others involved in the process of prosecution or treatment of assault victims.

One woman from a village spoke of the difficult time a village woman has having her attacker prosecuted, because of strong village family ties.



Michelle Davis

PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Another spoke of two men who raped a young girl. They were taken to Bethel for prosecution but were released on bond two weeks later. They returned to the village where they often saw their very young victim.

Village women who come to Anchorage can sometimes find themselves victims of rape because of the differences in cultures and the manner in which villages conduct themselves.

It is not unusual and is usually very safe for a village person to accept a ride in the village. But accepting a ride from a stranger in a big city often results in the woman becoming the victim of an assault.

The agency, which is funded from state, municipal and United Way grants, will send education workers to villages to provide rape crisis training to villagers if requested. S.T.A.R.

frequently needs assistance to pay for air fare, however.

Reeve Aleutian Airways recently offered to provide matching funds to pay for air fare to the Aleutians if a community agency provides the matching funds.

The agency also will accept calls from village victims if they call, said Paula Haley, executive director.

Anyone interested in S.T.A.R. or needing help can call the agency at 276-7279.