

Chukchi students write for 'real world'

by John Creed

Chukchi News and Information Service

KOTZEBUE — People don't always read bylines.

What's a byline? A byline usually appears at the top of a news story or opinion piece and indicates who wrote the story.

And if people don't always read bylines, fewer still notice the source of a story in a newspaper or magazine, such as whether the writer is a staff reporter, a correspondent, or whether the story came from a news service such as the Associated Press.

At the top of this piece, for example, you find Chukchi News and Information Service. If you're curious about that, read on.

A couple of years ago, I was wondering whether some of my writing students here at Chukchi College in the Northwest Arctic Borough should share their work with a wider audience than just their classmates and me.

During spring semester 1988, for example, a woman in Dillingham — Chukchi College offers courses by audioconference throughout most of rural Alaska — was working on an argumentative essay about how proposed regulations on village health aides could threaten their jobs.

I thought she had stated her case well, backing it up with solid evidence.

After several rewrites to "make it sing," as they say, I suggested we send it to an Anchorage daily newspaper, even though we both figured it was a longshot.

A few days after we submitted it, though, an editor called to say he planned to run the piece on the editorial page.

We tested a few more student writings in other newspapers around the state, and to our amazement, every paper used at least one piece we submitted for publication.

Were we onto something? We weren't sure at this point, but we did know that students who were published really got jazzed to see their

name in print.

"I knew a lot of people were going to read what I wrote, so I wrote it over and over again," one student told me.

Meanwhile, we were trying to give this fledgling project some kind of identity, no matter where the writing was distributed in Alaska.

We finally settled on Chukchi News and Information Service, a name that could cover both straight news stories and opinion pieces.

Over the past couple years, Chukchi News and Information Service has distributed news stories, features and essays to newspapers and magazines ranging from the local newspaper in Kotzebue to the state's major dailies.

This newspaper, the *Tundra Times*, has been especially cooperative and supportive of our students' efforts.

So far, the project seems to be working, although certain aspects are beginning to feel like tedious "factory work."

Everyone gets excited about new projects at first, but after a while, you realize that the individual attention needed to bring papers to publication standards eventually wears thin.

Nevertheless, the rural and Native voice we continue to see coming through our students' unique experience drives us on.

Who can argue that rural Alaskans do not bring remarkable raw materials to their writing?

For instance, most Chukchi writing classes require a two-page autobiography as the first assignment. Often, a life story might read something like this: "I grew up living a traditional Inupiaq lifestyle. My family traveled by dog team. We lived in camps and followed the caribou."

Apart from the natural curiosity that such writing engenders, these stories are simply worth recording.

We feel Chukchi News and Information Service is making a small but important contribution to history by recording the lives of ordinary rural Alaska residents, many of whom grew up in another world.

In addition, students also write on issues that all Alaskans, and in some

cases, all Americans, are concerned about, such as corporal punishment in the schools, economic development, fish farming in Alaska — even the benefits of mutual funds.

Publishing shows students that the press, at least in Alaska, is accessible if you're willing to put the time into good writing.

Students we get in these courses do not plan writing as a career. On the contrary.

Like college students everywhere, most Chukchi students take freshman and sophomore English composition classes, for example, "because it's a requirement." Kicking and screaming, in other words.

That's too bad, because I can't think of more useful and necessary college courses than those in writing. If you can't write, you don't get through college, much less make it professionally. Of course, a few required English composition courses cannot hope to make up for a lifetime of poor writing skills.

Many students come to us ill-prepared, but I believe that differs little from the scores of open-entry colleges and universities across America.

Overall, Chukchi students' writing abilities range widely. Many come to us with a crushing need for intensive developmental work. Others can stack up against the best in the country.

One former composition student researched and wrote the first known history of Healy, south of Fairbanks on the Parks Highway, for her term paper in English 213. I told her she should bind it nicely and donate a copy to the local library.

Through Chukchi News and Information Service, we try to motivate people to understand the power of writing — to persuade, to move, to help the world understand your world a little better. That motivation also comes from friends and relatives who read a student's pieces in the newspaper and then pay the writer a nice compliment.

We don't move the goalpost closer for rural writing students. Rather, we expect all students to improve their

writing dramatically, whether they come into class cocky or scared to death. For just about all students, we find that Chukchi News and Information Service offers an equal incentive to reach beyond just "doing the assignment" to writing for a real audience.

Oh, students still complain about all the rewrites and the browbeating and the time commitment that good writing requires. After all, delayed gratification can mean, as mentioned earlier, taking all semester to improve one paper to publication quality.

In fact, students often don't see their efforts in print until a few weeks after the semester ends because it takes that long to get the final edits completed. But when students know they may get published, it transforms the task from duty to challenge.

"I'm discovering that I really like writing," a Kotzebue student I've known for years told me the other night. She's taking developmental English, which prepares students for college-level classes; this semester from Chukchi's other English/journalism professor.

"Susan (Andrews) told me she wants to publish my autobiography," this student told me, beaming. "I want to get it perfect. I've realized that I really need to work on my grammar."

This woman, in her late 30s, traveled by dog team with her family and lived in a reindeer camp when she was very young. Her first language is Inupiaq. Like many Native students, writing and speaking standard English does not come naturally. I thought about these things as we talked.

"I want to take English 111 next semester," she told me.

What? She wants to take an English composition requirement?

My friend, you are out of character, I thought. You're supposed to be kicking and screaming.

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