

Della Keats: I help because I'm an Eskimo

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Unlike many doctors' offices, you don't have to wait three weeks to see healer Della Keats.

"I am an Eskimo, and I have to help my people whenever they call me. Anytime."

The 74-year-old healer does not have a waiting room filled with magazines. Eskimos in Kotzebue, or any of the surrounding villages, know that they can come to her house -- at any hour -- and know Keats will try and find the cause of their illness. And heal it.

"I always locate it. I guess that's why they call me a healer."

She relies on intuition to find the source of the illness, and then administers traditional -- often herbal -- remedies for the cure.

Back when she delivered her first baby -- nearly 60 years ago -- Keat's training consisted of little more than a medical primer and whatever advice she could garner from her family.



DELLA KEATS

"My family lived way up river, never with a lot of people because they followed the caribou. I would ask my mother how they did it a long time ago, when there were no doctors. But she told me they never had no big problem, that they took care of themselves real good."

Accidents and emergencies have stayed clearly in Keats's

memory.

"When I was 17-years-old, I helped two people at the same time. One man hit his toe with a big pick -- and the other was cooking food for his dogs and fell on his double-edge axe. It was a good thing I had just got some bandages from the school.

"The neighbors never tried to help him. I clean it, with peroxide and tied a string around it. It stopped. We sat him on the front of his sled, and drove him home 200 miles, maybe more than that. The dogs were so tired, we go slow. The man was so weak, he almost faint most of the time. We finally got to the village. My husband and the other boys move him, and he lived a long time, till he got very old and died."

Emergencies have also been a part of her own life. Her second child weighed three pounds at birth, she said. Two weak to nurse, she spend weeks spoon feeding him milk from her breast.

"I was so tired when he was

three-months old, I took him to the hospital. I never believe how I make him alive."

This son -- now a healthy adult -- helps Keats with her practice.

Three other assistants, a man and a woman, ranging from their 40's to their 60's are also learning her skills.

They follow Keats as she visits the sick, watching how she senses, and heals an ailment.

"My works have helped people, but nobody else knows them. So I am teaching these young people."

White doctors, too, are learning from Keats.

Some come for healings themselves -- particularly those with back pain. She frequently speaks to the student doctors and nurses in Nome, and has come to Anchorage to help the white medical establishment learn how Alaska Natives perceive, and cope with sickness.

Many people would like to use her healing powers, which she calls a "gift from God", but Keats says she works to help her people first.

"Everyday, I see from 15 to 17, maybe 20 people. And until a few years ago, I got no pay, just worked to help my people."

"Sometimes, I bought myself what I needed, like linament. I hated to have medicine, only when I really needed it, like aspirin.

But eight years ago, NANA hired Keats, agreeing to purchase whatever supplies she needed. Nearly invincible for 60 years, Keats says she now gets tired.

"For the first time, I got tired last month," she said, shaking her head as if trying to dismiss the impossible.

"But I always work. I never have a day off. I love my people. My reward is seeing them get well."