

# **Bering Straits Eskimo Arts and Crafts Co-op**

By MARGIE BAUMAN

NOME, ALASKA — They called it "Kawerak," for the Eskimos of the Seward Peninsula, but what it has grown to mean is wide-ranging programs and services for the economic benefit of the entire region.

From the little red office building just off the shore of the Bering Sea have emerged a credit union, day care center and education services that even include flying in instructors to outlying villages.

Then there's Bering Straits Eskimo Arts and Crafts Cooperative, Nome Receiving Home and Kawerak Accounting Services.

The list goes on and on.

Kawerak, Inc., non-profit corporate entity of the Bering Straits Native Association, has come a long way since its organization back in October, 1972. Its goal remains to fit sorely needed social services to the needs of today's people.

At its start, the little social services organization had as its sole responsibility operation of the Rural Alaska Community Action Program (RurAL CAP) for the Bering Straits region. Funded through the federal Office of Economic Opportunity, the program aimed at improving health and economic conditions for the area's people.

Today a visitor to the offices of Kawerak, Inc., on Front Street in Nome may be inquiring about joining the Bering Straits Federal Credit Union, doing business with Bering Straits Tannery or waiting to discuss financial matters with the head accountant for Kawerak Accounting Services.

Several blocks down Front Street is the Bering Straits Eskimo Arts and Crafts Cooperative, which buys ivory carvings and other crafts from village people for resale in the shop, other cities in Alaska and points far beyond. Some artists come right to the shop to sell their work; others make the transaction in their village, when representatives of the coop come out on sales trips.

The cooperative offers these artists a better place than their work may command elsewhere and in turn adds only a small mark-up, to cover shop costs, so the purchaser gets a good deal. Artists from the cooperative are promoted through a publication about the shop and also on sales trips made by shop staff outside the area.

The coop got its start in 1975 under a federal disaster relief grant to help the area recover from a heavy storm which caused

extensive damage to Nome and some surrounding villages in November, 1974. It has to date contributed to the income of just about every artist in the area.

Education, as well as art, plays a major role in the activities of Kawerak, Inc.

Under government contract, Kawerak operates the area's boarding home program and recruits village parents to work as house parents in Nome during the school year.

Bering Straits Education Center is involved in supportive services for the University of Alaska courses and operation of a vocational education center. Kawerak Education services operates village programs and flies in instructors to teach in the villages.

In conjunction with the operation of boarding home facilities at Nome Beltz High School, executive director Robert Madden of Kawerak, Inc. this summer is operating the school dormitory and cafeteria as a profit-making venture to house and feed area construction workers.

Profits will go toward the maintenance of the facilities and other needs of boarding home students not covered by federal and state funding.

What will Kawerak do next? Who knows.

At the helm of the operation is a board with representatives from each of 20 rural communities in the area. At the receiving end are some 5,200 area residents, whose need for self-help training programs and social services will continue for some time to come.

So the task continues, to make of the region's traditional subsistence economy a financially competitive one for today.