

Guest Editorial

Congratulations, Graduates!

These excerpts are from a speech given to the Sheldon Jackson College graduates by Julie Kiika, Alaska Federation of Natives president on May 17, 1996.

TundraTIMES says "Congratulations to all graduates and those students who have succeeded in progressing to another year of school."

Congratulations are in order: first, for you, the students who have worked so hard to further your formal education as well as develop your critical thinking skills; second, for the teachers and staff, who have been so interested in your lives to help you along your journey; and third, a special thank you for your parents and family members, who instilled within you a strong value system while you were growing up, including a love for learning and the need for plain hard work to accomplish your goals and desires. We are proud of you and wish you a happy, healthy and productive life.

I would like to talk about two separate, but related, issues: political rights and land title.

Political rights came slowly to Alaska Natives over several decades. The Citizenship Act of 1924 gave full status and rights to all aboriginal Americans, including Alaska Natives – the last major group to be permitted to vote. But even after the end of legal discrimination, prejudice and cultural differences kept many Natives out of politics into late years of this century.

The second issue is land title. Our quest for legal ownership of our own lands is a process that took 104 years and is still being implemented into law.

Up until 1940, Natives were the majority of Alaskans. But with the sudden, enormous military buildup of World War II, Natives became and remained a permanent minority in their own homeland.

In 1959, the Statehood Act allowed Alaska's new government to select and own up 103 million acres of public domain outside of federal land classifications. It was this selection process which gave impetus to the modern Native land movement and forced the federal government to turn its attention to the question of land rights.

The Native Land Claims movement came together in the 1960s because of the mounting pressures of land selection; the growth of rapid communication and transportation, by which Native groups could join together; the emergence of politically conscious and capable young Native leadership; and a powerful political weapon – Native ownership of lands over which the oil pipeline was to be built.

In conclusion, I would like to venture that as Native people, we are in a period of time which can be described as a period of renewal and renaissance. Our people are claiming our rightful place in this country. We have our land, our resources, our own Native institutions. We are becoming more educated on ways to protect our political rights and land ownership. We see a renewal of pride in our languages, dance and music. We are seeing a unity among Native people in this state that was unheard of years ago.

Our destiny is in our hands. We must continue to support one another and build a stronger and healthy Native community for our children. Solutions to our problems, which cannot be ignored, must be made which reflect that we understand our history and want to carve out our own unique form of self-determination.