

'Natives are susceptible to alcohol'

The following are excerpts from Maj. Gen. John Schaeffer's commencement address to the graduating class of Kipnuk High School:

It's an honor to be here in Kipnuk. It's my first trip here, but I know quite a bit about this village because this is where the best company in the Alaska Army National Guard is located.

Coming here to speak to you is my way of paying back some of the good things that happened to me while I was growing up. I want to pass on to you the good things and give you some ideas about what bad things not to do so you can do better than I have done.

Over the last few years, when all the problems with alcohol came out, and people started to tell us what alcohol was doing to our people, I decided I wanted to try and stop drinking. I knew as long as I was drinking, I was part of the problem, because I was saying it was OK to drink.

So I decided no more. Actually, I didn't realize I was an alcoholic. I quit drinking, and then within two months I got drunk twice. So it wasn't that easy for me, but there's just too much destruction caused by alcohol.

The reason I bring this up is because, number one, here in Kipnuk, you're trying to do something about it. I support you because of why you are doing it. It's important that you get control of what's going on in your lives. And the body searches for alcohol are your way of getting control.

I don't know whether you're right or wrong. All I know is you need help if it's going to work, and if it doesn't work, you need help with trying something else. In any case, you've got my support.

But number two, you're going to lose track of some of these kids who are graduating today. They're not all going to stay here in Kipnuk. Some of them are going off to college to get the education that will allow them to become leaders.

That's where they are going to have problems. Because all of us Natives are susceptible to alcohol. We may even be born alcoholics. I don't know that for sure, but why take a chance?

So what we've got to do is send these young people off with the determination that they will never drink. We've got to start that.

We can't say, "Try not to drink too much, because it's going to get you in trouble." Don't say that. Instead, let's train them now, get them committed so they don't ever have a drink to begin with.

Because it's going to ruin their lives. There's no question about it. All of us know that. We have enough people in our own families who have been ruined or even killed by alcohol.

We don't need that. We have too many other problems that need our attention, and we can't solve those problems when there's alcohol around. We have to stop, and once we stop we can begin looking for solutions to the other problems we have.

You've got the solution right now, and that solution is leadership. Just as you provide leadership in the 2nd Scout Battalion, do it in other areas as well.

Send these young people off to get the education to get into those agencies that impact your life here — for instance, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of Fish and Game or the Department of Public Safety.

Have these young people go to work for these agencies. Then they can explain to the agencies how life is here — what your values are, how you feel about things — so you will be treated better. Then when regulations are made, there will be a better understanding of how those regulations will affect your lives.



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None of those agencies are against you. They just don't understand you. The only way you're going to get to them is by joining them, because there's a lot more of them than there is of us.

We've got to be positive. We've got to believe that things can get better, and we have to make that belief a reality.

We need to send these young people off with the understanding that they are out there to do something — they are out there to learn for a reason, and that is to help the rest of their people. They must believe that they can make things better for you. You need to instill that belief in them.

After we send kids to college, we spend a lot of time trying to make Eskimos out of them again when they come home. That's pretty tough because the education system teaches them many things, and sometimes they forget the things that make them dear to us.

You need to bring them back every once in a while and talk to them. Make sure they remember what life is really like in the village. They will learn plenty about life in Anchorage or Fairbanks or Outside, but they need to remember where they come from and what's important to their people's values.

When they were little you would teach them something by going over and over it again. Just because they're graduated from high school, that doesn't change. All of us need to be reminded over and over again.

Another thing you need to remember is that there is very little failure by Eskimos. Eskimos do not fail classes in college. They may take a little while longer sometimes to get through because their English and math skills may not be what they need to be, but that just means they have to take a little longer and work a little harder.

Also, Eskimos do not fail in jobs. They can do any job as good or better than anybody else.

So why are there problems? Because of alcohol.

We know that. We see people die, and yet we do nothing. All my life I saw the problems, and I kept saying, "Yes, it's bad," but I kept drinking anyway.

I hope you will learn from that. You're going to do better, go further, be happier and do a lot more good for the people you love if you never drink.

If you can do that, you are going to be a success no matter what you do.