

Inupiat students learn of other minority problems

Editor's note: The following is a summary of a unique educational experiment being conducted in the NANA region. Individual aspects of the program will be explored further in future issues.

By Bill Hess

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Twelve student leaders from the NANA region met last week with minority leaders from throughout the U.S. and Greenland, and learned that each group faced similar problems in trying to survive as cultural entities. Each had to face dominant cultures intent on wiping out their unique cultural traits, and each often found itself being exploited for the economic benefit of others.

The students, all government leaders in their NANA village high schools, are participants in Project Arctica, sponsored by the Northwest Arctic School District. Project Arctica is an experimental educational program designed to develop Native leadership, particularly to prepare Inupiat students for the year 1991. Their corporation will no longer have government protection

from taxes, and Native shareholders will be able to sell their stock to non-Natives.

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) has brought money and with it many problems to Native Alaska. "Eight years ago," Bobby Schaeffer, Chairman of the board for the Northwest Arctic School District noted, "We were lucky to have 60 to 80 felony cases in a region in one year. Now, in an 11-month time period, there were 600. Suicide used to be unheard of. Now there are two to three attempts per week. Some of them are successful."

In search of the knowledge which may one day help them to find the answers to such problems, the students met with leaders flown into Kotzebue and representing Black, Mexican American, American Indian, Appalachian, Native Greenland and Native Alaskan groups. Two to three 80-minute sessions were held in the NANA Museum of the Arctic each day of the week, and were videotaped.

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PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Terri Gavin of Buckland leads some group singing of student leaders of the NANA region while James Commack of Shungnak looks on. Both were participants in a Project Arctica conference which brought guests to Kotzebue from thousands of miles away.

NANA students, other minority representatives, discuss problems

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The tapes will be edited into educational programs to be used throughout the distasteful television in April.

"I doubt that anything like this has ever been done before, anywhere in this country," boasted Caesar McDowell, the school administrator who was largely responsible for bringing the program together. The week's happenings were only one phase of a \$75,000 October through April program.

Joining the Alaskan representatives were Bernice Robinson of South Carolina, representing Black Nationhood; Ramona Bennet, former tribal chairwoman of the Puyallup Indians in Washington state; Gerald Wilkonson, the executive director of the National Indian Youth Council; Willie Valesquez, head of the Southwest Voter Registration Project and a Chicano; Hans-Pavia Rosing of Greenland, president

of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference and June Rosten, representing the poor whites in the Appalachian Mountains of the Southern United States.

Through their discussions with them, the students learned of many similarities between circumstances faced by their Inupiat people and the other groups. The Eskimo groups of Greenland are included in the Kingdom of Denmark. They have had their language and culture assaulted by the European way of life. This has resulted in great abuse of alcohol, and high suicide rates.

Now, however, Greenland has adopted a degree of autonomy through the home rule act. The Native tongue has become the official language, and is being used in the schools and government. While the problems persist, they have eased their stranglehold significantly.

The Chicanos faced a great loss of land and cultural

identity following the Mexican-American war where Mexico lost the northern half of its nation to the United States. Only now, with the help of long sought bilingual-bicultural programs in school, are they rising to a status approaching that of their neighbors. These programs face an uncertain future in light of federal budget cuts.

Ralph Anderson, assistant to Mayor Eugene Brower of the North Slope Borough, explained how the Eskimos of that area took unprecedented action when they set up their 80,000 square mile borough; the largest in the world, and the only one Eskimo controlled. Only by doing so were they able to secure a portion of the oil wealth being taken from their traditional lands for themselves.

John Schaeffer, president of NANA, told the students that in order to become a leader, an individual had to really

want it. "A lot of times you get knocked down, and have to pick yourself back up." Schaeffer told the students that leaders must deal with persons as groups, and must be wary of one and one relationships. "The hardest thing is that you can't get close to individual people, or you have a loss of control. This includes your own family. Otherwise, they might take advantage of you."

Charlie Edwardson, Jr., a lobbyist from Tanana, and Fred BigJim, a cross-cultural instructor at Sheldon Jackson College and the author of "Letters to Howard (Rock)," discussed land claims and corporations with the students.

Edwardson explained his involvement in the process that eventually led to the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971. "As a child, I began to wonder how is it that the others think that they have what we call our own? . . . It

is a significant fact that the Alaska Native people as a class of their own have not been conquered by a foreign power or army! Why are they here? Why do they want the things we own?"

Edwardson told how he looked into the agreement made between the United States and Russia when Alaska passed into American ownership in 1867. He discovered that the United States agreed to find a method for resolving all claims with the Natives, and that this had never been done. Prudhoe Bay was found to be rich in oil, and there was need of a pipeline to transport the oil across the state. The ownership of the lands necessary to do this had never been resolved between the government and the Natives. Thus the land claims act was born.

It was anger that prompted Edwardson to become involved and to take a leadership role. "My anger became the greatest vessel I had," Anderson told the students. "Because I was angry, I became a conversation piece . . . an immediate vessel for action!" Anderson stressed that in the settlement, Native Alaskans had received less than they started out with.

"It was not just for those that got robbed," Anderson answered in response to students' questions regarding the fairness of ANCSA. "It is a scar in my mind that will never be erased. We were not dealt with fairly on the concept that this country was built on."

BigJim praised NANA for being at the forefront in trying to meet any problems faced in 1991. "Organizing the villages in cooperation with the region was one of the most brilliant moves that could ever be made," BigJim noted the Merger between the NANA Regional Corporation and the 11 villages within its boundaries. BigJim also noted that Natives had lost much in the land claims settlement.

"When the land claim bill passed, all the people were together in Anchorage, . . . waiting for President (Richard) Nixon to come over the radio, saying he had signed the bill." Although the people spoke of having won a great victory, "the overall feeling was that we had lost something that we had had to begin with," BigJim remembered.

Although the students spent Friday, a holiday for their classmates, in the long sessions along with every other day of the week, they all claimed to enjoy it. "When I was at Buckland, I was thinking we were going to be in front of those cameras for a long time," explained Terri Gavin. "I thought it would be boring. Now, I don't think we even had enough time."

The only complaint voiced by Terri and a few of the other students was the fact some of the guests used big words that they didn't understand.