

Social worker calls Alaska's bush "home"

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By 8 A.M. Charlie Knittel pours his first cup of coffee and begins his work day at the social service office in Galena Alaska, an Athabascan village along the Yukon River. As a social worker for the Division of Family and Youth Service, Charlie will say the uniqueness of his job keeps him continually challenged. His responsibilities include overseeing six surrounding villages besides Galena — an overwhelming job.

Knittel grew up in Missouri, and went to graduate school at the University of California, Berkeley. Working in the bush in

Alaska, inaccessible to any major cities except by plane, would not have been in his wildest dreams until seven years ago when he began his first job in Anchorage at the Alaska Native Medical Center. After meeting and working with Alaska Natives from all over Alaska, Charlie and his wife Joan felt the pull to rural Alaska. Three years later they arrived in Galena.

It was winter and cold. Joan stayed behind with their two sons until Charlie found a place to live. "It was 20 below and no stove in the house...I slept in my sleeping bag with all my clothes on," he said. But people helped and welcomed him into the

community.

He was not the first social worker. Others had come and gone — the last one was afraid of flying in small planes — a major job requirement.

What is a typical day in the job of a social worker? "We do a lot of everything here. In an urban

setting, most social workers specialize, like foster care is specialized," says Charlie. Every day is different, and every season is different — that is what makes his job unique.

Meeting upstairs in Twilight's Restaurant, Evelyn Aloysius talks enthusiastically about the training

she just completed in Fairbanks. Charlie will work closely with her in determining the homes and families that need her service.

Homemakers work with elders and families who may need some relief from their children

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Social worker Charlie Knittel.

photo by P. E. Hyslop

Social worker

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Homemakers program many elders would have to leave their villages to live in rest homes in the city. The visit over coffee and sweetrolls comes to a pleasant close. Charlie has to meet with the State Trooper, Bill Weith about a more serious matter that has occurred in one of the surround-

"It was 20 below and no stove in the house..."

ding villages.

Charlie's happy demeanor changes to a grave quiet look as he listens to the State Trooper's investigative report. Another violent case and possible child neglect, but not enough evidence.

Three years ago, knocking on doors and introducing himself as

the new social worker was probably the hardest part of his job. Gaining people's trust and cooperation did not take long though.

"Now," he says, "when I knock on their doors, they know who I am and why I am here." Three times a month Charlie travels to one of the villages he oversees.

Resembling John Denver with his ready smile and his wire rim glasses, he has become a familiar sight in the small villages.

But are people really aware of his responsibilities as a social worker?

"I don't think so," he says.

"They connect it a lot with AFDC and Welfare Assistance", programs that come from his office but from a different department.

"The number of services we provide is so broad-base, from parenting classes to adoption—it's hard for people to really get a grasp of it."

The bulk of his job is foster care for abused children.

"It keeps us busy because it takes a lot of time, and a lot of paper work. Sometimes the follow-up takes up to two years," says Knittel.

The child sexual abuse cases are the hardest to intervene in. Prevention and education are important, says Charlie. Every village is different, and sometimes help is not accepted until a village is ready. Charlie credits Agnus Sweetsir, a paralegal working with him, for giving him a clearer understanding of the Native culture.

An Athabaskan, having grown up in the region, Agnus performs the same social work responsibilities as Charlie.

"The mix of a professional person and a person with local knowledge really clicks," says Charlie. "It is not right to have just a para-professional worker with this overwhelming job and equally hard for a professional worker from the city."

Agnus recently returned from Nulato and Huslia where she conducted a workshop on prevention of child sexual abuse. She feels villages are becoming more responsive in dealing with this problem.

"I think they are reporting now because they get more support... people are getting educated in dealing with child sexual abuse," she said.

Charlie and Agnus' work often involves people in unpleasant

situations. The person they work with during the day may be a neighbor, or a child in the same class with their children. This differs from urban social workers whose clients are rarely seen outside of work hours. How does this affect their private lives? Charlie does not think of it as an invasion of his privacy.

People used to call him a lot, he said, but usually just to talk and share current happenings.

"Mostly it was just listening," he said. They have to wait for the ground to thaw to get a telephone in the house they moved to last winter.

Living in the same community with his clients poses little problems.

"To the contrary...anybody will-

ing and who has the time to contribute can get involved in the community."

Burn-out. Statistics show social workers at the top of the list.

Often Charlie has to make difficult decisions affecting people—often a thankless job. In instances such as child abuse cases people are often caught up in highly charged emotions and do not understand his job. They often expect immediate results but, it is not that simple.

"People often don't see the whole picture, they only see the emotional part of it," he said. His main objective is to try to keep the family together within the

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Social worker

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confines of the law. His decisions are based first on the safety of the child, and then the well-being of the family unit.

Charlie does not deny the burn out syndrome but contributes his home office in Fairbanks as a good sounding board if he feels frustrated. Being a good social worker does require one essential ingredient.

"In order to be a social worker you have to have your life together. How can someone help another person if their lives in trouble?" he asks.

People in Galena have seen social workers come and go, but people notice Charlie's commitment. According to Flora Sweet-sir, Health Administrator for the Galena Health Center Charlie does more than put in his eight hours at the office.

"Charlie's rapport is very good here in Galena. Most social workers end up leaving in a year or two. He gets right in with the community, potlatches, social events and people really respect him for that."

She says Charlie and Agnus are a good team. Together they have

been receptive and open to the community and participate in training for Health Aides and in Child Abuse and Neglect classes held in Galena.

"We now have the resources to do something about problems," says Charlie. "We're not just reacting anymore like a lot of things you read in the paper. We're not just a band-aid anymore."

*"How can
someone help
another person if
their own life is in
trouble?"*

As Charlie prepares for a class in parenting that will be offered in Galena, he will tell you that the uniqueness of his job as social worker in rural Alaska is both challenging and overwhelming in the last great wilderness. Where else but in Alaska can he travel to a remote village—where hotels are non-existent—at night and find himself buried deep inside his sleeping bag in someone's food cache amongst animal skins?