



photo by Barbara Crane

Jimmy Tumartok, originally of Chevak and now a resident at the care center, watches the Point Hope dancers perform. More photos, page five.

Elders Conference kicks off 1990 AFN Convention

by Holly F. Reimer

Tundra Times reporter

The Elders Conference kicked off the 1990 Alaska Federation of Natives Convention this year with more than 200 participants from around the state discussing ways to keep culture and traditions alive.

The theme was "We live in two worlds with one spirit." Elders who attended the conference last week said this meant Alaska Native cultures can exist side by side with Westerners and all live with one spirit, which is unity.

Walter Soboleff, a Tlingit elder who

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• Soboleff: Elders must teach the youth

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was the keynote speaker, told a story about how things were long ago. He said only someone who respected himself was respected by the community.

"Not everybody could get up and talk. Back then, only those who were taught customs and traditions were listened to. And those who didn't respect themselves, or know the traditions and customs — nobody would listen," he said.

Soboleff said in order for youth to feel respect and be able to stand up and talk with respect, they must learn their culture's customs and traditions.

Education was another issue that Soboleff was concerned about. He said before Western schools came to Alaska it was up to the Native grandparents, uncles, aunts and parents to teach the youth.

'Why are we here today...because of our ancestors. And someday we will be the ancestors.'

—Dr. Walter Soboleff

"We forgot about ourselves as the teachers. And we forgot to let elders teach stories, legends, customs, hunting or even how to read the weather," he said. "These are things you can't be taught out of a book."

"Why are we here today?" he asked. "Because of our ancestors. And someday we will be the ancestors."

Soboleff said elders must teach their young people the importance of their cultures, otherwise soon the elders will be gone and the culture will begin to be lost.

Many elders got up and spoke during the two-day conference. Issues at hand included subsistence, family relationships, spirit camps, education, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act and drug and alcohol recovery.

The Alaska National Guard's Maj. Gen. John Schaeffer, who is also the new chairman of the Alaska Native Blue Ribbon Commission, was moderator for the spirit camp panel.

Schaeffer said spirit camps are an important part of Alaska Natives today because the camps help bring back culture and traditions and also are a way to help recovering drug or alcohol abusers.

Schaeffer said stress may be a cause of many health and social problems. He explained that stress may be related to the frustration of not being connected enough to the land, which he said is a very important part of an Alaska Native's well-being.

"In a Native school you'll probably see kids looking out the window in the spring, looking for geese. If they can't go out and hunt the geese, they'll probably get stressed," he said, "because they have a craving to hunt."

"So getting back to nature —

through the spirit camps — helps that craving, which takes away the stress," he said.

Reggie Joule, Maniilaq education coordinator from Kotzebue, said Maniilaq's spirit camp program, which has been in operation for five years, has been a success.

Joule said when he first started out at the camp, he had much to learn about traditional values before he could pass knowledge on to younger people.

The Maniilaq spirit camp takes children from 7 years old to teach them Inupiaq values and a traditional lifestyle.

Joule said the youth are taught how the values are intertwined with everything.

He said another way youth are taught is by watching adults, so adults have to set good, positive examples for them to follow.

The other speaker was Katherine Ideus from the Alaska Native Human Resource Development Program in Anchorage. She said her organization helps communities start their own spirit camp.

She said program representatives can help write grant proposals or go to the community and talk to elders and organizers who need assistance figuring out just what type of camp they should have and how to get it started.

"We don't go in and try and tell you how it should be run, but we assist you in deciding what goals and spiritual needs are right for your community. We play a supportive role," Ideus explained.

Thomas Jackson Sr. of Kake said he goes to the local schools in his area once a week to teach youth about tradition and culture.

"I first tell children we have a lot to learn — at school, outside school and at home," he said.

He said it's important for all elders

to reach out to their youth and teach them what they know.

Jackson also talked to his fellow elders about subsistence, which he called a political football.

He said Alaska Natives are spread thin, and if a solution to subsistence is to be resolved that all Alaska Native cultures have to join together.

"We can't succeed unless we're one body."

"From this meeting, we should do something and get done with this question of subsistence once and for all," Jackson said.

Walter Charley, an Athabascan elder from Glennallen, said subsistence to him means three meals a day.

He said he lived his whole life this way and he taught his family this same subsistence way of life as well.

He compared life years ago to today and said that now his subsistence way of life has been taken away.

"The law of urban — not rural — preference gives them, people who can survive without subsistence hunting, a chance to get out in the country. I think that's wrong. They throw most everything away and keep a little bit," he said.

Charley was raised to not waste a thing. He was taught that even the bones from a caribou or moose can be used when times are not lean.

Charley asked the delegation what should be done, and then suggested that a resolution be submitted to the AFN board of directors and come up with a unified decision that includes all Natives to stand up together and get a rural preference back.

Representatives from each region got up and gave a brief summary of what elders have been doing since last year's convention.

On the last day of the elders conference they joined the youth convention.