

Native students at ACC turn to Abraham for help

by Pamela Cravez
for the Tundra Times

An Anchorage Community College student is pouring fresh dark coffee grounds from a small brown bag to a filter. Elaine Abraham bends over and sniffs.

"It's French Roast," the young woman tells Abraham.

"French Roast! I love French Roast," says Abraham. She lets the student know the extra effort of bringing in freshly ground coffee is appreciated.

Although it is only 8:30 a.m.,

students already are busy working in two small rooms adjacent to the counseling center which acts as a lounge for Alaska Native students. One woman is sitting at a desk answering a phone, while at a nearby table, a young man is patiently correcting fliers announcing a potluck.

Dressed smartly in a suit and a good head shorter than even the shortest student, Abraham moves quickly, dispensing encouragement and providing a motherly warmth.

"I've been a mother to them," says

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• Abraham makes sure students have support system

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Abraham of the students who pass through her Student Orientation Service for Alaska Natives at ACC. "I have 37 'grandchildren' — that I know of," she adds, speaking of the children of her students.

For the past seven out of 10 years she's been at ACC, Abraham has been providing a support system for Native students through SOS.

Part of that support system is based on peer counselors, students who have survived one or two semesters at ACC. They help students new to the system, Abraham explains.

"They help with class scheduling, help with choosing an instructor — not all instructors are sensitive to Native students," she says. But she quickly adds that in the 10 years since she's been at ACC, the instructors have become much more sensitive to the needs of Native students.

Peer counselors also help with filling out financial aid forms, as well as with such things as making sure students lose their fear of the bus system.

"New students are scared silly of buses," says Abraham. "They think if they get on the wrong bus, they'll never get back again," she said. "Peer counselors ride the buses with the kids, and they just so they get over the fear."

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Putting money in the bank rather than carrying it around is another thing Abraham tries to stress to the students. She talks about two students who didn't take the advice. One lost the \$600 he planned to use for his rent in a bar; another was mugged and lost \$35.

Abraham feels her desire to help these students and her original desire to become a nurse come from her paternal grandmother, a Tlingit nurse.

When Abraham left her family in Yakutat and went to school at Sheldon Jackson High School, she played Tlingit nurse, too. At Sheldon Jackson, Abraham remembers helping the one doctor when he yanked tonsils.

"I'd be holding the kidney basin with all this blood, and I decided I could take it," she said of her ability to withstand operations.

From high school, Abraham went to nursing school in Arizona. She graduated at the top of her class and worked on a Navajo reservation during a diphtheria epidemic.

"The experience treating diphtheria was invaluable. When an epidemic hit

Bethel in 1952, Abraham volunteered to help.

"When I came into Bethel they were carrying the doctor out," she said. "She was suffering from exhaustion. The doctors hadn't dealt with diphtheria before, but I was well prepared."

Bethel was a bit of a culture shock for Abraham, who had never been north of Anchorage, but she said she "absolutely loved it."

There were no three-wheelers then, or even cars. Dogsleds, dog teams and drivers were part of the medical staff.

From Bethel, Abraham came to Anchorage. She was one of the first of six nurses to open the Alaska Native Service Hospital in 1954. She worked as a nurse in Anchorage, Sitka, Juneau and Yakutat and then, after 18 years, she retired and went back to school at Sheldon Jackson College.

She graduated after studying anthropology of Northwest Coast Indians and became associate dean of students at Sheldon Jackson.

Though Abraham is now working to help students adapt to the rigors of

school once they've reached college age, she believes that the effort to help Alaska Native students adapt should start much earlier.

Since the early 1970s, when she was at Sheldon Jackson, Abraham has been working to establish bi-lingual education for children. Children should be taught in nursery schools in their Native language, according to Abraham.

Just a couple of years ago, she went back to school again. This time she studied human resource development in Hawaii. Cross-cultural coursework and field work in Tonga showed Abraham examples of successful bi-lingual education.

Western society is based on left-brain — analytical — thinking, says Abraham, while Native culture is based on right-brain thinking, such as oral traditions.

It's important to teach the child Western left-brain thinking in the language of the home, she said. That way it can be more easily transferred once the child learns English, she added.

Abraham knows bi-lingual education for pre-schoolers is an uphill battle, so for now she makes sure students have a support system while they go through college.

And with her behind them, they know they do.