

# Leask: Native future depends on unity

by Janie Leask

for the Tundra Times

Unity does not come easily to Alaska Natives. We are many peoples — Aleut, Inupiaq, Athabascan, Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Yupik — with many differences.

Most of the differences between us, we encourage, indeed celebrate. It is with pride that we share the uniqueness of each of our diverse cultures.

Some differences, though, we must work to set aside for the well-being of our group as a whole. Instead of these differences, it is our similarities on which we focus.

The Alaska Federation of Natives was formed to address the similar challenges that face all Alaska Natives. Whether at a village, region or statewide level, we have found that unity is a tool — with many benefits. It is our strength as Native people. In many instances, our success has been based on the ability to set aside our individual differences and work together toward common goals.

Yet, unity cannot be taken for granted. It is a choice, and at times, our differences have even seemed greater than our similarities. AFN is a membership organization, and in the past, many of our members have chosen to leave AFN. All have, also,

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chosen to later rejoin and complete the circle of unity.

Following the recent AFN convention, the Tanana Chiefs Conference and the Association of Village Council Presidents withdrew their membership in the Alaska Federation of Natives. We were sad to see them go, for it meant the loss of two important members.

The loss of these two organizations will not threaten AFN's survival — we are still 35 members strong with each region represented on our Board of Directors.

The loss of these two organizations does not mean that their regions will no longer be represented in AFN. We are structured with three representatives from each region for villages, non-profit associations and corporations.

The loss of these two organizations, however, cannot be so easily dismissed. Losing members always hurts an organization, and AFN is no exception.

Both the village representatives and regional corporations in the Doyon and Calista regions will continue to speak for the concerns of their respective regions. However, it cannot be expected that representation of these regions can be as strong with one of the three regional representatives missing.

It is no secret that our Native community has been divided over the 1991 issue. The center of the debate at the convention was whether it was possible to get a QTE with an acceptable disclaimer in the 1991 legislation. This is something we all wanted. Still, convention delegates decided, by a 3 to 1 vote, that if this was not possible, we should still push for the 1991 legislation this year. As a group, we have made our choice. Now, we need to live with that choice and move on.

In the past year, the AFN staff has spent most of its time on the 1991 issue. For this, we have no apologies. There is no greater challenge to our people than the potential loss of

ancestral lands. However, it has left us with little time to address other important issues.

In my President's report to the AFN convention delegates, I stated that if we did not put 1991 behind us, we would find that the damage we have sustained will not be repaired by congressional acts, tribal governments or anything else.

Now, we need to come together, not split apart, as we address the many issues that face us — status and power of tribal governments; economic development; jobs and income for Bush villages; ensuring the best possible education for our children; confronting alcohol, drug abuse, family violence, crime and related community problems; continued implementation of ANCSA, ANILCA and other key pieces of federal legislation; and continued protection of our subsistence rights.

Unity will not only make us stronger as we face these issues, but our future as a people is dependent on it. We hope the Tanana Chiefs Conference and the Association of Village Council Presidents will recognize the strengths and benefits of unity and ultimately rejoin ANF. We all recognize that the benefits of their participation extends beyond these two regions. Let us set aside our differences and work together.