

# 'I sat there and realized how powerful this moment was, to witness this...'

by Theresa Demientieff Devlin  
for the Tundra Times

SISIMIUT, GREENLAND — During our journey to the Inuit Circumpolar Conference in Sisimiut, I was reminded I was an Indian aboard this charter. It was not in a negative manner; it was friendly, yet it made me think about this trip in a different light.

We stopped twice, first at Yellowknife, N.W.T., to refuel. We were wondering how long we would be on the ground, then how long would we be able to walk around. Outside the window were the Royal Canadian police with red lights flashing and an announcement that we were to remain on the jet.

The police remained there until we lifted off. Again we stopped to refuel and were reminded we could not leave the plane. We remained onboard the charter until we landed in Greenland.

The welcome was made by the pilot. "The temperature is 10 degrees."

"Oh, no!" We were prepared for the worst. As we filed off the airplane, we found it very warm. It was the first hint of the differences. It was 10 degrees Celsius.

We were divided into two groups to complete the last leg of our journey to Sisimiut. Our group traveled via helicopter, and the other traveled by ship. It was a 40-minute flight.

Looking over the land, it reminded me of the Tangle Lake area between Cantwell and Paxton: No trees, just small lakes, some waterfalls and rock.

We circled Sisimiut, and it looked to me like old Marshall, a village along the Yukon. The houses were mostly uniform in appearance, painted in bright colors and very cheerful.

Mayor Ove Rosing Olsen and a small delegation met us as we landed. We were assigned accommodations to private homes, the school or dormitories. That was when I first met Louise. She spoke no English and, well, I could not speak her language, not any Eskimo at all.

I, being relatively confident, thought it made no difference. Her home was very warm, cheerful, neat, rather artistic and clean. Right away she made me "Kaffe" and set buttered sweet biscuits on the coffeetable.

She, her daughter Najarak and her granddaughter Hunuoratiqq and I sat together. No way could we communicate. We all sat smiled at each other. I made feeble attempts at giving compliments.

I looked over the living room, and all of this beautiful beadwork caught my eye. There were several dolls all dressed in beaded dresses and bonnets standing on beaded doilies. There were beaded candles, beaded jars, beaded window decorations, just beautiful beadwork. I was amazed.

Well, that was my connection. I brought out my beaded purse, my wallet and change purse. They were really excited to see this style. They couldn't figure how it was affixed to the material.

I could understand facial expressions so I was able to gesture from then on to start our communications. It became a challenge. First it was at the level of expressions, gestures. When we were feeling pretty competent, company came. Albinus, Louise's son, his girlfriend Julie and her brother — my first link to English. Julie and her brother could speak a little, enough to get around our initial acquaintance.

They were really surprised to find

out I was Indian. They had never heard of Athabascans. I explained some basic information of the Native peoples of Alaska. I wished I had some pictures and postcards of home to share our people. Well, the best I could do was to sit down and draw.

I was so surprised to learn that they were governed by the Danish, that they maintained a strong belief that they were part of the land, that they didn't believe in owning it, that they shared it. Their concern was that there was now introduction of wealthier people coming into Greenland to build bigger and more expensive homes. These people then turned around to sell the homes, and this was the introduction to ownership.

They told me of the dogteams. Theirs fan out in a row. I asked if they experienced any dogfights. They indicated that when there's a new team, there is usually a fight to establish the leader. Once that is understood, there are generally no problems. The

ference. They, too, were really surprised to learn I was Indian.

I thought that this was good time to use the bathroom, so I asked, and the woman took me to a small room, without a door, no signs to indicate whether it was a men's or women's room. When I asked, the reply was yes.

I went on in to find a single sink, a mirror, and two small closet type bathrooms with doors for privacy. The toilet paper holder, unlike ours, was with a side open so one could easily slide a new roll on without fussing to replace the old roll. The toilet itself looked the same, yet when I went to flush, the knob on top was the only possible way to flush. So I pulled and it started flushing. What a great idea!

As I was leaving I felt a little concern for how I was going to deal with this men's-women's room during the conference.

Louise and I walked back to the house and went to bed. I noticed that

to be established so they could communicate better.

It was truly amazing to be there to observe. Within me were questions: Would it be possible to unite our Indian Nation? How? Are we that different that we couldn't manage somehow to unite?

As they talked, I watched the course the dialogue took, into areas of mutual concern as human beings, then as Eskimos. I noticed how the division of nations came down from time to time.

I felt a twinge of anger to see that these people were divided politically, that they were bound by invisible power to remain dedicated to their national leadership. How difficult it is to move away from what is familiar. Just as I felt, without the security of familiarity, it is difficult to trust. Then as they talked about the oil spill in Alaska, they commented how good it was of the Soviet Union to send help in the cleanup.



Family members who opened their home to Theresa Devlin included, from left, Najarak, holding her daughter Hunuoratiqq, Louise and Ole.

dogs are a type of husky, great in structure. They allow no other breeds into the country. They do not allow cats.

They enjoy the natural resources of muktuk, black berries, seals, walrus, shrimp, reindeer and various varieties of fish. Most foods are imported from Denmark and Canada.

There was something about these people that caught my eye. I could not identify what it could be for awhile, so I just shoved it aside for the time being. We shared our dinner, then the English speaking guests left, and I just ate. I was becoming a little tired by then, and I felt a little lonesome for English, somebody to talk to, just casual conversation, a joke, anything, just something familiar!

I asked about where I was going to sleep. I was taken upstairs, passing a room with a double bed and crib. No, I wouldn't be sleeping there. The next room past that had a king-sized bed and a smaller single. I was offered the back side of the king or the single. I chose the single. It was then I realized I would not be in the privacy of my own room.

I wanted some fresh air, so I managed to tell Louise I wanted to walk. She understood and took me to the conference site. Some women were working on the last minute touches. I looked and found the interpreters' booths, lined up in a row, and the speaker podium.

The tables were set in for the delegates, the balcony for observers and chairs set up for elders and guests.

One of the women could speak English, and we talked about the con-

ference. They, too, were really surprised to learn I was Indian. They had never heard of Athabascans. I explained some basic information of the Native peoples of Alaska. I wished I had some pictures and postcards of home to share our people. Well, the best I could do was to sit down and draw.

They next morning Louise woke me up for breakfast and off to the ICC we went. We found seats up in the balcony and in the front row. As the conference opened with a prayer, I listened and glanced around at all of the bowed heads.

Then the Greenland Singers sang songs, and we were all invited to join to sing their national anthem. Then the East Greenland Eskimos performed their song and dance. It was very interesting. Their songs were very much like a chant, a little like the New Zealand Maori singing, and the women swayed their hips a little, like the Hawaiians. They beat the drum from the bottom side of the drum.

Then the conference started. A warm welcome was extended to the Soviet delegation.

I sat there and realized how powerful this moment was, to witness this first time that the representation of the Eskimo people from four countries was present. It was dramatic to witness them talking about how they maintained empty chairs to represent the Soviet Eskimos, to acknowledge their absence yet to symbolize that they were not out of mind.

They recalled Eben Hobson's dream that they would all someday sit together.

They spoke of their concerns, the environment, pollution, the ozone layer, the oil spill in Alaska, their natural resources, a common dialect



The mountain Nassask towers behind the community of Sisimiut, Greenland, the site of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference.

The Canadians spoke of shame, in regard to their government. The officials sat by and let it be in the hands of others to clean it up.

They then talked of the Indians, I sat right up as if I were being called. They spoke of the Indians in Canada dealing with their land claims, protests against the government. Could that be the reason we couldn't get off the jet, unrest?

As the experience was settling within my thoughts, I went back with Louise to the house. As I walked, I talked out loud, hoping that she could understand, all the time knowing that she couldn't. I felt such strong emotions of confusion. How could it be that we as humans share so much, the world, the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars, and yet we don't know that much about each other?

We share emotions, concerns, need

for song, dance, fellowship, and yet we are strangers with one another. I went back wishing that I could find a small private place to cry and be alone.

As the days went by, I decided that I would not be this way again, so I best make this a good trip. I called Julie and asked her to tell Louise I wanted

in the door put a little tension in the air. That was complicated with the notion that the other person is so used to this policy that even if they caught me by surprise, it would not make a bit of difference other than the element of surprise.

I found myself questioning their at-

dress among the girls and younger generation. They were obviously influenced by Denmark and Europe. They are a very proud people.

Louise's grandson Ole lives with her and ultimately slept with us in the same bedroom. I found that just too much for my Catholic upbringing to accept

dignity, the eloquence, the enthusiasm of song, the gestures. Everything about their performance was exciting.

The audience was captivated by these dancers. They stole the show. When they finished they received a standing ovation. They returned to the stage and once again danced and sang. During their dancing, I was reminded of a childhood experience, a traditional potlatch. Pius Savage danced this way, with strong and powerful movements, with heart, with every ounce of energy.

I thought, knowing how performers and audience interrelate with one another, these people will not go back home the same. No, when a performer does well, the audience reacts just as these people did. There is a flow of energy from dancers to audience. The audience is receiving and enjoying. There is energy. It comes alive.

These people would go back to their country with a strong bond to this experience. The odd thing is that these Eskimos from the Soviet Union had learned or relearned dance from a videotape taken of the Kotzebue dancers at an earlier ICC.

They taught themselves and added their dress to complete it with their style.

As the ICC was winding down, I was very proud of our Alaskan delegation.

I did notice that we, all Alaskans, have become very political in our reaction to the land claims, perhaps just a little too much.

I wanted to do something to share my culture with Louise, so I called Julie to have her tell Louise that I was going to make Fish Ice Cream for the family. I needed to go to the store.

We went to the store, and I went around looking for white fish. I knew I wouldn't find exactly what I needed. Substitution would be necessary. We found some kind of fish. It looked good. Then I found the raisins, sugar. No, I wouldn't need to buy it, she had some at home.

Then I looked everywhere for shortening. I kept saying shortening, shortening, that's all I need now, shortening. I kept repeating it over and over in my head. Then when I couldn't find it anywhere, I started with the clerks. You know Crisco, Fluffo, shortening, shortening!

They made phone calls to try and locate someone who could speak English. No luck. Then in came the manager. He said in broken English, can I help you? Yes, at last someone who knows English. I am looking for shortening, you know Crisco, Fluffo, shortening!

His face was blank. I do not understand. I almost started into a round of Momma's little baby loves shortening, shortening, Momma's little baby loves shortening bread. Then I knew I was on the brink of being ridiculous.

I brought him to the section with butter. He just said only that or fat is what we have. Well, that's right. I just took the lard and thanked everyone involved.

I did make the ice cream. They watched as I added all of the ingredients. I worked at whipping it just as Mom used to do. I actually sweated as I worked, and they tasted it. That's about it, they just tasted it.

I left Sisimiut by ship on the return trip. I stood and looked out over this ocean, the blue sky and felt the warm sun. As I looked, I wondered at the ICC, the Eskimos, the people of Greenland, and I remembered what so impressed me about those people: It was the dignity that they had in their walk, their language, their children.

And I felt I had learned a lot.

*As I looked, I wondered at the ICC, the Eskimos, the people of Greenland, and I remembered what so impressed me about those people: It was the dignity they had in their walk, their language, their children.*

a dictionary with their Native tongue and English. They talked about it and we did manage to locate two, English to Danish and Danish to English. The only trouble they didn't know how to read Danish.

So I decided to build my own dictionary. We worked on it during the evening hours. It was fun to go around the house and pick up items, or point them out, to slowly say the words and for me to write them out the best I could. We enjoyed this!

During the evening hours there were cultural events set up for the participants and community of Sisimiut to enjoy. It was an exchange of dance, songs. I watched it with Louise and Najarak at the house. We found it more relaxing just sit and sip Kaffe and nibble on pastries.

Louise started to take me to visit her older children. We walked to her son's house. There the family was celebrating a birthday for one of the children. A son, perhaps 2, even there

titude toward sexuality. They are very open about the very subject that we just have stopped whispering about. They have posters around and about that are very candid about everything. As example, in the bookstore, there was a poster with paperdolls, male, female, naked. Then there was nice display of Native clothing.

I, of course, having been raised Catholic, shuddered at the thought. I was wondering when did this get started? Were these people always this way? Are we the ones that are weird? Do we know shame better than they know pride or acceptance? Where do right and wrong start and end? Who set the boundaries? How do I face these things here in this land that knows only what is acceptable and familiar?

One evening we went to a type of a rock concert. It was held about 15 miles from the townsite, back toward the heliport. They had set up a huge tent. There we listened to a number

easily. I found more ways to avoid going to bed. I'd sit up and work on the dictionary til 2 a.m. every night.

Ole was very handsome, pleasant, and was eager to teach me their language. He also had his little gestures he was teaching me. I'm a pretty good student. The night that I took them out to dinner, we were excited. The dining room of the hotel was filled with people from the ICC. and Ole was giving me a little check on my ability to convey the new gestures I learned.

Well, I went right through them with great zeal, and his eyes went blank, a little shock and embarrassment! I glanced around the table, and everyone was kind of taken back.

I asked Julie what was wrong? She asked me if I knew what that last one meant? Of course not, should I know? She said, no, you should not know, but it is not something you should be doing!

Suddenly my gestures came alive. I was swinging my finger at Ole, casting shame upon him as if he were my son. He smiled meekly. Teenagers! Obviously, their gift for mischief extended around the world.

It was about the fourth day of the ICC; the elders were to report about their work accomplished in their gathering. I was surprised. They were asking for recognition and participation in the decision making of the ICC.

I was stunned. How many of these conferences have gone on without this? There was a good deal of discussion on this matter. I couldn't believe it. I was curious as to how the Alaskan delegation would deal with this. They had no problems. A couple of elders sat at their table and participated in the decision making process!

Then I recalled how the Alaskans were very considerate to always accompany elders and make sure they were taken care of. I was proud of the Alaskans.

I was very aware of my role as press. My name tag had a big "Press" on it. It made me very sensitive to other press people. Sometimes the press is very arrogant.

In passing one Eskimo woman reporter, I could not help but overhear her saying to her cameraman, no, this ICC is not as big a deal as they think it is!

I was immediately angered. If the ICC can catch the eye and ear of the United Nations is that not a big deal?

Needless to say, I was torn at times, recognizing myself as press. Other times I was Alaskan, and other times an Athabaskan Indian. The Alaskan delegation of Eskimos made particular effort to bring me into their delegation room and make me feel as though I belonged.

During the Soviet evening of cultural exchange, I was sitting in the living room at Louise's, impressed with the power of the performance, the

Photo by Theresa Demientieff Devlin

Photo by Theresa Demientieff Devlin