

One by one, people make a commitment to sobriety

by Sen. John Binkley
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — One by one, members of the Alaska Native Blue Ribbon Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse stood up before the Alaska Federation of Natives Convention in October and described what their personal commitment to the sobriety movement meant to them.

For Maj. Gen. John Schaeffer, it meant that after all these years of dancing while under the influence of alcohol, after a year of sobriety he discovered he really couldn't dance after all!

For me, it meant deciding not to drink after my wife made that personal commitment during her first pregnancy. And after a close friend drowned in an alcohol-related accident, I discovered that a personal decision was not enough, that I had to use my role as an elected, public official to further the goal of sobriety as well.

In concluding our presentation at the AFN convention, commission members asked members of the audience to join them in standing together against a common threat — in wearing the lapel button with the commission's theme: "Our Spirit: Strong Sober" as a demonstration of personal commitment to sobriety.

With Native drummers dramatically setting the tone in the background, dozens of audience members stepped forward and made that commitment in front of family, friends and several thousand other Alaska Natives.

It was a powerfully moving experience. We hope it's just the beginning of the Blue Ribbon Commission's mission "to support and encourage the growing sobriety and drug-free movement among Alaska Natives."

The commission is the direct result of a resolution passed by the 1986 AFN Convention directing AFN to "monitor, evaluate and coordinate efforts to curb alcohol and drug abuse and work with local Native organizations to develop community-based alcohol abuse programs."

The Blue Ribbon Commission is made up of 13 committed individuals representing a variety of backgrounds and organizations.

We certainly aren't breaking new ground with our efforts. The sobriety movement has been growing for quite some time now — in quiet, hardworking programs here and there, in communities that have taken a stand against alcohol, in families that have determined they want a better environment for their children and among scores of individuals who have made a personal commitment to sobriety.

One of the prime forces in this movement from the very beginning has been the *Tundra Times*. The efforts of this newspaper have done much to raise our consciousness about the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse and the many benefits of sobriety.

The commission has five goals. They are:

- To support and encourage alcohol and drug-free Alaska Native families.

- To encourage the practice of traditional Native values.

- To support existing groups that are working to promote sobriety.

- To encourage the formation of sobriety groups in every Alaska community.

- To encourage sober Alaska Native leaders.

We hope to help each of these efforts through:

- Education about the problems of alcohol and drug abuse and where to seek information and help.

- Support for existing groups that are

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working to promote sobriety among Alaska Natives.

- Encouragement of the positive values and healthy alternatives to alcohol and drug abuse.

We'll be making extensive use of the media in our efforts — with a series of public service announcements for radio and television, as well as printed advertisements in newspapers all over Alaska.

We plan to organize and support a speakers bureau to address sobriety issues and to organize and to promote healthy Native role models.

In future weeks we'll be calling attention to ways in which public agencies, private businesses and groups and individual Alaskans can help in this statewide movement.

Sometimes it takes dollars, and certainly a major effort will be raising the funds necessary to fulfill this work.

Sometimes it takes a personal commitment such as that made by dozens of proud people during the AFN Convention.

I learned early on that the problems of alcohol and drug abuse affect all of us, no matter what our own personal stand. I believe the benefits of a sober, drug-free society will affect all of us also — in ways we had never before considered.

Certainly the decision made by my wife and myself more than 10 years ago has enriched our marriage and the relationship we have with our children in ways I had never thought possible.