

VISTA Takes Penetrating Look Into Native Education System

A VISTA Volunteer, Mrs. Rosaire M. Kennedy, who with her husband, Tim, spent

almost a year and a half at the village of Noorvik, has made a penetrating look into the educational system of the native people primarily that of the Bureau of Indian Affairs although, she said, the state system was not much better.

Mrs. Kennedy has put her thoughts in writing and submitted them to Senator Robert F. Kennedy, chairman of the Senate Sub-committee on Indian Education.

As her main argument, Rosaire Kennedy pointed out the methodical breaking down of the native people's

cultural heritages by the educational methods of the present day system of schooling in Alaska.

Saying that she and her husband had spent 15 months at Noorvik, Mrs. Kennedy said:

"Our first reaction to the educational system in the villages was one of shock and the picture became grimmer as time went by. The enclosed articles point out some of the more outstanding defects—inadequate and irrelevant curriculum, segregation not only in the

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Penetrating Look...

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schools, but between the teachers and the community they serve, and the literal rapping of pride and cultural values."

Mrs. Kennedy went on to say that an Eskimo girl from Wainwright on the Arctic coast told them about her difficulties in learning to read from the Dick and Jane series "which are still used today."

"She said that for the longest time she could not say 'Oak Tree Hill' because in Wainwright there are no trees or hills and she had no idea what the book was even talking about," Rosaire Kennedy wrote.

"This girl managed to survive in the educational system and has graduated from the University of Alaska but she is exceptional.

"What of the others who are so confused and overwhelmed by the foreign images in their books (cars, mailmen, even streets and sidewalks) that the English language remains completely foreign to them?

"To make a comparison one could picture children in the first grade of a New York school learning to read from books that spoke of Tunu and Putu watching their father hitch his dogs before setting out to hunt caribou."

Mrs. Kennedy argued that this type of curriculum not only impedes the learning process but impressed on the children that they were inferior to the white race pictured in their books.

"Many BIA teachers are prone to reinforce this myth either overtly or subtly by their methods of dealing with the students and the community at large.

"Thus, it was possible for an intelligent man, member of the Noorvik village council, holder of a master navigation ticket, who served in the intelligence division of the Army, to tell us in all sincerity that he knew Eskimos were not as smart as whites and never could be.

"And he was not alone in this sentiment. Time after time people actually apologized to us for having to live among them and referred to themselves as 'dumb Eskimos' or 'dirty Eskimos.'

"This is what the BIA system of 'education' has done to the people of Noorvik, educated them into believing that they are second-class citizens.

"These are people who have a rich and noble ancestry with much to be proud of, and who have survived in the most inhospitable climate in the world without any of our modern conveniences."

Mrs. Kennedy discussed briefly the separation of teachers from the villagers.

"Teachers are cautioned against being too friendly with the members of the community and one teacher in Kotzebue felt that his job was threatened because he had entered an Eskimo home."

Rosaire Kennedy deplored the little or no orientation of incoming teachers as to the background of the native culture and the problem of transition that is going on now.

"We have not teachers

who have been with the BIA in rural Alaska for five or ten years and had no more insight into the people than the average man in New York," Mrs. Kennedy pointed out.

"They viewed Eskimos merely as welfare recipients who were either too stupid or lazy to learn. I feel that this lack of contact and understanding on the part of the teacher is very significant.

"It would seem almost impossible for a white middle class citizen to teach members of such a vastly different culture effectively without extensive training and constant dialogue with the people of the particular community he serves.

"Aside from this, the segregation helps to perpetuate the white superiority myth and if a man has lost his pride what motivation is there for learning?"

In her lengthy testimonial to Senator Kennedy, Mrs. Kennedy suggested the following:

That textbooks adapted to the rural Alaskan child be introduced; the introduction of courses in Eskimo or Indian history relating past cultural values to the present;

That prominent native Alaskan leaders and topics such as the formation of native associations and the land claims be included in current affairs discussions;

That at least a month long orientation course be held for ALL new teachers, not just one-fourth of them;

That involvement by teachers in the community life be actively encouraged, if not made mandatory;

That the present system of sending students to segregated high schools thousands of miles from home be ended;

That the BIA launch recruitment campaign for qualified and properly motivated teachers on a wide scale.

Mrs. Kennedy said that the BIA was making changes for improvement but she thought the process of these changes might be too slow. She also commended the agency for sponsoring the teacher-aide program where local people are trained to assist in the village schools.

"I do not claim to be an expert on native affairs or education but it is a matter of conscience that I write this letter to you," Mrs. Kennedy told Senator Kennedy.

She told the Senator that he had recently visited some Indian reservations in the Lower 48.

"If there is any possibility that you could make such a visit to Alaska I would urge you to do so," she said.

She said that aside from educational problems, there were many needs that remain to be met; that if a man of his stature "could learn first hand about the problems and lend support to a development program it might make all the difference in the world."

Sen. Robert Kennedy's committee members are slated to come to Alaska some time in the future but it is not known whether he will be coming along on the trip.