

A heartfelt salute to all high school and college graduates

With the advent of each spring and early summer season, herding return to spawn on kelp and hemlock and Aleut fishing boats receive their Orthodox blessings. Bowhead whales follow retreating ice north through the Bering Sea and the ice goes out on the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers. The primal sound of millions of waterfowl settling to their tundra nesting sites fill the river deltas.

These are important motifs of the cycle of northern life. But there is another we'd like to celebrate with this issue of *Tundra Times*, equally as important as those associated with the vital resurgent subsistence cultures of Alaska's indigenous peoples. Every year at this time, too, scores of Alaska Native youth and young adults receive their high school diplomas and college degrees. This is truly a time to be proud of this upcoming generation. Against many obstacles they have struggled to gain knowledge, to expand their vision, to learn new ways of thinking. They have done this not only to find and know themselves, but to better nurture their families, their communities, and even in their cultures.

We know that in order for the beauty, dignity and vitality of Alaska Native cultures to survive, we must essentially ask our young to learn and live a parallel way of doing things, not instead of the old ways, but in addition to them. Only this way will they be able to help shape the ongoing adjustments that indigenous and European cultures must make to one another, rather than being overcome by the waves of change rolling toward us all. We also now know, beyond any doubt, that carrying this heavy burden into the mainstream school system poses incredible challenges to our young, and sometimes exacts a heavy price. Yet this is precisely why the commitment of so many Native teachers, counselors and administrators to return to their home village or region is so vital, and worthy of special praise. For we are not simply graduating smart kids. We are watching the next generation of earth-shakers, cage-rattlers, boat-rockers, in short the next generation of leaders, march down that aisle—or across that gym floor—in an important rite of passage that signifies hope for the future of all Alaska Natives.

Years ago, as the first Europeans began moving into the country—our country—many of the forbears of this year's graduates began making some very tough choices. They knew, those wise elders, that some compromises would have to be made in living the old ways. They gave up their nomadic cycle and began settling in permanent villages. This set in motion many other changes that rippled over the land. Today, their foresight is being vindicated as Native graduates affirm not only their cultural pride, but also their academic credentials. With their new tools, their innate integrity, a strong sense of community and the same knack for pragmatism that has allowed their people to persevere in the Arctic and sub-Arctic for millennia, our students are some of the best emissaries we have to help us bridge the gap that sometimes yawns open between ourselves and the newcomers in our land.

We offer this year's Native graduates our heartfelt congratulations on their achievements and wish them every success.