

Hensley joins UA Board of Regents

By Bill Hess
Tundra Times

The educational system in Alaska has done a poor job, teaching about land claims, Native history, language, and other issues important to Alaska Natives. That was the message Willie Hensley brought to a group of Alaska Native students in Anchorage just before Gov. Bill Sheffield announced his appointment to the University of Alaska Board of Regents.

Hensley replaces John Shively, who has been appointed to serve as the governor's chief of staff. Hensley is chairman of the United Bank of Alaska and president of the NANA Development Corp. Shively is a former NANA Development vice-president.

"The University and the public are extremely fortunate to have a man of his wide experience and commitment on the Board of Regents," Sheffield said of Hensley. "I'm very pleased that he has volunteered his time and talent to the state."

In his impromptu address to the student group, Hensley remembered his own college days, including the years he put in at the University in Fairbanks from 1960-62. Natives coming into the school often lacked any kind of "network" to give them the kind of support they were used to receiving at home through the extended family and friends, he said.

"Education is an individual experience," Hensley said of the American system. "We are a social people. We'd rather not live between four walls. We like to get out."

It is sometimes very hard for people from the villages who like to get out and interact with each other to make it in the American college environment, Hensley said.

"At the start of each year, there would be a fair number of freshmen. Before the semester was over, 'poof!' it was like a genie had taken them away!" Hensley told the students of his own education; how it had lacked consistency during his elementary years as his family would journey inland from Kotzebue to game and timber. In the eighth grade he transferred to a Christian run school in Tennessee, where he completed high school.

In college, his studies and research created an interest in Native land ownership which led to his involvement in the land claims movement. Ironically, Hensley noted that after the corporate structure mandated by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was in place and his region seemed to be doing well, accidental death, alcoholism, suicide and crime skyrocketed. "It couldn't be that we were poor," he said.

"Our people, Eskimos, had never had anything of consequence . . . we began to see also that some of the worst of our people, myself included, were the leaders (in the ANCSA corporations and the resultant politics)." By "worst," Hensley said he meant those



Willie Hensley addresses the UAA Alaska Native Student Organization. Seated, left to right, are Dr. Ted Māla, Barbara Nelson, president; Georgianna Starr, secretary, and Jean Rashleger, treasurer.

PHOTO BY BILL HESS

adept in white-man style politics and money dealing.

"They are the ones who have to be mean and tough,

and maybe they can't always tell the truth, or they have to keep silent. They are the ones who are vocal, and don't

mind telling others what to do. Our people are not like that."

Hensley noted that every in-

(Continued on Page Five)

Your education is for your people: Hensley

(Continued from Page Two)

stitution known to the white man has come into the Native world, and the problems have expanded accordingly. "But where are ours? Who has responsibility to you, Athabascan? Aleut? Tlingit?" he asked.

Such concerns led to the beginning of Inupiat Ilitqusiat — the spirit movement in NANA, with the traditional leaders, the Elders, being proclaimed as the leaders who know the cultural values important for spiritual survival.

"Your education is not for

you," Hensley added. "Your education is for you to help people."

Hensley expressed his disappointment with the school system's failure to adequately teach about Native land claims, history and culture, but he expressed hope that in the future, there could perhaps be more interaction between the university and the lower level public schools which would result in students being better prepared in every way when they entered college.