

Convention brought into homes by AFN TV

By BILL HESS

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Joe Paul of Kipnuk couldn't leave home this year, but still managed to participate in the Alaska Federation of Natives convention, and was even able to hear parts of it discussed in his own language.

Rural Alaskans across the state were able to watch AFN action as it happened right on their television screens, thanks to a broadcasting effort launched by the Northwest Arctic School District's Instructional Television program and the University of Alaska.

"I think it was the kind of coverage that will change the way programming is handled in Alaska," boasted Don Rinker of Kotzebue. Rinker directed the 19-person crew which produced 54 hours of television coverage incorporating five languages. The broadcasts went out live over the Learn Alaska Network and the Alaska State Satellite Program and were

available to all stations in the state to pick up and use on their own news programs or however they would like.

"You have two basic audiences in the state of Alaska," said Rinker, "the urban audience and the rural audience. Ninety-five percent of the time they're viewing the same thing and it is compatible to both audiences. But sometimes there is something special, which really needs to be done in Native languages. We felt the AFN convention was one of these special events."

Besides English, portions of the convention went out with Inupiaq, Yu'pik, Aleut, and Tlingit explanations. Six volunteer translators, four of them Elders, took on the task of explaining the proceedings in their own tongues. Rural residents could participate directly by calling a toll-free number provided by Zenith.

Many did call, Rinker said, and expressed pleasure at the

opportunity. Paul, for example, called and said he had wanted to come to Anchorage, but was unable. He enjoyed the coverage which came over his television set.

"It shows that Native language audiences can be taken into account, and should be taken into account," said Rinker.

The Native broadcasts were done over the Learn Alaska Network. The broadcasts were done in segments of 15 minutes each over an hour period, according to Rinker, with the interpreter giving a summary of what had just happened at the convention, and an explanation of what was coming up. "These were really discussions which high school students could understand," explained Rinker, "targeted so that they could relate it to what they were studying in school."

Undertaking such a large project in an urban setting proved to be a true challenge to a television crew from the Arctic bush. Producer Steve Strait noted that the seven crew members who came down from Kotzebue and the NWASD, brought along 3300 pounds of television equipment. A blizzard fierce enough to shut down the Kotzebue schools struck the town as crew members were loading the

plane but fortunately eased up enough to allow them to take off, before shutting down the airport for the entire weekend.

In Anchorage, NWASD producers joined some staff members of the University of Alaska Instructional Television Consortium and other crew members hired especially for the coverage.

"It's tradition with a large production to operate from a permanent, inside TV studio," noted Strait. "What was unusual about our operation is that we took a television studio to the event, and built our own facility." To do so, the crew worked virtually all night Sunday Oct. 17 in the Sheraton Ballroom. Monday, they began taping the Alaska Native Health Board Conference which was held just before AFN.

From that point on, work went on virtually around the clock. Strait averaged three hours of sleep a night. "It was that way for just about everybody. I was very tired before the show, but I wasn't nervous. I was confident. Our people were the best. They were all professionals. They knew what to do."

When Pope John Paul visited Anchorage, Strait was working for Channel 13 and served as

pool-television co-ordinator. He was responsible for co-ordinating broadcasts from all the different channels and networks covering the events and feeding them to state-wide, national, and international pickups.

Although the operation was basically funded by the NWASD, they did receive some help. Wien donated five round trip tickets from Kotzebue to Anchorage. Legislative Affairs contributed \$5,000 to help defray expenses and Alascom provided the Zenith telephone number and the microwave links. Copies of the tapes will be turned over to AFN, which will be in charge of providing interested parties with desired coverage.

"I was raised in Anchorage," said Strait, recalling four-week delays before programming from the West Coast would reach Alaska's largest city. From there, it would work its way up to Fairbanks, and then gradually filter Northward. Always, the information was going North, with little coming back.

"I see this as a reversal of that process," said Strait, noting that with the satellite connections, material produced in the North for rural Alaskans can not be pickup up world-wide.