

Elders master teachers of traditional lifestyle

By Mary Jane Litchard

The following was presented at the 4th Annual Bering Straits Elders Conference

There have been so many Eskimo people who have passed on.

We have lost many wise elders and many young talented people like my late husband "Bib" Tevuk; the list goes on and on.

The majority of these Eskimo deaths are of young men, the most recent of Lloyd Natungok. Young men who would have continued hunting like their forefathers, support and raise their future families, and be leaders of their communities.

Each time I hear news of a young man being lost, having

accidental death or who dies from an illness, or have taken his own life, I get a fearful feeling within me that we are losing vital people for raising future Eskimos. It is so important to me that we survive as Eskimos to keep up our ancestral traditions of giving and sharing, going out to our vast ancient grounds to subsist as we live in this modern era.

Within my Eskimo side, our family have lost many who have gone on to the next world, like my aunts Bertha Walluk, Flora Avesuk, my uncles Floyd, Wilbur and David Walluk, our loving grandmother Fanny and my close brother Bobby Brown. Deaths of my friends and relatives have made

me think seriously of life. You realize how precious each one's life is and for me, it was a realization of being an Eskimo survivor.

Like many of my fellow students, we grew up in a changing world which is moving very fast and affecting our lives dramatically. When we entered schooling, our Eskimo education was shoved behind us and we were told that in order to survive in this world we must learn English and learn the dominate white human being ways.

For a long period of my life I lived in a sea of confusion. I did not clearly understand the dominant white man's materialistic way of life, the majority always rushing and eager to make money anyway they can. I did not know much of my own Eskimo culture for it was not taught in the schools and my people were a silent minority in this vast land.

Our teachers were from the Lower 48. They were not familiar with our way of life and customs; many had taught me (and others) to be ashamed of being an Eskimo. I saw myself as a spider, alone and dangling on a thin line trying so hard to get back on my web.

That delicate web above me is the Eskimo life and education I crave for and have not yet received. Although I am an adult, I am still in the elementary stage of learning my Eskimo culture, my heritage, and my language.

I strongly believe that we are losing many young people because of a lack of Eskimo education in our school age years. For instance, if Lloyd Natungok and my late husband Bib and his friends were educated in the traditional way of predicting upcoming weather, they probably would have been alive today.

With the wisdom of our elders behind us we would have been able to cope in this fast changing world. Through this education we would have grown up as much happier adults; alcohol and drug addiction, depression and suicidal attempts would have been deleted. We would have had a lot of exposure of doing and understanding many Eskimo ways.

I have many questions like how are fish skin boots made? How do we build emergency shelters when we are stranded in the tundra or out on the ice? When and how do we set traps for squirrels and how do we make squirrel skin parkas? How do we build sod houses? How far do we have to go to collect the sod? What is the technique of making a rain gut parka? How do we take out the sinew from an animal to make thread?

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Follow tradition of love and peace

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It is not too late to start our Eskimo education. We have many elders present here who can teach us the wisdom of our ancestors. We may lose this wisdom if we do not act right away. I realize that many of us are too busy in this world making a living.

We have let another culture dominate our way of life, thinking it will make living easier, but in the long run, life became harder. We are struggling to pay bills just to heat our homes and feed our families.

If we had kept our tradition of building sod houses, our homes would be warmer and we would not be involved in depleting Mother Earth's deep-embedded oil, causing a worldwide energy crisis and polluting our world's atmosphere.

I would like to see more of our Eskimo culture and educational series on TV. Ideas on TV are alien to our way of life where tons of precious oil get blown up and cars get smashed daily. Our children get the wrong impression of life when they see persons

being gunned down and witness the unjust ways of treating people. To better express myself, I will read from one of my poems titled "AN

ESKIMO DREAMER 'HINTING FOR WORLD PEACE'":

The people living on either side

There is killing, war and fear.

Someone frail in hunger just died.

So many lives in poverty, I hear.

Why have men ruined God's plan?

A designer with all his might,

Created all, gave life to man.

Each soul beautiful to his sight.

Why is there so much injustice?

Have you heard of the Eskimo days,

When my people turned to God's obedience,

To love, share for better ways?

It is not of my skin color I tell you all this.

It is of world peace - I hunger to make our home, earth, a bliss!

We, the remaining survivors of the Eskimos are in serious need of our Eskimo education and must be positive in our present and future plans of our people.

God created each one of us strong and unique with an abundant heart. He provided us with a bountiful land, and gave us a talented culture.

We must not forget our cultural needs and we must replenish our Eskimo spirit. As a people we must be united and educated in all fields of life.

We must not be blind with prejudice or hatred. We must follow our ancestral traditions of giving and sharing.

This war-stricken and poverty world is in need of love and peace and we can be the spiritual leaders to guide our world in that direction.

Abraham Lincoln once stated, "You cannot help men permanently by doing for them what they could and should do for themselves." I hope and pray that many young people will start looking up our elders and start seeking, individually, this Eskimo education.