

Degnan says Alaska Native names are a positive issue

by June I. Degnan

for the *Tundra Times*

UNALAKLEET — Using Alaska Native names on buildings and landmarks can be viewed as a positive racial issue.

We have been embroiled in a class and racial struggle with the state for the past century. As Alaska Natives we have not been treated as well or equally as our white counterparts.

Evidence of the cultural clash is reflected in the absence of our presence within the power structure of the state government and the educational system. The lack of political power and authority is further evidenced by the large numbers of our people in jail and confinement.

Alaska is our home and we must maintain order by commanding respect and by conducting ourselves respectably. Just because someone wants to treat us unfairly does not mean that we must allow it to happen. We have the ability to guard and protect our rights, if we choose to. As Alaska Natives we have been exposed to an overabundance of racial prejudice in our communities, both urban and rural.

The prejudice comes because the Outsiders are jealous and envious of our land ownership. We own the land they want. We must protect our land, language and identity.

It will take unity and a collective effort to defend and protect our rights. We must recognize that if one of us is made to suffer, we all will feel the pain of prejudice.

We have our own Native leaders who devoted their lives to securing our land and future. They left us with a

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legacy of hope for better to come. Their hard work and perseverance laid the groundwork for securing our land title. Their memory must continue to be revered and respected.

Our children must be reminded that we have our own heros. We must not allow someone else to write our history or create our heroes for us. We have struggled for a lifetime to gain title to our homeland. The struggle to keep the land is gaining momentum today. We will need all the support, strength and unity we can muster in order for us to survive in our homeland after 1991.

It is difficult for any minority to be recognized by society for the achievements attained in serving their own people and to be elevated into the place reserved for heros, no matter how deserving the person may be. The dominant culture will try to discredit the memories of our successes, ridicule our history and destroy our culture and respect by orchestrating name changes on buildings, landmarks and mountains. Don't allow it to happen.

June I. Degnan was born in Unalakleet, and her family has lived there for centuries. She is a Yupik Eskimo — a teacher, planner, writer and poet.