

Calista chairman says family comes first

by Barbara Crane
Tundra Times reporter

Ivan M. Ivan has seen a lot of changes in the world since he was born 44 years ago in the village of Akiak, about 20 miles up the Kuskokwim River from Bethel.

But the one thing that hasn't changed is his belief that the family comes first.

Ivan remembers working hard, even as a child, to provide food for his family.

"The main thing was to store enough fish away for the winter," he said. "We had very few store-bought items."

"That's the same thing my family does right now. Fishing all summer — work like heck 15 or 20 hours a day, cut the fish up, hang them, dry them, put them away. Then we're squared away."

Moose season brings more hard work.

"We always go get a couple of moose if we can. Then we can them, dry them, salt them, brine them — do anything we can to preserve the meat."

"And then we add a few things like ptarmigan, beaver, whatever we can go after."

"It's work, but a lot of it is fun. We go by the four seasons, not by 8 to 5. We bust our backs in the summer to provide for the rest of the year."

Ivan's parents encouraged him to get as much education as he could, so Ivan left Akiak to attend high school at Mt. Edgecumbe.

"My parents believed that education was required for survival," Ivan said.

"They encouraged us to go to school and work hard at it and then be



Calista Chairman Ivan M. Ivan.

got to understand the English language completely."

Last February Ivan was elected chairman of the board of directors of his regional Native corporation, Calista.

Calista Corp. has had serious financial problems in the past, but now Ivan feels it is turning around.

"Calista is doing much better than before," he said. "We're lean and trim!"

Ivan believes the creation of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act corporations placed overwhelming responsibilities on many of those who suddenly found themselves in charge.

"We just could not deal with all of a sudden starting up and running multi-million dollar corporations," he said. "We had consultants and lawyers left and right who came up here for a quick buck to 'help' us."

"But now we're doing fine. We'll survive, and that's the bottom line."

Ivan, who is also a major in the Alaska Army National Guard, credits the Guard with providing much of his

education and training.

He says it's no coincidence that so many Native leaders have Guard membership in their backgrounds.

"The Guard provides young people with education and leadership training that can get them ahead in the business world, too," he said. "We push them to take advantage of every opportunity available and to go as far as they want to."

The different jobs he's held have sometimes taken him away from home and family, but Ivan has definite plans about where he wants to spend the rest of his life.

"When I retire, I'll go home to Akiak and mush dogs with my brothers," he said. "There's so much to do there. It's wide open country where a person can do anything he wants."

"When I was younger, I used to wish that my region wasn't so old fashioned. The other regions seemed to be so much more modern."

"But now I'm happy with the way we are. It's better our way."

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whatever we wanted to be — either by living a traditional life or by moving into the other culture.

"We could live anywhere, just so we could provide for ourselves and our families."

Now Ivan is offering that same freedom of choice to his own children.

"I've got six kids," he said, "and they're good kids, too."

"After they're 18, they have to live their own lives and take care of themselves. They will have to make their own decisions, but I'll provide support however I can."

"I believe that as long as a person is brought up to survive and earn a living, whatever they want to become is their own business."

Because of his close relationship with his children, Ivan is especially aware of the way the world is changing for young Natives.

"I think boredom is one of the young people's biggest problems," Ivan said, "and that's what gets many of them into trouble."

"It's sad that so many of the older people who have the wisdom to help them are passing on."

He sometimes wishes things could be the way they were when he was young.

"My last child, who is 6 years old now, doesn't speak my language," Ivan said. "I just can't communicate with him in my language. But if he's going to compete in the world, he's