

# Student's poetry grows into play

By BILL HESS

Tundra Times Staff

*Imagine a village that isn't a village anymore.  
Imagine a house that once stood tall yet fails to stand any longer  
Imagine a dog that's kept tied and rots with no change.  
People had a way of talking  
But no longer have that way.  
We now know little of two languages; that hurts our education  
and destroys our tradition. These languages are everywhere and  
only the educated know from where they come.  
Imagine the languages being turned around;  
Imagine it being easy to survive without a pencil and a paper.  
Just imagine!*

A young Yupic girl lies motionless, just above ground level. Six of her peers, all boys, surround her. Her arms are folded across her chest, and her body is wrapped in a shawl. A white man standing nearby gives directions to her friends.

"Now the pallbearers," he says, "we need one here, one there . . ." and so on.

"Over-my-dead-body!" a small voice suddenly rises from the girl. The white man looks at her in amazement.

"Right!" he says. "Exactly!"

The white man is neither a preacher nor an undertaker, but rather an actor and a teacher. The girl is not a dead body at all, but is a student in Akiak who is not only taking part in a traveling drama workshop sponsored by the Alaska Repertory Theatre and brought to Akiak by Dana Hart and Nancy Krebs, but is also the author of the above poem, which is being used as the basis for a play which will be put on by the juniors and seniors of Akiak High School.

"Sad, maybe, or angry," Sarah Kawagley answers when asked what she felt when she wrote the poem. "Or maybe I felt like I wanted to write something down!"

Sarah originally wrote the poem in a journal which she was keeping as part of an assignment in Bill Chalmers English class.

"I liked the poem right away," Chalmers a poet himself, remembers. "I told her so. I asked her if I could make a copy and show it to the students." She agreed, and he did. The

students took to the poem and soon began to express their own imaginings, as Chalmers hurriedly scribbled their words down on a legal pad.

*Imagine that we hadn't been ripped off  
—by the government  
—by industry  
Imagine that no one ever knew — of our nature — of our oil —  
of our nearness to Russia.  
Imagine feeling sad —  
Imagine never knowing the loss.  
Imagine that there'd never be another dam  
Imagine no floods  
Imagine no roads  
Imagine no animals killed  
no fish dying  
no bad feelings.*

The students rattled on, expressing anger that usually remains inside them once they get into the classroom.

Chalmers describes Kawagley — Little Wawa to her family and friends — as "very sensitive . . . she feels very deeply . . . intelligent."

Kawagley was inspired to write her poem by a village "which used to be Akiak" but which was abandoned when the inhabitants moved across the Kuskokwim River to its present site. "I don't think there's much now," she says of the village, "but there were old houses, old churches. I think they rotted away."

*Imagine no campers polluting, littering  
Imagine no hunters killing — disturbing  
Imagine no trees lost, no eggs crushed, no firewood stolen,  
no beauty destroyed.  
Imagine no experimenting —  
What are they trying to do anyway?  
To take our land — to make more money —  
They care more for money than they care for anything else.  
We need our land — we hardly use their money —  
We eat from our homes.  
We don't buy importance — we need only to be remembered  
by our families.*

Although Kawagley lives in an Alaskan Bush community reached by no roads, the advent of television has connected her with the rest of America in a deep way. In her journal she tells of her favorite performers: Andrew Stevens of "Code Red" and Melissa Gilbert of "Little House on the Prairie." Yet, as she states in her poem, the onslaught of modern American has weakened her use of her Native tongue, while leaving her with a lot to learn about English.

"I don't know a lot of the words in Yupic," she explains. "The hard words. Or feelings. I can't translate them . . . most of the time, I speak English."

An old value which Kawagley holds strong to yet is love of family. In her journal, she writes of her deep affection for her father.

*Imagine holding strong to our families.  
We stay a family to help our parents to survive.  
And to fight for the land  
To try and save it from those who do not love the land.  
We stay to survive, to fight against the lined up houses  
ugly houses —  
All the same  
all white  
all brown*

Kawagley has her dreams for the future. "I think I want to join the army," she explains. "It interests me, all the stuff they do, to handle a rifle, or march down the road. Do some drills. It seems like fun to be over there. I've heard about it mostly from my brother, and my dad.

*Big clumps of roads  
cut down trees  
to fight against the highways  
animals dying  
men dying  
Eskimos dying  
traditions dying.  
Change, bad change, will come driving down that highway  
and crime  
and drunkenness  
and death  
Imagine no new people coming to our land.  
different people  
money people  
people who don't care.  
Imagine only the old people staying*

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Sarah Kawagley

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# Poetry in Akiak

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*People who care  
who understand  
who learn our language  
who love our land.*

Kawagley's poem grew into a play only after Chalmers took it and the students' feelings to a conference he attended. He brought the legal pad on the plane with him. "I was going to re-arrange their words, and put them in a logical order, Chalmers remembers. "But when I began to work with them, I found out there was nothing I could do to improve them." So Chalmers left the words just as they fell out of his Yupic students' mouths, and just as they appear here.

*Imagine Washington —  
being honest, keeping its promises  
knowing how it feels to be poor  
thinking about the Eskimo  
caring to ask the Eskimo what it is we want.  
Imagine thinking of tomorrow  
as an exciting time in which to live  
instead of an angry time in which to die.  
Imagine tomorrow as a day when those things we do for fun  
no longer are dying, but come to life again.  
Imagine — —  
hunting  
fishing  
trapping  
hooking  
mushing  
skating  
sliding  
laughing — — — forever.*