

Annual meeting was sad and happy

by Hannah Paniyavluk Loon
Chukchi News and Information Service

KIANA — Every year the NANA Regional Corp. works in cooperation with Maniilaq Association and other agencies in Northwest Alaska to set up an annual meeting for the NANA shareholders.

Inupiat Paitot
People's Heritage

OPINION

The annual meeting draws people from all the Inupiaq communities in the state, including Anchorage and Fairbanks.

The people in the village hosting the conference — this year, Kiana — build additions to their houses, buy furniture, set up extra beds and expect to have between one and 30 guests in their homes. Men prepare by hunting for caribou. Women take out their salmonberries, blueberries and *quagaq* (wild rhubarb) they picked from last summer's harvest.

The women and their daughters cook meals and bake endlessly to get ready for their guests.

This year there were so many familiar faces from the villages that you had to keep your salutations and conversations brief. Kiana High School was packed with NANA shareholders, officials from the Red Dog Mine, NANA Regional Corp., the Northwest Arctic Borough School District, the Northwest Arctic Borough, Maniilaq Association, as well as bankers.

This is a time when shareholders get to see their friends again, a time to recognize people for their heroic efforts and a time to reward people for their hard work. It is also an opportunity for concerned shareholders to confront NANA and Red Dog officials about local hire, jobs and environmental concerns.

I was amazed by the report our resigning president, Willie Hensley, gave about the corporation's profits and ventures and the fact that NANA responded quickly to disasters, such as the recent oil spill in Valdez. The reports he gave were positive and short. We, as shareholders, were fortunate to have him serve us; he kept our corporation both operational and profitable.

Also, I was moved by reports from the school district, from Selawik Search and Rescue and from Kotzebue Search and Rescue. Bobby Schaeffer, chairman of the school board, reported that through the district screening process, they found that 20 percent of the students enrolled have fetal alcohol syndrome. To me, this was shocking news. No doubt, this is also the case in my home village of Selawik.

Myrna Ticket, on behalf of Selawik Search and Rescue, recognized the chairman of each village search and rescue committee for their efforts and assistance in searching for my late uncle, William Foster, of Selawik.

As I recall, I was in Selawik when the big storm started last February, and his long absence had begun to alarm his family and the people. Because he had fallen into a crevasse up in the mountains, he was injured and the searchers missed him by 10 feet. They did not see him.

To avoid this kind of tragedy, one of the searchers at the conference recommended that we carry a small container filled with gas wrapped tightly with cloth and place it in the compartment behind our

snowmachines. Also, we must carry enough matches while traveling by snowmachine.

If only my uncle had carried a little survival kit like this, perhaps the tragedy would not have happened. I assumed his knowledge would keep him alive. But we never know. We do not control the harsh environment in which we live. Anything can happen to anyone.

Walter Sampson of Kotzebue Search and Rescue, recognized and gave awards to Steve Troxell and Dan Coffey for diving into water in 30 below weather at Kobuk and finding the drowned little boy named Howard Wood Jr.

A few days before Christmas, other searchers had given up and left for their homes, but as long as there were holes in the river, Troxell and Coffey kept diving. According to Sampson, diving into the water under cold conditions was risky. In fact, one of the divers had to be pulled out because his breathing apparatus froze. One day before Christmas, little Howard's body was found.

I remember seeing Howard Jr. for the last time. He and his parents, Howard Sr. and Ethel had driven up to camp above Kobuk last fall to spend the day. I recall both parents knowingly restraining him from going close to the beach. Who could ever forget a little boy about 3 years old with big eyes, long lashes and soft brown curly hair? His mother loved to run her hands through his hair because it was soft; the way he got attention from his parents, he was their pride and joy.

Then in January, after the drowning, I went on a day trip to Kobuk and

visited the Woods' residence. Howard Jr.'s grandmother, Amelia Gray, reminisced about how she used to glimpse through the window of their house as she passed by on the way home from work, and she would see the father and his son eating. But the house was quiet now. Little Howard's dog paced around the house.

We lost little Howard because the Kobuk River was not solid frozen; there was open water in front of the village of Kobuk.

Sadness also silenced the audience at the annual meeting when Maggie Newlin received the first Robert Newlin Award. The late Robert Newlin was our Inupiaq leader. Not only did she receive the award for being the great woman behind a successful man, but for sharing him with the people and NANA.

Someone in the audience started singing "Praying for You." Sadness and tears filled the air.

Despite the sad news of the region, we enjoyed some fun, too. Women and men displayed their intricately sewn muskrat parkas, white wolf mukluks, rich velveteen parkas with wolverine ruffs, beaver caps and stylish *atikluk* (kuspiks).

This year, at the NANA Shareholders' Day there were dog races and *aqsraaq*, an Eskimo game similar to soccer between "freshwater" and "saltwater" people. Saltwater people represented participants coming from the coast, whereas freshwater people represented the inland communities.

And finally, the time arrived to feast and be entertained by people from Toksook Bay. Because our religion

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banned Inupiaq dancing long ago, I never understood Eskimo dancing.

But, after observing the Toksook Bay dancers, I found them to be cultured in their Yupik dances and songs. Although we did not fully understand them due to acoustics and language, we knew the dances related to daily activities of the Yupik life, such as hunting, fishing and doing household chores.

I found myself sweating after getting excited watching the elderly performers from Toksook Bay. Despite their age, their dances were strong, graceful and expressive.

In the evening, it was time to fly home to Kotzebue in the dark. I could see below us the lights of snowmachines shining, starting at Kiana, going across the Kobuk Lake, all the way to Kotzebue. What a day!

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