

Vaska uses education to help his area

By Vern Metcalfe

If you were to ask which legislator is closest to gaining a doctorate in anthropology you would undoubtedly draw a blank stare from whomever you asked the question. Or who amongst the 60 lawmakers had taught at the University of California at Berkeley for several years as well as at a community college in Alaska?

The answer to these questions would be 34-year-old Tony Vaska, a Democrat from Bethel, who holds a degree in English from the University of Alaska-Fairbanks plus a master's degree in Anthropology from Stanford as well as having "all my course work done toward a Ph.D." He plans to get together with the chairman of the department this summer to gain an insight on the dissertation necessary to get his doctorate.

The Eskimo legislator was born in Kalskag which then had a population of 150 and "I guess about 100 now," and is not to be confused with Kaltag which is an Athabascan village. "I think I can safely say that I am the only legislator born there," said Vaska. He went to school in Bethel and then on to St. Mary's for his high school education. The Jesuit institution "was a darn good little school when I went there; the nuns taught us well and the priests also were fine teachers."

After graduating in 1966, Vaska went on to the University of Alaska, then on to Stanford and after that to the University of California teaching post. "I came back because I simply wanted to come home . . . I liked teaching but my main goal is to do research. I like libraries," he noted. And added that "I can do my

research for about two hours but then I have to get up and go outside and run or play basketball." He also is an avid baseball player and fan, a game he picked up at St. Mary's.

Vaska admits cheerfully that he wasn't always a Democrat having registered as an Independent or no-party prior to his seeking elective office.

"I knew I couldn't be a Republican so you can describe me as being a 'new Democrat,'" the second term House member noted. Representing the Bethel area, which is larger than several other states, Vaska describes his home town as "no longer a village, we have 4,500 people now and we are the service hub for the lower Yukon and the Kuskokwim Rivers and their villages."

As for his primary aims in the legislature, Vaska indicated that the legislators from the Bush areas had to be "more coordinators than anything else between state and federal grants." He used as an example the situation with the Bureau of Indian Affairs schools which the state is taking over and also mentioned block grants. "These federal block grants need a lot more exploring as to what they mean or are meant for, and we have to find that out," he indicated.

He is also deeply concerned with Alaska's fisheries and said, "more studies are needed on herring and salmon in our area; particularly at Goodnews Bay and Nelson Island." Vaska also noted that a "small halibut fishery is being developed in my district . . . last year we had a two-week session which produced good results . . . the halibut moratorium will not apply north of the 56 latitude."

In explaining his district, Vaska said, "while the Bethel area is my district you have to remember it services all other areas of Northwest Alaska and as a result I work very closely with Jack Fuller (R-Nome) and Vern Hurlburt (D-Sleetmute)." Their mutual concerns with their Bush constituents has not caused Vaska to join the House majority coalition of which the other two House members are members.

Vaska also is promoting something that has not been tried in Alaska since the early part of this century — fur farming. Southeast Alaska's many small islands once supported many such operations but they ceased during the Great Depression. "Fisheries is my greatest concern but I can see where we might be able to have fur farming with land mammals since we have a lot of well trained fur trappers in the Northwest," Vaska noted. He added, "we are hoping to be able to do this with beavers, they move around a lot, but we also have a lot of mink and muskrat as well."

Vaska is also concerned with the walrus which he describes as "eating themselves out of house and home." His concerns with the fish and wildlife in his area led him when he first came back from California to become associated with Nunam Kitlutsisti which translates to "Protectors of the Land, Inc." The corporation (non-profit)

is an offspring of the Association of Village Presidents in his area and "the organization worked in Resource management and we were in on the ground floor of this struggle to maintain subsistence hunting and fishing rights."

As a veteran now, of the many struggles of those living in the Bush, Vaska can look back on a time when "I was on an airplane all the time, attending meetings . . . it is real tough on these people (associations and corporations) meeting all the time with all the regulatory agencies." Not unlike his Senate colleague,

Frank Ferguson, who has experienced the same problems, Vaska has had to cut back on some of these activities. He is also concerned with the closure of the BIA schools which has "impacted my district more than any other; we also have some deep funding problems with our Indian Health Service Hospital at Bethel."

Vaska, with a large smile, described the IHS facility as being "our Yellow Submarine, it resembles one with its being up in the air off the tundra and with its curved lines."