

Native executive offers message of hope

by A.J. McClanahan

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Alcohol abuse among Alaska Natives is not just a problem, it's a killer whose toll mounts every year in wasted, broken lives, according to Roy S. Ewan, chief executive officer of the Copper Center based Ahtna Inc.

But Ewan, who has battled alcoholism in his own life, says he wants to offer a message of hope to families affected by the disease.

"I think there is hope for everyone," said Ewan, who explained that as the chief executive for a Native regional corporation he must

deal with the problem on an almost daily basis.

He said he is called frequently about shareholder problems with alcohol causing problems in the work environment.

"I'm really aware it is a problem," he said. "For myself, I know when you're drinking you think it's just something you do."

But for the 50-year-old Ewan, an Athabascan who was born in Copper Center, drinking is no longer just something he does. He said he decided to quit drinking in 1983 when he ran for the Ahtna Board of Directors. At the time, he felt alcohol was affecting his life and work.

"I know I looked terrible," he said, adding that he knew other board members would not listen to someone who was drinking a lot.

For Ewan, the choice to drink or not to drink must be an individual decision.

"An individual has got to make up his own mind," he said.

At the same time, he said he recognizes that most people need counselling and other help in order to work through their problems with alcohol. Alcoholism is not hopeless, he said, no matter who has the problem.

Ewan said that although it is difficult for for-profit Native corporations to initiate programs to fight alcoholism, corporate leaders can set examples, and they can work hand in hand with state and federal programs by doing such things as sponsoring speakers and workshops and initiating programs on the job to encourage people with drinking problems to get help and not lose their jobs.

And he urged others, who like himself have overcome their alcohol problems, to talk to Natives, reaching out to others as often as possible.

"I don't think alcoholism is hopeless," he said