

FRANTIC SHUFFLE AT WILDWOOD

Too Short Time Allotted For Opening the Facility Creates Many Confusions

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WILDWOOD — The air chills, leaves fall, the tundra turns rich colors, and all over Alaska, students leave small villages and head back to school in mass movements.

This September, about 150 students headed for the Kenai peninsula and the brand new Wildwood boarding school project. The former Air Force Base is scheduled to be turned over to the Kenaitze Indians as part of the land claims settlement.

Schools in Kenai traditionally begin on Aug. 30. However, the Kenai Native Association did not get a use permit for the former base until Aug. 18.

Until they had the official sanction of the Defense Department, the Dept. of the Interior, and the Office of Management and Budget of the U. S. government, not one scrap of paper, not one extra chair, not a mattress, nor even a cup and saucer could be moved onto the facility.

Fortunately, the Air Force left behind much of the furnish-

ings and equipment to make the Wildwood facility a fully functioning boarding facility for 200 students who would attend the local schools.

Students could not be recruited until access to the base was officially secured. Under that kind of time pressure, a team was hastily put together to go out to the bush.

They went to Barrow, Kotzebue, Kiana, Noatak, and other remote communities. In some villages they did not talk to young people but to the village council.

The plan was to recruit mostly junior high students. The reasons for this were many. The junior high in Kenai had a newer building. Some thought that the most creative teachers were at that school. And it was also thought that younger kids would make an easier integration into the predominantly non-Native community. The goal was 200 students.

As a result of a word-of-mouth communication system known as the "Bush Telegraph", surprise of surprise, kids began to show up!

Roy Kochuton, a 9th grade Aleut from False Pass was on his way to Mt. Edgecumbe. When he reached Anchorage, he re-routed himself, had his ticket changed, and showed up at Wildwood.

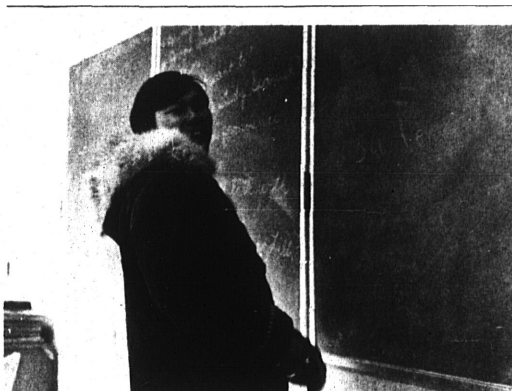
Said one of the staff: "We jumped around like Lindbergh had arrived! Fortunately, by that time, we had managed to hire a cook locally and were able to feed him."

While many schools are having problems with drop-outs, Wildwood is having problems with drop-ins. Kids come, look around, call back home to cousins, brothers, sisters, or friends, and say: "Come to Wildwood."

How is Wildwood different?

An Eskimo girl sits in her modern, furnished apartment complete with kitchen, refrigerator, washer-dryer. She shares it with only five other girls. It is her home. For awhile.

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The Frantic Shuffle at Wildwood . . .

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"Privacy," she says simply. "They treat you like you're a person." Then she looks thoughtful. "But that means you have to be responsible too."

Wildwood has great expectations of being different in many ways. Students do not live in large, impersonal dorms, but in small apartment units under the supervision of cottage parents. Their school experience is in a normal district high school, not especially designed for Natives.

Freedom is part of the total concept and withdrawn only when abused. Each student gets \$5 a week spending allowance.

"Our biggest plus," says one of the leaders, "is the facility itself. We have our gym, bowling alley, library, pool tables, television rooms, and movie theatre (not yet in operation)."

In addition, kids can and do take a bus or taxi into town a few miles away. As yet, there are no student-owned cars, but no rules against them either.

Each morning, the students from Wildwood are bussed to the Kenai High School which was less prepared for their arrival than the Wildwood staff.

The whole program was predicated around 9th graders. But the students who showed up in the largest numbers were in the

higher grades.

"I think you could say," said one of the counselors, "that we have not had much pre-thought." Due to the last-minute, down to the wire nature of the opening at Wildwood, recruiters were after "anybody we could get to come to Wildwood."

As a result no new teachers were added to the staff. One teacher was transferred from the junior high. Classes are overcrowded and the late-arriving Native students have a limited choice of subjects available.

Many of the vocational courses were filled before the bush students registered - auto shop, woodworking, welding, typing, and so on.

When an extra welding class was formed and it was 100% Native, the non-Native students complained about discrimination.

Many of the students at Wildwood have gone outside their area to schools before: Edgemoor, Belz, Anchorage, Fairbanks. They are by and large, highly adaptable.

For the predominantly non-Native community of Kenai, the adjustment may be a harder one than students face. In what was formerly and is still an oil-producing area, many residents

hail from lower '48 states like Louisiana and Texas, where prejudice against minority groups is high.

A welcome task force was organized by Rev. Bruce Bartell. Volunteers run a free pick-up service for incoming students from the airfield to Wildwood.

New students receive a welcome letter, a map of the area, a discount certificate from Northern Commercial department store, etc. Whether or not the whole community will welcome the sudden influx of 200 Native students is the big question in Kenai.

Last year there were no more than a handful of local Kenaitze Indians and about thirty or forty Boarding Home students. The entire number of Kenaitze Indians scattered throughout the peninsula is around five hundred.

During the first frantic weeks at Kenai high school, registration and not integration has occupied everyone's time.

A Kenai teen-ager was told by the counselor that she would try to see him on Monday, if thirty or more new students did not come in.

He replied sarcastically, "Not thirty more Eskimos, I hope."

About ten per cent of the teachers have taught in the bush prior to Kenai. In one class, the instructor jumped in with both feet and conducted an inter-cultural rap session on equal justice under the law.

Kenai teachers admit that many of their problems have nothing to do with the Wildwood students. Lack of funds, books, and other materials have been a continual problem.

A biology class planned as a remedial class for non-Native students having difficulties with science, is now filled with Native students who need altogether material. The teacher is worried that there will be no books or equipment for them until Christmas, unless it is flown in.

Some teachers are excited and enthusiastic about the Wildwood Project. Others are critical and cynical.

One teacher remarked that the whole Wildwood Project "was just a way for the Kenaitze Indians to make money."

Just about everyone from the city of Kenai, the Kenai borough, the AFN, the BIA, and the Kenaitze have been accused of using Native kids to make money.

It is certainly well-known that the school district faced a huge cutback with the withdrawal of Air Force personnel's children. It would seem more accurate to say that the Kenai borough as well as the Kenai Native Association stands to benefit from the influx of federal funds that support the new Wildwood.

There is some question whether those funds are adequate to fully support the goals of Wildwood.

"Sometimes," said one of the executives, "I get the feeling that the BIA deliberately gave us less money than we needed. They've given us half a pie and not a whole pie. We're very understaffed to do the things we need to do, right?"

"If we had gotten the base July 1, we'd have a different story. But this thing is going to fly if it takes us . . . well, we're down to a 6 and 1/2 day week now. Whatever it takes, it's got to work."

At the end of the day at the Kenai High School, a football pep rally was held. It was complete with brass band, short-skirted cheerleaders with red pom-poms, pep squad, and of course, the football team.

The newly arrived Native

students sat a little to one side, somewhat quieter than the rest of the student body, and watched the Great American Dream Machine in action.

Six lively, healthy, vibrant, non-Native girls spelled out a special cheer called S-U-C-C-E-S-S.

Whether or not Wildwood spells out SUCCESS for Native kids remains to be seen.