

# Northwest elders focus on self-esteem

by Pete Schaeffer

Delegates from throughout the NANA region and elsewhere in Alaska met in Kotzebue recently for the second NANA Regional Elders Conference.

The meeting's theme, "Feeling Good About Ourselves: A Community Effort," embraced the subject of self-esteem and the many ways it affects us as individuals, as Native people, and simply as human beings.

John Pingayak of Chevak gave the keynote speech on "Culture and Self-Esteem."

**Inupiat Paitot**  
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## OPINION

He spoke of the traditional relationship he had with his grandfather, pointing out that communication with him had fit not only traditional values, but also those of the Western world.

Pingayak emphasized the need to communicate with elders in order to keep younger leadership on track.

Then he and his 7-year-old daughter Liana did some dances from Chupik country, demonstrating the simplicity and good feeling of traditional celebration.

"Overcoming Barriers" was the title of the first afternoon's panel discussion, which was moderated by Roland Booth and Pete Schaeffer.

The main subject of discussion was the relationship between cultural celebrations and the Friends Church, which in the past has discouraged such things as Eskimo dancing.

The issue was addressed by Robert Sheldon, superintendent of the Friends Church. In a nutshell, Sheldon explained that Eskimo dancing has been discussed by officials of the church and that there was recognition that positive cultural expression is a real boost to the well-being of Native people everywhere.

Four topics of discussion were: role models and leadership development, subsistence and self-esteem, culture and self-esteem, and communications.

Recommendations developed by workshop participants were presented to the general assembly on the last day of the conference. In summary, they included the following issues.

### • Social Issues

The Friends Church should form a social issues committee to discuss traditional celebrations such as Eskimo dancing and other issues of significance to church officials and interested members of each community.

### • Educational Issues

The consensus was that the villages

and Kotzebue must be made to feel some ownership of their schools. Numerous comments about the Northwest Arctic Borough School District were made in all the workshops. Subjects ranged from concern over poorly prepared students leaving high schools for colleges, to unhappiness with the suspension policy implemented last year.

It was generally felt that two things need to happen. First, communications between the school district and parents must improve, and the advisory school boards need to be given some authority to deal with local problems.

It was decided that the list of educational recommendations would be presented by representatives of the Regional Elders Council to the Regional School Board.

### • Subsistence

There is a need to organize a voter registration drive in the NANA region. This year we will vote for a new governor, and as we have all learned, it is much easier to deal with rural needs including subsistence if we have a governor who supports our way of life.

### • Other Issues

Other recommendations reflect concern over the state of municipal government in the NANA region. For example, Mildred Sage reminded those who hold public office that they

have sworn an oath of office and are bound to obey laws and set good examples as role models for younger people.

Another recommendation asked the NAB to study the feasibility of its assuming municipal tasks in villages so that the villages would be freed to deal with the traditional or IRA governments.

One reason given for this is that, even though funding levels for villages are decreasing, the state of Alaska — in its granting of funds for village projects — requires bookkeeping and reporting that the villages cannot afford. It was also asserted that the villages need to address their own social concerns — concerns which the state, with its bureaucracy, is poorly equipped to deal with.

Traditionally, elders were the authority in any gathering of people, be it camp or village. In terms of cultural survival, an elder cannot be replaced, and it is a terrible thing when elders pass on, taking all their knowledge with them.

It is truly a pity when generations shut themselves out from elders. On the other hand, if elders are made to feel that what they know is not important, who are they to tell?

Many thanks to the organizing committee and volunteers who helped during this very successful elders conference. Talkuu.