

Four-year-old gets a head start from CITC

by Helen Chase
for the Tundra Times

Jeffrey Huntsman, 4 years old, eagerly awaits the arrival of his school bus every morning. Waving goodbye to his mom, Anita Evans, Jeffrey is on his way to Head Start, a pre-school program designed to help prepare Native children to enter the Anchorage school system.

Once at school, Jeffrey spends his day in structured activities such as painting, looking at books, recess and interacting with children his own age. The wooden blocks are Jeffrey's favorite. When school is over, Jeffrey helps his mom with household chores or plays with the family pets.

Life hasn't always gone so smoothly for this little boy and his mother. Just over a year ago, Evans gathered the courage to move herself and her young son to Anchorage from the village of English Bay. She left behind a life of physical and mental abuse from the man she later divorced.

Evans, 23, had been married just a year and a half when she decided on a better way of life for herself and Jeffrey.

Unfortunately, the situation didn't improve right away.

Evans had been living in Anchorage only a brief time when her former stepmother offered to keep Jeffrey over a weekend.

While in his "grandmother's" care, Jeffrey was traumatized by two foster boys who were on probation from the McLaughlin Youth Center. Evans discovered later these boys had previous histories of abusing children.

Evans was devastated. When Jeffrey was brought home from his weekend visit, she noticed a dramatic difference in his behavior.

"He was real quiet and withdrawn," she said. "He was afraid to go outside."

Over the next few days it became more apparent to Evans that her son had been subjected to trauma during his stay away from home.

"Besides incidents at school, Jeffrey would just stare off into space or start running and screaming," Evans said. "He started wetting the bed again."

At first Evans wasn't able to deal with the situation, and she denied anything could have happened. When Jeffrey's behavior continued to worsen, she turned to the counselors and directors at Head Start for help.

"My life was just going in circles," Evans said, "but they've helped me out. They've pushed me in the right direction and held my hand."

Evans participates in counseling every week while a psychologist continues to work with Jeffrey on a one-to-one basis. What exactly happened to Jeffrey is not known, because he's unable to talk to anyone about the incident. Therefore, Evans can't bring charges against the youths.

Overall, Evans has been happy with the Head Start Program. Counseling has helped her get her life back on track.

"At first I thought it was my fault," Evans said. "I felt I shouldn't have let Jeffrey stay there, but the therapy is helping. We've come a long way. We are still working on some problems, but life does get better."

Evans now has a new man in her life. He has a 10-year-old son, Zachary.

Evans began a "chore chart" at home at the suggestion of the counselor. By doing chores around the house and tracking them on the chart, Jeffrey earns privileges. The chores include brushing his teeth, helping water the plants and feeding the family



Anita Evans volunteers in the Head Start classroom at Fort Richardson to assist her son Jeffrey Huntsman, 4.

photos by Helen Chase



Jeffrey Huntsman loves the Teen-age Mutant Ninja Turtles.

cat and dog.

Typical of most 4-year-olds, Jeffrey loves the Teen-age Mutant Ninja Turtles. He hurries in from the bus after school so he can watch the cartoons at 3:30.

Sometimes Evans takes Jeffrey down to Ship Creek so he can feed the ducks.

"He really has a loving nature," Evans said. "He really is gentle with animals."

Evans said that at first Jeffrey hated school, but by the second month, he loved it. For the first time during the interview, Jeffrey spoke up.

"I love Head Start," he said. "I love the blocks."

Evans has decided to keep Jeffrey in Head Start another year rather than have him enter kindergarten this fall.

"I think it will be better for him

academically when he enters first grade," Evans said. "He'll do better socially, too."

Unfortunately, Jeffrey's circumstance is not particularly unusual. Pam Robinson, director of the Head Start Program, estimates at least 25 percent of the children currently enrolled have similar problems.

"Jeffrey's situation is not an extreme case," she said. "If anything is atypical about this particular situation, it is his mother's willingness to work with us on helping Jeffrey, to take the steps necessary to get Jeffrey and herself back on the road to mental health. Also, Evans volunteers in the classroom, and this has been therapeutic for her to see the improvements Jeffrey is making in school."

Currently serving 40 pre-school

children, the Native Head Start Program in Anchorage focuses on children's health, nutrition, social, emotional and physical growth as well as their cognitive development. Recently, the Cook Inlet Tribal Council took over the Head Start Program from Rural Alaska Community Action Program.

According to CITC, in order to create as little disruption to the children currently enrolled in the program, no changes are expected until after the completion of the school year. During this time, the CITC staff will review the needs of the children and their parents and will begin to refocus on the cultural orientation of the program.

Although Jeffrey was enrolled in Head Start in the village, Evans said, "The Anchorage Head Start is a lot different. It seems to be a lot more structured."

The school itself will move at the beginning of the fall semester. It's now at Fort Richardson, which has the lowest Native population in Anchorage, according to CITC.

The current location eliminates some children from the program. Fort Richardson is so far away from their homes, they would have to spend more time on a bus than allowed by the program's guidelines. A new location will make the program more accessible for children and for parents who want to volunteer for the program.

CITC also wants to:

- Promote a culturally appropriate learning environment for the program.
- Develop and implement a multi-cultural education program.
- Identify the individual needs of children and families.
- Encourage parents to participate and get involved in the planning, development and implementation of the educational activities.

CITC's sister corporation, Southcentral Foundation, will be a partner with CITC in implementing health services for the children and families in Head Start. Through the Southcentral Foundation, CITC will provide comprehensive health services.

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