

Native teacher delivers speech at UAF

by John Creed

Chukchi News and Information Service

FAIRBANKS — A Native school teacher from Northwest Alaska received one of the highest honors extended by the University of Alaska Fairbanks to a student earlier this month during the 68th commencement at UAF when she delivered the student speech.

"I am honored, but there are a lot of other students who also deserve recognition," said Sandra (Erlach) Kowalski, 23, who received one of the more than 700 degrees conferred during the annual ceremony at Patty Center on the UAF campus May 6.

The student speaker, who is always one of UAF's most outstanding student scholars, is chosen through a nominating process involving faculty, counselors and others.

Kowalski finished her undergraduate studies in 1989, earning two degrees: one in English education, the other in Inupiaq.

Kowalski's first degree was conferred in May 1989, but her Inupiaq degree came later — during the 1989-90 academic year — so her second degree was officially conferred at the recent commencement.

While a UAF student, Kowalski received mostly A's, graduating with high honors.

"We are proud of her," said Suzi Erlach, Kowalski's mother. Erlach lives in Kotzebue and grew up in Buckland. Erlach said her daughter respects the Inupiaq value of hard work.

"Sandy's education took a lot of self-discipline, a lot of motivation, a

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lot of pride in being Inupiaq, and a desire for a better world for all of us," Erlich said.

Kowalski also is a graduate of Kotzebue High School. As a student there, she attended the Rural Alaska Honors Institute, a UAF summer program in Fairbanks that simulates the college setting for rural high school juniors.

When Kowalski entered UAF as a freshman in the mid-1980s, she lived at NANA House, a special dormitory where houseparents from Northwest Alaska provide structure and guidance so that NANA students can better bridge the gap between rural and college life.

While at UAF, besides making the chancellor's list regularly, Kowalski's extracurricular activities included working with the Festival of Native Arts, an annual Native American gathering at UAF to share crafts, dance and music. She also served as a peer counselor for fellow Native students. In 1985, Kowalski was runnerup for the Miss World Eskimo-Indian Olympics crown.

Kowalski, a certified teacher, has been working since September for the Northwest Arctic Borough School District in Deering, where she teaches K-12 Inupiaq and secondary English. She is married to Karl Kowalski. They plan to move to Kotzebue this summer with their 10-month-old son, Aaron. The Kowalskis are expecting their second child in September.

Chukchi News and Information Service is a writing project of Chukchi College, UAF branch campus in Kotzebue.