

'I may not agree with what you say but I will defend unto death your right to say it' —VOLTALRE

## Alcohol: killer drug

We have all heard the public outcry this year concerning drugs, largely focused on the use of cocaine, "crack," PCP, marijuana and heroin. But the number one "killer drug" in America — alcohol — is consistently left off the list.

Every one of us has experienced the ravages of alcohol in some way. Its impact on Alaska Native individuals, families and communities is epidemic. As Nora Guinn, the former District Court judge and Yupik elder from the Bethel region, stated during a recent AFN conference, "Alcohol is destroying us."

The misuse of alcohol is the direct or indirect cause of increased child and sexual abuse in our villages; it is a contributing factor in most of the violent crimes occurring in our communities; and it is one of the primary reasons why so many of our young adults are in prison.

Clearly, alcohol abuse arises from our frustrations; but, at the same time, it contains the seeds of our destruction if we let it continue unchallenged. There are many within the Native community who are fighting back. We have seen increased awareness on an individual level. Villages have exercised their local option by casting votes to "go dry." Educational efforts aimed at our young people, to help them understand and avoid alcoholism, have been mounted by schools and other agencies.

During our recent Youth & Elders Conference, held in conjunction with the AFN Convention, a powerful film entitled "The Honour of All" was shown. It portrays the experience of a small Indian community in Canada which, 15 years ago, was almost 100 percent alcoholic. Through their own efforts, recognizing what alcoholism was doing to their community and to their children, the people of Alkali Lake achieved something remarkable. They *stopped drinking*. By 1985, the community was 95 percent sober.

This film has a tremendous emotional impact on people who see it. It ends on a note of hope and encouragement because it shows what we, individually and collectively, can do by using the tools we have at hand.

Alcoholism is a community sickness which affects us all, whether we drink or not, and I commend those individuals and organizations who are bringing it out of the closet — to talk openly about our collective problem. At the statewide level, we can lead the debate on a variety of political issues — passage of 1991 legislation, continuation of the subsistence priority, the education of our children, the need for economic development and jobs. But if we are destroyed, as a people, by alcohol — what will all our successes mean?

The Alaska Council on Prevention of Alcohol and Drug Abuse holds its Sixth Annual Conference this week in Anchorage. Members of the Alkali Lake Band will be on hand to talk about their efforts and experiences. We can learn a lot from them. We can take one step at a time, using the resources within us, and this conference is an excellent start.

*This guest editorial was submitted by Janie Leask, president of the Alaska Federation of Natives.*