

BIA TEACHER ANSWERS CRITIC

BIA Defended After VISTA School Criticism

Mrs. Judith K. Fisher, a Bureau of Indian Affairs teacher at Wainwright on the Arctic coast, has come out in defense of the BIA system of schooling in Alaska in a letter to Tundra Times.

Her letter is also a rebuttal to the letter written by Mrs. Rosaire Kennedy to Senator Robert F. Kennedy in which she charged the present day system of schooling for native children is breaking down the native people's heritages.

Rosaire Kennedy and her husband spent about a year and a half at the village of Noorvik as VISTA Volunteers.

"Undoubtedly I will not be the only BIA employee to write in regard to the article concerning Mrs. Kennedy's letter to Robert Kennedy, Senator from New York, attacking our organization and teachers.

"I was so very appalled by her lack of information and by her generalizations made from one or two circumstances, that I felt it imperative that I, too, make a retort," wrote Mrs. Fisher in her letter to Tundra Times.

She said that she and her husband have lived and taught in Alaska for the BIA for five years in four different schools, including a boarding school.

"I fail to believe that any teacher would teach in BIA schools for five years—or for 40 years—as has one lady, now in Unalakleet, if he did not possess a sincere admiration, respect, and even a love for the native people—young and old alike—and their culture and customs.

"For life is an isolated village in Alaska, even with the relatively modern con-

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veniences we are furnished, requires a terrific adjustment for most teachers who have spent their lives in the fast-moving, mechanized, mobilized society 'outside,' Mrs. Fisher pointed out.

She said she couldn't imagine any teacher in a small village "NOT" becoming involved in the community and its activities, that this was almost impossible to avoid for the school is the "hub" of the village.

"We host Native Co-op Store meetings, village council meetings, and Parent Club meetings," Judith Fisher continued.

"We house the Public Health Clinic and help the health aide; we do all we can for the Head Start program and have directed the operation of the Neighborhood Youth Corps program; we help with income taxes, send correspondence for persons unable to write and seek markets for the villagers' arts and crafts items.

"We utilize the abundance of oatmeal by rising early to serve breakfast to the school children twice a week, turn our entire building over to Public Health Service as a TB X-ray clinic for a Sunday and often put in twice the required 40 hours per week.

"We have great fun mushing dogs, building snow-block houses, doing Eskimo dancing, and struggling to learn a few words of Inupiat. And are we exceptions? I am certain that we are not!"

Mrs. Fisher said she witnessed in Anchorage BIA rural school workshop in January in which 300 educators gathered "dedicated, enthusiastic individuals, all seemingly searching for better ways to do their job—educate Alaska's native children and prepare them for further schooling and for the outside world."

She said the teachers who gathered in Anchorage gained a world of knowledge and understanding from a noted anthropologist regarding the natives' cultural heritage and that booklets on this subject are now being distributed to the students for classroom use.

"Another portion of the workshop was spent on teaching English as a second language and learning, among other things, how to create and utilize many teaching aids with themes familiar to the native children," Mrs. Fisher wrote.

She said the teachers listened with fascination as a well known translator of the Inupiat language told of his work, and that of his colleagues, in Alaska and their program for self-teaching and reading of the native languages "which is ready to begin at this time in our

schools on an experimental basis."

"We listened intently to panels, whose members were native school board members, as they discussed various topics, and to the enlightening and touching speeches made by several of them."

In discussion groups the teachers shared their problems, frustrations, and ideas. Mrs. Fisher said the new teachers were more idealistic, the experienced more objective, "yet all seemed eager and willing to continue the challenge awaiting them in their respective schools."

"While there," Judith Fisher said, "never once did I hear the words 'dirty Eskimos' used, so perhaps the blame for that derogatory term can be placed on some other organization."

She pointed out that in larger communities, such as Kotzebue which Rosaire Kennedy mentioned, it was difficult for the school employees to become involved to a great extent in the village life or to make many intimate friends because of the lack of dependence each has upon the other.

She said that schools in those larger locations, were not used for many village functions and that the villagers in turn have a greater variety of activities to hold their interests and consume their time.

"Yet, I seriously doubt that striving to overcome these handicaps is discouraged by the administrators of the schools," she said.

While teaching a year in Barrow with her husband, the Fishers made some very close friends who they often visited; that her husband attended Chamber of Commerce meetings and that they had adopted two infant Eskimo boys.

She said that yet today, they can visit Barrow and find they are unable to recognize two-thirds of the populace, not because they have forgotten them but because they never got to know them during their year

"As far as having primers written exclusively for Alaskan native children use," Mrs. Fisher pointed out, "may I inform Mrs. Kennedy that these have been in existence and in use for a number of years, although I do feel there should be more of them to supplement the basic reading program, and have heard that there are some in the planning stages.

"Yet, the basic readers are also of importance, I feel, for even though many of the stories are entirely foreign in setting and action, the children learn from them—

about a world in which they will certainly visit or live one day and about other ethnic groups around the globe and their respective cultures."

Judith Fisher said that pictures, films, recordings—as many aids as can be thought of to give the children a clearer concept of what it is like to roller skate on a cement walk; to ride in city traffic or on an elevator; to eat cotton candy or ride on a merry-go-round; to climb a tree or roll in dry autumn leaves "...and the children seem fascinated, not frustrated, for only one of my 36 students has ever been farther than Barrow."

"Discussing the current native activities of the state," she said, "is a good suggestion, and may I add that copies of the Tundra Times are received at all BIA schools, providing a good basis for this program."

Mrs. Fisher said that the boarding school problem was a difficult one; that she can see advantages and disadvantages to them after being both in the villages and at Wrangell Institute in Southeastern Alaska for two years.

She said the greatest disadvantage was the breakdown of the close native family unit. She feels, however, that regulated sleeping, eating, study hours and close counseling services prevent a much greater number of dropouts than would be possible in the villages where the lure of hunting, whaling, or a job, might be stronger than the desire for an education.

"And if the student was just far enough away from home to be able to visit during the holidays, how many of them would fail to return to school?"

"Perhaps this sounds heartless, yet I have witnessed the necessary adjustments to a boarding school way-of-life taking place; the homesickness gradually disappearing, and the developing of a sincere fondness for the dorm life, the other students, and the teachers and staff; for the many social activities, for the 'city' shopping trips and for the trees and mountains of a new environment.

"Most of them are happy and most learn a great deal.

"Now, if my letter were not already too lengthy, I might add a few criticisms of VI STA, yet that would be grossly unfair for thanks to them, our village will soon have electricity.

In a postscript, Judith Fisher added:

"Since I have been a devoted fan of the entire Kennedy Clan for some time, I, too, will send a copy of my letter to him!"