

Consider 'Nateness' for jobs

To the Interim Commission on Children and Youth:

I am writing this to confirm and expand on my comments made at the public testimony portion of your commission meeting in Fairbanks on Aug. 8. Your commission is an especially important one, and I appreciate the opportunity to present my views before you.

I care about all children and youth, and the Fairbanks Native Association programs by and large serve all youth with only minor exceptions. FNA is also an advocate for the Native constituency in the Fairbanks North Star Borough. It is in the role of an advocate for Native children and youth that I made my comments.

As I stated to you at the hearing, Native children and youth comprise approximately 40 percent of the population of the Fairbanks Youth Facility, yet as I understand it only one Native person is employed there.

The Division of Family and Youth Services caseload of Native children has fluctuated between 25 and 40 percent. A few Natives are employed there, not many.

The alternative school in the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District has a population of 60 percent Native students. I am unaware of any Native staff. One of the youth homes in Fairbanks has over 50 percent Native youth. Not one Native is employed there.

I hear from my non-Native friends they don't want to hire a Native. They tell me they can't find a "qualified" Native.

It is time for the dominant culture to consider "Nateness" as a qualification for employment. We have had several generations of destruction perpetrated upon us by well meaning and not so well meaning non-Native "experts."

We know we have friends among you who care deeply and sincerely about what happens to us. We would not be here to protest if we didn't. The cultural and political genocide to Natives would have been completed long ago.

We are here thanks to the help from our friends. We are also a tough practical people. We know how to survive and live. We learned the secrets of life and survival. We practiced a holistic approach to life. We devoted equal attention to all areas of our being, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.

The impact of the Gold Rush madness changed the course of our lives forever. Most of us lost the way by force. Our children were taken away and housed in boarding schools.

They lost their spirit for life. Our sacred circle of family was broken.

Alcohol took over to assuage the pain of loss of family, culture and Nation, nearly finalizing the destruction. A few remained quiet, unobtrusive, apart from the mainstream of upheaval and waited. These are among today's elders.

We are once again ready to hear the wisdom of our elders. They are available to us when we ask them. Until they and all generations are allowed to participate in the decisions and actions regarding our children and youth, the destruction will continue.

Some of the "high and mighty" psychologists and other professionals who are acknowledged as experts by the dominant culture are causing great harm to our Native children by misdiagnosing and giving our children harmful labels which will follow them throughout their lives.

Some solutions? One would be to mandate Native hire in proportion to the clientele served in grants and contracts. If "qualified" Natives cannot be found, hire elders and paraprofessionals recognized by the Native community as experts.

There is far too much reliance on "academic expertise" and not enough on pragmatic common sense. Not one Ph.D. existed among us in the Native community before the impact. Yet we had an excellent social, political and spiritual order. We still have that expertise. We need to be allowed to exercise it.

Some of our well meaning friends complain about us wanting to be different. They take it as an affront or rejection of their "superior" culture. It is not so much wanting to be different. We are different culturally and racially. We have not had a choice about changing. It has been imposed upon us.

We need to have our difference respected and acknowledged. We know we must change. We have and are changing. We need the time to lessen the damaging effects of the dramatic change imposed upon us. We also need time to make careful and thoughtfully considered decisions about which to keep of the original culture and which to sacrifice in order to balance our new ways.

Again I appreciate the opportunity to make these comments before you. You have an important task before you. For the sake of all the children and youth of Alaska I wish you well.

Sincerely,
Elizabeth L. Keating
Executive Director
Fairbanks Native Association Inc.