

Chimegalrea just wants to be different.

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Vernon Chimegalrea grew up in Bethel as most rural Alaskan youths do: caught in a cultural evolution that has more dead end paths to follow than incentive promises.

But come May, this Eskimo kid will walk off with a diploma of graduation from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Now, you say, "So what?"

And you might also say that he would get his education, find a job in some city and bingo! End of story, so what's the big deal? Thousands of kids have done it and they're in every city.

But if Vernon was lucky enough and had to do all those things, however, he would be like the rest of them. He could be an accountant, a lawyer, a banker,

and engineer or whatever it takes to live in a city.

"He's a different kid, that Vernon," said John Angaiak, General Manager of Vernon's tribal council, the Orutfararmuit Native Council (ONC).

Vernon is different from most rural kids, alright. He didn't pick a college major that would be beneficial in most metropolitan areas. He chose, instead, to get his degree in his own Native language: Yu'pik, in applied linguistic.

Why on earth would he go to college to study his own language? Where would he find a job except one of the villages around Bethel. Even in Bethel he would have a hard time because English is the first language there.

"I want to come back and help my people," Vernon said.

It seems like a farfetched dream since his preparations have been

mostly on his own. Vernon worked his way through the first three years at UAF until he ran out of money and applied for a student loan for his senior year.

"He worked as a fisherman, a fish-egg buyer and at odd jobs in the summer time to pay for his tuition," his father Sam said. "Vernon has always told us he was going all the way."

This strong conviction in Vernon's part came as a surprise to his family since no one has ever gone to college in its history.

The Chimegalrea family moved to Bethel in 1964 from

Napakiak village down the Kuskokwim Bay coast. Vernon's parents, Sam and Alsie, did not even get to high school.

And even at grade school Vernon seemed to make dropping out of school a family tradition.

But in high school he was totally convinced to go all the way, his father said. Bethel high school principal Lon Winters said Vernon was one of those kids who who needed very little encouragement. "He seemed to have his mind all set on what he wanted in life and wanted to do," Winters said.

Vernon also had his mind all made up that he was going to study his Greenland cousins' dialect before graduating. However, how was he going to do it? He buried his pride once again and looked for help.

"Vernon did his homework. He came to ONC with his plans and convinced us that this important program is needed for his graduation," said Angaiak.

Vernon is now on his way to study Inuit at Sulisartut High School at Qaqortoq (Julianah), Greenland.