

Native values made education worthwhile

By Bill Hess
Tundra Times

There are those who credit white man's education for the success Rosita Worl has so far found in life, but she strongly disagrees. "Yes, it was beneficial," she admits. "But the thing that made it go for me was the Native values I learned when I was young. My mother was the greatest influence in my life."

Worl is a Harvard-educated anthropologist; a Tlingit mother of three who has ventured into Arctic seas with Inupiat whalers in search of bowhead, and a former cannery worker and university instructor who now runs her own magazine as well as Chilkat Institute, a research organization focusing on Alaska Natives.

Through Chilkat Institute, she and her colleague, Charles W. Smythe, played a major role in preparing the recent Economic Status of Native Women report sponsored by the Alaska Women's Commission.

"We were taught to think of the group as a whole; the tribe, and to work for our people," Worl remembers her mother. She was also taught to have pride and to reflect that pride in the way she talked, walked, held herself.

This, says Worl, proved to be beneficial in an economic sense. "This made you feel

very positive about yourself, and give you confidence in what you were doing."

Although Worl prizes the education she has obtained, her introduction into western schooling was anything but pleasant.

"In good Tlingit style," she recalls her childhood, she went to live with her grandparents in Petersburg when she was elementary school age. While she was contented with the life she was living and what she was learning, the western society was not.

"When I was seven or eight years old, a woman came up to me and asked me if I would like to see my brother and some of my other family members," Worl remembers. Her family originally came from Haines, where the brother was.

"I said yes. I did not conceptualize that that meant I would have to leave my grandparents." She joined the woman, who she recalls as a seemingly friendly and gracious social worker, in a taxicab.

"I heard the cab driver ask 'Don't you think we should tell her grandparents we are leaving?'"

"No," the woman said, 'just drive on!'" Then I realized what was going on. I was frightened! I started fighting to get away. The social service people literally kidnapped me

from my grandparents! They abducted me and didn't ask anyone from my family first!"

Young Rosita was taken to the Haines House, a mission school in Haines, where she would stay for three years before her parents could win her back. "I do not remember the experience with pleasure," Worl says. The rules were strict and punishment severe. There were many spankings. When she was caught speaking her own Tlingit language, young Rosita was made to stand in front of the other students who were encouraged to laugh at, and ridicule her.

"You have to remember, the mission schools were established in Alaska to 'civilize' Native children," Worl explains.

Not everything was bad. Worl recalls that Haines House would sometimes "rent out" the students for a nickel a day to help with berry picking and other chores. Her own relatives would sometimes "rent" her. Those days were good.

At other times, Worl would be punished by being sent to work with the cows and to do other farm chores. "This was supposed to be boys' work," she laughs, "but I really enjoyed it!"

The attitude of not looking at western-style occupations in the traditional male - women jobs slant was given to Worl by

the example of her mother. She had been an organizer and influential leader in the salmon canneries in the Juneau area. "She used to take me to union meetings," Worl recalls.

"I would take minutes on the meetings. I really learned a lot!" Worl says she was also inspired by the activist role her mother took toward civil rights well before the 1960's, when it became popular to do so.

After her mother died, a special ceremony was held for Worl. She was selected to replace her mother in life; to take up her role. The Alaska Native Sisterhood presented Worl with her mother's banner.

Worl had been spending her winters employed in an office job in Juneau and her summers working in a cannery. She chose the cannery work not for economic reasons, but to be with other Tlingits and relatives, and to be involved in putting up Native foods.

After the ceremony, Worl spent one summer thinking about her responsibility to her mother's memory. Then she was offered a job as the executive director of the Alaska Native Brotherhood Higher Education Program. She was skeptical of her qualifications for such a job, but was convinced to take the job.

"This was in the OEO (Of-

fice of Economic Opportunity) days," Worl recalls, "when government was getting the idea that people should be involved with decisions that would affect them."

While the concept sounds good, Worl found it brought a lot of frustration into her life. "I was surprised, because people were listening to Indians at the time. They wanted to listen to what I had to say." In fact, Worl remembers, educators and bureaucrats would ask her for the solution to Native problems.

"I was frustrated," she says. "I couldn't offer the answers. I didn't know how to run a school!"

Worl does not remember her exact age at the time. Late twenties or early thirties, she says. Whatever, it was a good time to try for a college education. "I chose anthropology because I felt it offered me ways to look at solutions in different ways that were not so rigidly structured. It would allow me to look at society as a whole."

In the past, the effort in education, employment and social work was to force Natives to fit the institution. "I wanted to change that," she explains. "I wanted the institutions to change to fit Native people."

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PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Rosita Worl looks over slides she had taken years earlier on the North Slope as she searches for a cover for the Alaska Native News.

'If committed, you can anything'

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She attended Anchorage Community College and Alaska Methodist University. "I felt like a curtain was opening for me," she remembers.

She earned her degree in two years, but still felt frustrated. "I thought it was ridiculous that they would give a degree to someone who knew as little as me."

At the suggestion of friends, she applied for graduate school and was accepted into Harvard, one of the nations' "Ivy League" colleges. There she encountered students from other countries, including developing Third World nations. She learned that Alaska Natives shared many of the same concerns as did they.

"It was exciting to be in an academic environment, and to be able to talk to people who had experienced the same thing as me."

Also exciting for Worl was the fact that several other Alaska Natives, including Dennis Demmert, Bill Demmert, Emma Widmark, and Fred Bigjim were attending Harvard. Charles Edwardsen Jr., was also "in and out of our lives."

Back home, the land claims movement was in full swing. The Alaskans on campus would get together and analyze what was happening.

"From afar, we could see that ANCSA (the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act) was an experiment," Worl remembers. "We were able to analyze ANCSA from the other experiences Native Americans had had. I think a lot of us

were aware of the pitfalls later down the road, such as the 1991 issue."

Harvard was also a tough experience. Worl had three children to care for by herself, and in trying to meet all her responsibilities, often found herself staying up until two, or even four a.m. "The kids learned a lot," she points out the good side. "We would all do our homework together."

Worl believes this helped create the academic atmosphere which resulted in all of her children pursuing higher education. Ricardo, her youngest, is now attending Dartmouth. She feels it was also helpful in giving the family the experience of working together which they would later need to establish the Alaska Native News.

After earning her Master's degree in 1975, Worl was encouraged to stay on and teach. "I was not educated to stay at Harvard!" she protests. "I wanted to come back to Alaska!"

She spent the next two years studying political development in the newly formed North Slope Borough. Worl became aware that many whaling captains wielded considerable political influence. She then followed them out on to the ice and sea.

Afterwards, Worl did research for the Arctic Environmental Information and Data Center at the University of Alaska in Anchorage, and became an assistant professor in anthropology. Much of her work has been used to fill the field research requirements

which she will need to earn her Ph.D. degree. Worl is working on her dissertation for that degree.

While teaching, Worl became aware that most urban Alaskans knew virtually nothing about Rural Alaska. This included many Native students. Worl explains that this was a large factor in encouraging her to launch the Alaska Native News.

The undertaking was greeted by many with skepticism, but with the help of all her children, Worl has been publishing the glossy monthly magazine for more than a year.

The Chilkat Institute, which she intends to turn into "the best applied science research organization in the state," is her latest project. Worl hopes that Chilkat will not only be involved in researching the development of Alaska Natives within a larger Western society, but will provide them with the data and analysis to make their situation better; according to their own cultural needs.

Worl believes the study on the economic status of Native women was a good project to launch Chilkat Institute. Some

of the findings she discovered in interviewing women across Alaska surprised her.

"Many of the women said that Native men discriminated against them," she explains. The women felt the men were not allowing them full and equal participation in the cash economy. Traditionally, Worl says women have always held equal status with men.

"Ours is a matrilineal system," she speaks of her own heritage. "Tlingit women have always had strong status. It was only later on, when the effects of white culture came in, that they lost ground." Traditionally, there was a division of labor, Worl says, but the women still had full economic and political equality.

"We have not found one Native woman who wants to be a whaling captain," she notes. "We did find women who want to be construction workers, or to work in the oil fields on the North Slope."

Worl believes she has encountered obstacles of her own because she was a Native woman. "What bugged me the most was that people assumed that I would get things because

I was a Native woman," she explains. "It was like they were denying I had certain intellectual abilities and was earning what I received."

"I couldn't get money for research. They assumed that because I was Native, and a woman, there would be all kinds of money for me to do research."

Worl also encountered difficulties when she sought money to establish her own business.

Despite the fact that during the previous year she had paid off a \$25,000 loan from the United Bank of Alaska in six months, no one was willing to loan her the funds necessary to launch the News.

After a struggle, Worl did secure a loan from Security National. "That's just a difficulty Native people and especially Native women have to face," she sighs. "It's a reality of life!"

Yet, if a person is truly determined, she can make it, Worl says. "First you have to convince yourself that success is possible," she says. "Accept the fact that you are going to have hard times, but, if you are committed, you can do it!"