

She provided her own inspiration

By Linda Lord-Jenkins

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Hilda Woods says she didn't speak the English language very well when she joined the first class of the William E. Beltz High School class in Nome in 1965. But she knew enough to know the curriculum wasn't very good and to know that if she wanted to excel she would have to make it on her own without waiting for the school to help.

The Shungnak girl decided to take her fate in her own hands and mounted a dedicated effort to graduate and attend college. She graduated high school in three-and-one-half years and took business office equipment classes for no credit during her final semester there while working at a bank in the afternoon.

Despite her apparent excellence in school, Woods says no one except for the basketball coach and his wife encouraged her to go farther than high school.

"Here I am graduating early and there is no encouragement. The only encouragement I got was from the Army and Navy. There was nothing from the college, not even Alaska University."

She finally applied to attend the University of Alaska, and Haskell Indian Junior College in Lawrence, Kansas. Accepted at both, she decided to attend Haskell.

She says her Haskell experience was one involved in cheerleading and curriculum planning. She immersed herself in school activities instead of partying.

After attending Haskell majoring in Business Administration she graduated in the top 10 students in her class and was recruited by the federal government to work in a secretarial job in Washington D.C.

She says her commitment to work for the government was for nine months with an option to continue but she had become interested in U.S. Sen. Mike Gravel's office and went to work for him. That job lasted nine and one-half years and taught her a lot, says Woods.

After Gravel lost re-election to office, Woods returned to Alaska and now is an executive secretary and assistant to United Bank of Alaska Chairman Willie Hensley.

She says that when she returns to her village many young women seek advice on what to do in their future and she advises them to get an education "but to never forget they are Eskimo. My village hardly anyone spoke English and I never forget where I came from, the culture and heritage.

"They need their education, the skills to get any kind of job. People without an educa-

tion are washing dishes and cleaning floors. It seems that you need a good education to even get a laborer's job here."

Woods says that she found that even though she received no encouragement from her educational background, much support came from the people in her home village.

Her job course now is one of support person for Hensley as it had been for Gravel and as her mother and sisters have done for the men in her village.

"Women are not leaders. I always listened to my dad and brothers and carried on in the background a lot. That is what I am doing now."

The time may come when that will change, says Woods. But that is in the future.