

Posehn succeeded by not listening



Rinna Posehn visits with Al Nagak of St. Michael in the ASRAA office.

PHOTO BY BILL HESS

By Bill Hess

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Before she could get ahead, Rinna Posehn discovered she had to ignore a good deal of advice given to her by those in a position to know. Posehn, who hails from St. Paul, is the director of the Association for Stranded Rural Alaskans in Anchorage.

ASRAA has been responsible for helping many rural Alaskans who encountered misfortune in Alaska's biggest city to return home, and has helped many others to find housing, food and employment until they could get on their feet.

One bad bit of advice came from a counselor at Mount Edgecumbe, BIA Boarding School, where Posehn graduated in 1969. She wanted to go to college. "No, don't even try!" she recalls the counselor's advice. College would be too hard. "Go to secretarial school instead."

"I was foolish enough to follow that advice," says Posehn, who earned nothing but A's and B's at the secretarial school she attended. Afterward, she married a young man from Kodiak Island had two kids and worked in a cannery.

There were problems in the marriage, and a lifetime of cannery work did not appeal to Posehn. In the early 1970's the Bureau of Indian Affairs sponsored the Regional Corporation Business Training Program and selected 50 students to participate, including Posehn and her husband.

Participants would enroll in college accounting or business management Associate of Arts programs for two years.

The BIA would select their courses and pre-register the students.

"I felt we were treated like kids," Posehn recalls how she

once again went against the desires of those who knew better. "The second semester, I chose my own classes, and registered myself." The BIA went ahead and pre-registered her in government-selected classes anyway.

Posehn had to withdraw from all of the BIA-selected classes where she was being marked absent daily.

Posehn's marriage collapsed, and she found herself alone, caring for her two children, who were sick most of the time. Her grades suffered.

The BIA advised her to drop out.

Posehn was determined to stay. She convinced the BIA to keep her enrolled in college. Her BIA counselor, Jean Swenson, saw Posehn's determination and became a very helpful adviser and friend in helping her struggle through.

Ironically, Posehn was the only one out of the group of 50 who completed the program and earned an AA degree from the University of Alaska.

She left college with somewhat unrealistic expectations. "I expected to start somewhere in the mid-management level," she laughs. Instead, Posehn got a job as a secretary at the Aleut League.

Before winning the job, Posehn was interviewed by Lily McGarvey, the League's health director. "She asked me what my goals were," Posehn remembers. "I told her, 'in five years from now, I want to be sitting in your seat.' I believe she liked that. I think that's the reason I got the job."

Posehn later left the League to work as a waitress on the Alaska Railroad. She then returned to the League which was now the Aleutian/Pribilof Islands Association as a secretary in the community health department. After two years,

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Posehn made way by not listening to others

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Posehn was promoted to executive secretary. She stayed there a short while and then took a job as a secretary with the Atlantic Richfield Company.

"At ARCO, I was always bidding on higher jobs. I kept sending memos into management, and making suggestions. I suggested that they could use a liaison with the Aleutian chain, and that I was certainly well qualified for the job."

ARCO chose not to listen to the Aleut secretary. Posehn did not ever receive any answer to one of her memos.

After two years, she returned to APIA. Posehn and a group of other concerned people had already gotten together and formed ASRAA.

"Finally, ASRAA received funding," Posehn recalls. "The board asked me to resign from my job, and to apply for the position of executive director."

Posehn had thought she would eventually like to run for political office, but her experience in working with politicians in conjunction with ASRAA has changed her mind.

Posehn agrees that Native

women seeking careers in the cash economy face many obstacles. "I hate to say it, but one of the biggest obstacles I faced was Native men," she says.

"I have served on a few boards. When I have tried to speak up, I have found that Native men do not want to listen. One man told me, 'Rinna, why don't you stay out of politics? You're a woman! It's a man's job to speak out!'"

Posehn has encountered many non-Natives who tend to judge her as being "naive, dumb, or stupid" because of her race and gender.

Still, she has words of encouragement to any Native women seeking a career. "Always keep your goals in sight," she says. "Make sure they are realistic goals, ones that you can meet. Be patient. Take one step at a time. Just try to ignore those who think you can't do it. You have to let a lot pass over your head."

"Whatever you are doing, do the best job you can. If you are a waitress, be the best waitress you can be. But never lose sight of your goals."