

She does her best at fast food restaurant

By Bill Hess

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Molly Ann Okbaok still has half an hour before she starts work, but already she sits at a small round table in the dining area of the Fourth Avenue McDonald's, visiting with her brother, James. "I always come early," she explains, "so I'll be on time.

"Sometimes, if other crew people call in sick, they depend on me to clock in early, so it's good if I'm already here." Okbaok, who was born just over 20 years ago in Teller, has begun her career working as hired help in the fast foods business.

"My managers like me," she says proudly. "Like on my days off, I will check in to see if they need me. Sometimes I ask if I can come in, and they'll say 'sure.' They depend on me. Right now, they don't want to lose me."

Frequent visitors to the Fourth Avenue McDonald's will soon notice that Okbaok can virtually always pull out a pleasant, if somewhat shy,

smile. Being pleasant and happy is part of the job, she explains. It makes customers want to come back.

Sometimes, it is not easy to smile. The hardest times come when Okbaok is waiting on customers at the counter during busy spells. Hungry people just keep coming, one after the other. Okbaok must run back and forth, grabbing a "Big Mac" here, a large order of fries there, two diet Cokes and a root beer, one hot cherry pie, a nine piece box of Chicken McNuggets, a strawberry milkshake, and a hot wheels jeep.

Not only can it get confusing, but the repetitiveness of the work can get monotonous. Still, Okbaok says she enjoys her work. "I really try to do my best on a job," she says.

During the monotonous times, Okbaok says someone will do something to make the others smile and to laugh.

Still, she does not plan to be at McDonald's forever. Okbaok hopes to go out and live

on her own, and she will need a higher paying job. She has offered to help pay the rent at the family home, but her father will not let her.

"He wants me to save my money," she explains.

"Right now, I want to go into the service, I'm thinking about the Air Force. They give good basic training. You have the opportunity to learn what you want; about computers, office work, all that stuff." Beyond the service, Okbaok has not decided what she wants to do.

First, she would like to get a little experience with life.

Will being a Native woman make it harder to reach whatever goals she finally sets? "That's a tough question," Okbaok pauses.

"Not really," she finally states. "I'm proud to be what I am. I always will be. If you feel good about yourself, you can do what you want to."

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Young board member has lot to learn

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Lisa Nicolai of Chistochina believes in getting involved at an early age. In fact, the 18-year-old may be the youngest person of either sex to be elected to the board of an Alaska Native Regional Corporation.

"I have a lot to learn," ad-

mits Nicolai, who was elected to the Ahtna board last October. "They'll probably be talking about a lot of things I don't know anything about. But I'm glad I got on while I was young. I'm going to keep on learning. By the time I get as old as the others, I'll know what's going on."

Nicolai first was elected to the board of the Chistochina village corporation. Then she was nominated for the Ahtna board, and faced two of her own cousins in the election.

Nicolai is hoping to go on to college later, but she has not yet decided what she would like to study or what career she might eventually pursue. For now, she wants to spend time caring for her new baby, Daniel Jr. and making a good home for the entire family.

When she does enter the job market, Nicolai says she is not worried very much about discrimination because she is a Native woman. "I don't think any of the people are prejudiced around here," she says. "I think I'll have as good of a chance as anybody."

Debbie Jessup is an accountant who travels back and forth between the North Slope oil fields and Anchorage for the NANA Regional Corporation. "The way I feel about it," the Kotzebue Native says,

"is that back in 1971, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was formed. That made Native corporations, one

"I am a NANA shareholder, I represent NANA, and I am dedicated to NANA." Still, when Jessup hears of statistics that women, including Native women, make less than men who have the same job skills, it irritates her. She believes that even in the regional corporations, men earn more.

"Women should be paid just like the men," Jessup says. "I think nationwide, we've got to stand up and say 'Hey! We want to be treated equal!'" Still, Jessup does not see herself as "radical."

"I can't be what way. I have to go about it by another means. I would rather work on the positive side."

Jessup is now attending school, while she works, with the goal of earning a degree in accounting from the University of Alaska. "I do need that degree," she explains. "A degree opens many doors."

Once she has it, Jessup believes she will still stay with NANA.

"It's my life," she explains. "NANA is the corporation, and the corporation belongs to the people. I am one of the people, and I will do what I can to help."

Before working for NANA, Jessup served as an aide to Alaska state Sen. Frank Ferguson for a year. "That was a beautiful privilege," she says.

Jessup believes that in today's world, many Native women find they must work. "It's called making a living," she says. "Making a living so you can eat; so you can go get your hair done, and buy a pair of shoes."

She feels that any woman who truly wants it can find a successful career. "But you've got to work hard," she advises. "You spend eight hours out of 24 at work so, by golly, you better be doing something!"

"The opportunity is there. It's just if you want to go out and get it."