

She is determined to be a teacher

By Stephen Lay

Sophie Barnes is going to be a teacher. If determination is any indication of ability, she'll be one of the best. Few Alaskan teachers have had to overcome so many barriers to earn teacher certification.

Barnes had to completely learn a foreign language while constantly fighting prejudice. She kept going when quitting would have made sense. It has been her dogged determination that kept her in school, studying and learning. Yet, despite her dedication to education, Barnes didn't even start school until she was 10 years old.

"We were living in a village of only about six or eight families. There was no school. People started bugging my folks that we had to go to school . . . We moved, and my dad told us we had to go to school. I didn't even know what school was," Barnes said. "It was the scariest experience for me."

She spoke only Yupik.

Barnes was lucky. Her teacher spoke Yupik and allowed her to use the only language she knew while learning English. It was the beginning of her zeal for bilingual education. She quickly picked up English and graduated with the other students her age.

"When I went to high school in Anchorage, there were just three or four of us Natives. And we had to fight like crazy," she said. "I was made to fight, and I fought those kids. I had to constantly fight my way in that high school . . . I wasn't going to stand around and let them step on



PHOTO BY STEPHEN LAY

Sophie Barnes

me."

Again she graduated with her class.

Shortly after high school she married. Because of family responsibilities, she was unable to continue her education at the university.

In Kasigluk, her home village, she worked as a bilingual teacher in the school. Later she taught the first, second, and third grades alone although classified and paid as an

aide. The third grade students, when they graduated from elementary school in 1981, voted Barnes as their "Best Teacher Ever."

While teaching in Kasigluk, she became involved in the First Language Program. The program designed and developed bilingual methods and materials. Summer workshops were held at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks and Oregon College of Education. Attend-

ing the workshops, Barnes earned her first college credits and became interested in getting a degree.

The program further strengthened her advocacy for bilingual education. To her such a program offers the dual benefit of preserving the language and developing a core cadre of educated Eskimos to protect their people's interests.

"We need to start thinking about being our own teachers," she said. "We need our own experts — lawyers, doctors and teachers — who can speak our Native tongue and fight for us and explain things to us. We shouldn't have to always hire whites to do our fighting for us."

Lack of understanding laws and legislation have hurt many Yupiks, Barnes feels. Her father, for example, lost his Bristol Bay fishing permit simply because he didn't understand that he could hold more than one permit.

He was eligible for both a Kuskokwim Delta and a Bristol Bay permit. He thought he had to select one. So he took the permit for the delta because it was closer to home. Today a Bristol Bay Drift permit is worth at least \$100,000 according to the University of Alaska specialists with the Sea Grant program.

"He lost it because he didn't understand," Barnes said. "Lots of people did. Like today lots of people don't really understand the village corporations. They get the earnings report, and they don't know how to read it. So they just throw it away after they look at the pictures."

Only education, Barnes feels, can protect the people and prevent further erosion of Yupik culture from outside influences.

To get her degree, she has worked. It took her five years to earn an associate's degree from Kuskokwim Community College in Bethel. School, children and family dominated her time.

They also prevented her from continuing her education on a university campus.

"Alcohol has hurt a lot of people. It has hurt a lot of families," she said, speaking from bitter personal experience. Her first marriage ended in divorce because of her husband's alcoholism and its related problems.

"Alcohol is never mentioned in the Yupik home," Barnes said. "The only place you ever heard about alcohol was in the churches, and it's a sin to drink . . ."

The majority are embarrassed by drunkenness and avoid talking about it. Seeing a family member intoxicated is humiliating.

"Booze isn't in the homes. In a Yupik home we don't have cabinets with bottles in them. Because any time there's a bottle in the house, and there's a drinker, he'll drink it down," she said.

She plans to continue alcohol education with her students after she becomes a classroom teacher. Since she has completed her degree, she hopes to work as a bilingual teacher this fall.

Barnes is the first member of her family to earn a college degree.