

# Kodiak kids learning about Native art

By Marlin Stum

Although indigenous Alaskan lifestyles seem threatened by many facets of our fast-paced modern culture, Native folk arts are thriving among children in Kodiak.

Three Native artists and an assistant demonstrated traditional basket weaving and kayak building skills at two elementary schools here recently as part of an ongoing Native Folk Arts Program designed to expose students to various aspects of local Native culture. The program is funded by a grant from the Indian Education Act.

Martha Matfay and Sophia Simeonoff instructed fourth and fifth grade students on how to weave baskets. Principles of kayak construction were taught to fifth and sixth-graders by Larry Matfay and Ed Turkisher. The boys and girls are now practicing their new skills on individual projects that will continue for the next month.

Simeonoff and Turkisher will return to the classrooms for a few hours each week to check on the students' progress.

"I'm really excited about this," said East Elementary instructor Susan Blott. "The program gives the students an opportunity to learn skills they would not otherwise be exposed to."

Ann Marchesani, a teacher at Main Elementary, said her 25 fifth-graders look forward

to working on their crafts each day. Some students are working in pairs building two-foot replicas of actual life-size kayaks.

"They have the frames built already and are now preparing to cover them with parachute material," noted Marchesani.

In building the models the students gain hands-on experience in the use of tools such as

saws and files. They also learn to measure materials, tie and seal knots and shape dampened wood. The students planned to have the kayaks finished in time to display them at the Kodiak High School Arts Fair going on this week.

About half of Marchesani's students are working alone on baskets. This is "more time-consuming, close work," she

said. The weavers are using Kodiak beach straw they collected and dried along with purchased raffia, a strong fiber from palm trees in Madagascar, an island off the southeast coast of Africa.

When the projects are completed, Marchesani's pupils plan to teach one another their respective crafts, thereby completing the traditional Native

circle of learning and passing the skill on to another.

Bob Thomas of Thomas/O'Keefe Associates in Kodiak has been contracted by the Kodiak Island Borough School District as an educational consultant and program coordinator.

He said the IEA grant is split into seven funds, one for Kodiak and one for each of the villages on the island. The villages use their money for a variety of things including supplemental travel funding for athletes, said Thomas.

A parents' advisory committee oversees the program in Kodiak and decides how the city's part of the grant is used. This year the money is being spent on the Native Folk Arts Program and the high school's Alutiiq Studies Program.

Thomas said about 75 artists are involved in teaching the Native folk arts to students at the two elementaries, the high school and the Kodiak Junior High. This is the program's fifth year of operation on the island.

Earlier this year June Chya met with students to discuss herbal medicines and edible plants. Around Christmas, three men from the Russian Orthodox Seminary demonstrated traditional "starring" skills. In yet another aspect of the studies, Jacob Simeonoff is currently teaching carving to young Kodiak High School artists.



PHOTO BY RANDY BELINSKY

Fifth grader Nancy Lind watches carefully as Martha Matfay demonstrates basket weaving in conjunction with the Native Folk arts program at the Kodiak Island schools.