

# Individuals, not institutions must work to keep cultures alive

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The only way that Alaska Natives and Indians can hope to preserve their traditions is to work hard at it themselves, not rely on their corporations or others, according to a panel discussion presented by the AFN convention.

If you want to preserve the important aspects of Native life, don't put it in a museum and don't trust to schools to do it, said John Schaeffer, president of the NANA Regional Corp.

Schaeffer, who is working with the Inupiat Spirit committee to try to re-institute pride in being an Inupiat in the NANA region, told the group that he can't even speak his Native language because of the education he received.

Schaeffer spoke after a Tlingit storyteller presented several traditional stories, and said he wished he had been able to listen to the storytellers when he was growing up instead of the Western dominated education system.

Schaeffer said NANA has been trying to do materially what it can to preserve its traditions and started by building a museum. While the museum is a good one, he said that Natives should leave that to governments.

Referring to the storyteller, "Babe" Williams, Schaeffer said, "If you saw a great orator, a great actor in him you missed the point. He is trying to tell us something. The elders are trying to tell us what is wrong with us is that we haven't been living traditionally. The Native value system we are living by is missing. We are not being taught."

Schaeffer said that trying to preserve only Native dances, songs, food, and stories — all the trappings of the culture — is inadequate. "The important thing is how you feel about your self and your culture."

"The values you live by could be any kind of values, just as long as they are being taught."

The way the traditional culture is being preserved in NANA is by re-instating the traditional values. "We are teaching culture, the traditions so they won't be forgotten. Teach the language so it won't be forgotten."

"If we are taught to look only at material things then we are a dying culture," said Schaeffer.

And he told the group that they can "live in the western world but you don't have to give up the culture. We can learn it, teach it and live it."

Millie Buck of Ahnna talked of how she led the fight in

her region to get a bilingual education program in the schools. She said her fight was long and frustrating. "I often left the school board meetings in tears," she said, but persevered and was successful.

But despite her success, she said that the school program can't do it all. "Native parents have to work with the young. Just living a life of comfort isn't enough."

She says that she cooks in the traditional way and often visits her mother to speak in her Native language.

And she warned that all Natives should use their traditional skills of hunting, fishing, trapping and cooking because who knows when we may have to use them."

David Katzeek, the president of the Sealaska Heritage Foundation, told the delegates that they must recognize that they are "more than cedar and beadwork."

He told the delegates to think back to the stories of their youth and to seek deeper messages within them. "My grandparents used to tell me stories and when I asked what they meant — they said, 'There will come a time when you will understand . . . the music, stories, song and the dance.'"

He told the group that Babe Williams "grasped the

spirit of the stories he told" and Katzeek said the delegates should try to grasp the meanings of their grandparents' stories.

Georgiana Lincoln of Doyon talked of the tradition of sharing that used to be so prevalent in Native cultures and she spoke of today's practice of marked trap lines and staked out claims.

"Tradition means sharing. What's mine is yours. You are welcome in my house any time. I trust you. I love you."

She said she is finding more and more of her people caught up in the Western influences and is worried by that. "I went to a village to participate in a very important meeting. A woman came in and asked how long the meeting would last because she wanted to watch Mork and Mindy on television. Is that tradition? To set aside what we have got to maintain

in order to watch a television show?"

Oscar Kawagley of Bering Straits, talked of a project which has begun in his region to record the memories of his region's elders for future generations.

The region obtained a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to record the stories and memories of village elders for use in the region only.

He said each village will be able to record what they want in their Native language.

He said two people in each village are working on the project which will not be released for anyone outside the village.

The project will include life histories, personal experiences, names, places, knowledge of hunting and food preservation, myths, legends, beliefs, and much other information.