

Hootch has its impact on Nunapitchuk

By Margie Bauman

NOME--Knapsack on his back, attorney Stephen Cotton was off again, en-route to Nunapitchuk and round two of the battle for equal high school opportunity for rural Alaska.

Nunapitchuk is a small village in southwestern Alaska and a 19-year-old high school student there played a key role in Cotton's successful fight for her right to go to high school at home.

Cotton, a Legal Services attorney with the Center for Law and Education, Cambridge, Mass., spent more than three years working on the case with his associate, Bruce Trombley, of the Legal Services office in Anchorage. An out-of-court settlement on the case was reached Oct. 27, after a hearing for the state of Alaska and Legal Services in Anchorage.

In a nutshell, the compromise said that unless a community takes affirmative action to send its children to high school outside the village and specifies that the community does not want a high school, they have a right to that school.

"Our job right now is to see that this decree which exists on paper is implemented as quickly as possible," Cotton said. "If there are any problems, present or looming, we want to be on top of them, to get them resolved."

All of which adds up to a lot of travel for Cotton. In the last two and a half years, he's logged more than dozen trips to Alaska, for periods of a couple of weeks to two and a half months.

Now he was back again, to check with the Legal Services Corporation in Nome on the progress of the settlement, then south to Bethel and Nunapitchuk.

It was Anna Tobeluk of Nunapitchuk whose name appeared on the revised class action suit against the Alaska Department of Education in a demand for high schools for 126 rural villages.

The suit, originally filed in 1972, was then known as the Hootch case, for a old girl named Molly Hootch, who wanted a high school in her village of Emmonek. Emmonak now has a high school but a number of other villages do not.

Last year, for example, there was no high school at Nunapitchuk. Now Tobeluk and 15 classmates are carrying a full load; albeit no frills, in a sparsely furnished schoolhouse so chilly the students wear parkas and snowpants indoors.

Cotton said teacher Shirley Grace told him "When the wind's blowing, they keep their mittens on."

But Cotton also noted in a telephone interview later from Bethel that there weren't all that many complaints.

The last time he was at Nunapitchuk, Grace tried to dismiss class early so the village council could meet in the makeshift schoolroom and some students didn't want to quit.

"The teacher had to physically take the typewriter away from the girl who was typing in order to get her to leave," he said.

And how about the star of the case, Anna Tobeluk?

"School's good; lots of fun," she said.

And what would she tell students in villages that don't have a high school? "I'd tell them to tell their parents to fight for it. It's good," she said.

But if the legal matters were ironed out in the Oct. 27 compromise, the financial end was not totally resolved.