

Traditions triumph at Kivgiq

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I just had a most astounding experience. I spent three days with a group of Inupiaq as they celebrated a Kivgiq. What a blast.

People had come in from all our villages to Barrow to dance, barter, visit and give gifts to friends. I don't think you could ever come up with a better definition of a good time.

The people of the North Slope were about to enter a devastating time in their history 100 years ago. The western world was about to "discover" them and it was not going to be pleasant.

Not only did missionaries do their best to stamp out the spirituality of the culture, but T.B., measles and other epidemics were poised to wipe out well over half the population of Inupiaqs on the North Slope. When the devastation ended, there was only one Nunamiut (inland) Eskimo village left.

The damage to the culture was horrifying. More than half the cultural memory bank was wiped out in one generation. Those left behind felt the responsibility of keeping a culture alive whose oral history went back beyond memory and into the mists of pre-history.

Just to make the task a little more difficult, those Inupiat left alive were forced into settling down and making do in a western setting which imposed on their usually nomadic existence. And just when it seemed as though it couldn't get any bleaker, their children were sent away to school so any attempt to teach them traditional ways was blocked by their virtual absence nine months out of the year. And let's not forget they were forbidden to speak their own language so many were cut off from their Elders because of the language barrier.

It's no wonder, as one of the dance leaders announced the next dance her group would do, she said they would try to do the best they could from what

they were told and what they remembered but they would never be able to really capture back the way it had been. Too much time passed and too many people died with their knowledge unshared.

The last Kivgiq in memory before its recent revival had been in 1915. The only knowledge many had of some of these dances were the memories of Elders trying to see in their mind's eye, events which had occurred when they were seven and eight years old.

Yet, despite all the obstacles thrown in their path, despite the best efforts of the western world to stamp out this culture, it had survived. Not only had it survived, but its survivors had pulled off something this side of a miracle.

Because here they were, 100 years of devastation later, hosting a Messenger Feast in the gym of a school they not only built, but own and run. It is a school which assures their children will never be sent away again - it is a school

which assures the language and history of the culture will survive.

And so the people here danced for three nights in a row until well after one and two in the morning. They danced and they sang and they visited and they laughed.

They had defied the odds, not only survived but triumphed. Their leaders, the whaling captains, had seen to it the traditions never died. In the face of tremendous odds they fought to keep the traditions alive. And they succeeded beyond anyone's wildest dreams.

Were we lucky Prudhoe Bay was on our land and gave us money for the tools to do this?

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You bet we were. But it went beyond luck. Money could have been wasted. It wasn't. It bought us a second chance at keeping the Inupiat culture alive.

Inupiat dance is now taught in our schools starting at the youngest grades. You could see the influence this had on the children attending the Kivgiq. Not only did they dance during the invitational dances but they danced well and with joy. There was no hesitation. They knew their tradition.

There is one dance done at Kivgiq in which the dancers form a long line. They enter from one side of the stage and exit the other side while dancing. One group danced with a mother leading the line and her little daughter bringing up the rear. The little girl was so small she almost fell over on some of the moves. But she danced her way around with the group and never faltered.

She was their little caboose, anchoring down the line and bringing it to its rightful conclusion.