

UAA Native Student Club honors Elaine Abraham

by © Shelley Trainor

Saturday, May 1 was an important day. On that day, the Native Student Club of the University of Alaska - Anchorage honored Elaine Abraham for the love and support she has given to all of the students at the University since she began her work there in 1976 and as she continues on today as the coordinator of the Alaska Native Studies Minor.

The guests were presented with a Welcome Dance, a delicious Potluck and an open mic for people to honor their friendship with Elaine. Throughout the afternoon and evening, Elaine spoke words of encouragement and thanks to the students and guests. She advised the young mothers and fathers to, "Bring your children to the University so that they will feel at home as they begin their studies years from today." There were many young people in attendance.

Elaine is a Tlingit from Yakutat. She is an R.N. and holds an A.A. in Anthropology, a B.A. in Human Resource Development, and a M.A.T. in Bilingual Multicultural Education. Her name in Tlingit, Lax ya Koose ix, means "Everlasting", "and undoubtedly the results of her accomplishments will live far beyond her span on earth." That progressive statement was noted upon the artistic table mats decorated by her adopted son, Bill Kiana.

Denty Owens of Golovin began the occasion with an invocation and next, the Master of Ceremonies, Sam Lamebull, introduced the Welcome Dance by the Tlingit and Haida Dancers of Anchorage. After the dance, Elaine began the first of many traditional teachings of the evening. Her first teaching began as she showed us the respect she has for her family by introducing all of her family in

attendance to us; one at a time and very respectfully until there was a large family of people filling one whole side of the room of the cafeteria in the Lucy Cuddy Building.

There was a lot of humor and joyfulness within the gathering. A 20-foot length of beautiful beads draped above the head table. When Eric Morrison came to the podium as one of the distinguished speakers he noted that for the first time, he saw a necklace big enough for "Big Bob Aiken" of Barrow. Behind the speaker's podium hung a colorful banner with "We Love Elaine."

One of Elaine's relatives, Ray Smith, told the kind of anecdote which we all love to hear; a story of our friend's childhood. Once, long ago, he and Elaine were in a battle to win an ice skating race. Elaine won and I imagined Elaine's determined expression as

a young girl with her legs flying along for all she's worth to keep up with her much taller friend. Later in the program, Dean Wayne Miller honored Elaine by recounting that anecdote and saying that if it's a race between the University of Alaska campus, he was shocked to discover that there was no Indigenous Studies Center for the people of Alaska. This political issue is one which Elaine and the Native Student Club have chosen to meet straight on.

In the past years, there has been an ongoing struggle by students and a handful of university faculty and employees to support the Native Student Services and to create an Indigenous Peoples Center within the University of Alaska - Anchorage. There are a few of our bravest and most outspoken indigenous people who have taken the risks for the rest of us. They have recognized and named fraud,

oppression, racism, and "crimes against the peace and security of mankind" as the United Nations describes this situation. The administration of the University of Alaska has been guilty of misinforming the students of our true political relationship with the United States and attempting to disenfranchise the Native Student Club from meaningful participation within the University of Alaska - Anchorage. As the American Association of State Colleges and Universities wrote after an evaluation of UAA:

"UAA's student services suffer from institutional racism more pernicious than the most blatant of individual racism. The university, in the person of the chancellor, must take immediate, dramatic and public action to remove these institutional barriers."

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There is a mandate from the University of Alaska Board of Regents to improve the education for the indigenous peoples of Alaska. Even so, this administration has put up stumbling blocks for the faculty and students who have attempted to honor this mandate. It has been a great struggle for the students and some of the faculty, such as Dr. Louis Rey, to advance their positions for the recognition of the original peoples. This is ironic as the university is a land grant university and as such the land is a grant of rights for usage from the indigenous peoples of Alaska.

The Chancellor was not present to honor Elaine. However, some weeks before he had chosen to dishonor her and all of the Tlingit and UAA students by ignoring her as she was unceremoniously and without notice moved from one building to another. Her name was taken off her door. Her students didn't know where to find her and Elaine was not invited to attend the opening of the new Native Student Center. It was Elaine who established the original Student Orientation Services in 1970 at UAA which is now the Native Student Services. Neither were any members of the Coalition on Higher Native Education invited as this coalition was created by Elaine.

This insult to Elaine was the cause of the second important teaching which she presented. Elaine made it very clear that an insult to herself is an insult to all Tlingit people. Elaine explained this and then the Tlingit people in attendance showed us a Tlingit ceremony where in the Tlingit people are Standing Together as one of their people. This is a very powerful experience for all of the people as the Tlingit in their tradi-

tional cloaks physically stand behind their relative.

The Standing Together ceremony demonstrated one aspect of the awakening political maturity of the peoples of Alaska. The oppressive insult was recognized openly for all to realize and a way was made for us to proceed in a constructive and determined manner. In like manner, the Mistress of Ceremonies, Diane Benson, was proud to announce that she too is willing to fight fraud and injustice

and she said that her spirituality is not for sale and she is taking a stand in a lawsuit against Warner Brothers. Diane is a playwright, a poetess and actress.

Mary Reeve of Dillingham has been one of the most outspoken students and risk-takers which for herself resulted in a threat via memorandum from university personnel against her status as a student. Elaine thanked Mary for her outspoken loyalty to Alaskan students by presenting Mary with

a beautiful Tlingit blanket. Elaine also praised the College of Arts and Science of UAA for their humanity towards the indigenous peoples of Alaska. She especially thanked Dr. David Maas and Dr. Carl Shepro for standing with the students. Elaine thanked Harriet Beale for her energy "of ten people" and Marge Edels for her organizational skills. David Henson, proactive past-president of the Native Student Club was given a beautiful handmade shirt

by Elaine.

Respect for human diversity has become the law of the land. For Diane Benson, a lawsuit has been her choice. For Elaine Abraham, a Standing Together for the people has been hers.