



Martina Demyan never had the opportunity to get a high school education as a youth, but at 48, she is a college freshman.

## At 48 she starts college classes

By Bill Hess  
Tundra Times

Martina Demyan does not fit the "profile" of today's college students who are learning about computers with plans to go out and get good paying jobs.

Yet Demyan, a 48-year-old

Yupic woman from Southwest Alaska who had little education but did have a lot of hardship as a youth and a young woman, is planning to do just that.

"I was born in Old Hamilton, Alaska," she explains in a soft, gentle voice. "After my

parents died, some missionaries took me in at St. Mary's." With a boarding school widely praised by Alaska Natives, St. Mary's would have seemed an excellent place to get a good education, Demyan says she was so upset after the death of

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# As these people show, whatever it takes, it's never too late to go back to school

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her parents that she would not study for two years.

"After that, I really went into my studying. I really wanted to learn." Fate and a brother had other plans. The brother lived in Old Hamilton and was raising a family of his own. His wife was sick. He needed someone to care for his children. He sent a letter to St. Mary's, asking for Martina's return.

"I begged the Mother Superior, I didn't want to go. I wanted to finish school." Demyan was 14 or 15 years old at the time, and to have stayed against her brother's wishes, she would have had to have been at least 18.

She returned and began caring for his four children. In the summer, they moved to Emmonak. "I tried so hard to learn how to take care of kids," she recalls, "but the father of them was starting to drink. I was not raised up in drinking. So I was not happy."

There was little money for anything; Demyan found herself without the clothes she wanted and needed. One day, she ran off and stayed with a girl friend and her husband. She soon felt a need to support herself and found a job as a fulltime babysitter in Bethel.

Later, a doctor encouraged her to come to work at the hospital, assuring her the nurses would teach her all she

needed to know. Demyan did. When Demyan was still in her early 20's, she found her way into Anchorage, where some friends took her into a bar. "I didn't even know what a bar looked like," she remembers. "There was lots of people in the bar. There was music. I didn't know they were drinking liquor."

"I sat down with a couple of girls and made friends. They ordered drinks. I ordered orange juice. They laughed at me when I said 'orange Juice.' One said, Here, taste this. It tasted sweet. I didn't drink it."

Demyan found herself a job at the Alaska Native Medical Center, and married a soldier.

"That's when I started drinking," she recalls. The more she drank, the more she wanted to drink. Life got worse and worse. She started being late for work and got into trouble there. "It was awful."

Her husband took her Outside to Montana, but she disliked it so much she insisted he bring her back and he did. The marriage broke up. She married another G.I. and the drinking got even worse. That marriage broke up too.

Demyan could find only odd jobs to support her. In the depths of what seemed a miserable life, she started going to church, where she says she did a lot of thinking.

"I used to think, 'what am

I doing? Where are things that could take me in the right direction?' I started thinking I'd better correct my ways, because I don't belong in that other direction."

She learned to type, and earned her General Educational Diploma.

Eventually, she found work cleaning up and taking care of a wide variety of small tasks at the Oomingmak Musk Ox Co-operative in Anchorage. She stayed there for a few years, and then, very recently, she thought she should improve her clerical skills so she could advance beyond the \$4 an hour she was earning.

She stopped at Anchorage Community College, think-

ing perhaps, with her boss' cooperation, she could find time to take a class or two. There, she met Elaine Abraham, who directs the Student Orientation Services (SOS) at the school.

Along with her assistant, Mike McKuen, and Helen Reed, a clerk specialist and receptionist at the college, Abraham helps students from all over Alaska and even Outside to take care of the difficulties they encounter at college, especially those coming in from rural areas.

After talking with Demyan, Abraham realized that what she really wanted was to become a fulltime college student but that she just felt that

economically, it was a little more than she could handle at the time. Abraham found the funds to help Demyan with tuition, housing and books.

Now Demyan is a fulltime 12-credit-hour student. Before digging into her computer classes, she is taking basic math and English courses to help her catch up on much of what she missed earlier. SOS has a special honors program of 15 students, most of whom can boast of very high grade point averages. Abraham was so impressed with the accomplishments Demyan had made to just get into college, that she included her on the honor roll as a first semester freshman.

"I couldn't figure out if this was true or not," says Demyan, "if this was really going to happen for me."

"I know she can do it," Abraham encourages. "It might even take four years instead of two, but she can do it. Some people are afraid to take that first step. Martina took it."

Helping students is what Abraham loves best. She encounters all sorts of problems. Some rural freshmen come in with little knowledge or preparation for life in the big city. A student should be prepared to deal with expenses of about \$1,000 as soon as he gets into Anchorage, Abraham notes. Yet she recalls one southwest

resident who showed up with \$35.

Many students have trouble with housing, and those with children are often hard put to find day care services. Some need counseling for alcohol and drug abuse. SOS helps wherever it can. Abraham recalls one young man whom she had to take to the airport because he did not make progress on his substance abuse problem.

"He cried all the way to the airport. I cried all the way. But I have kept in touch with him. He has been working in a logging camp and he says he is doing good now. He is coming back in January."

"We've heard so much about the academic difficulties that Alaska Natives and American Indians have. Well, that was 12-15 years ago. We're doing good now. These students are sharp!

"Computers will be in everybody's lives in four or five years," says Stephanie Sincic, below, who is majoring in Computer Information Systems. Abraham says that Sincic, a 30-year-old Tlingit from Juneau, has the best record of any Native student with her grade point average of 3.6. Sincic envisions computers as becoming a real help to Natives all across Alaska. She can picture residents in Alaska's remotest villages taking college courses from top-notch professors via the computer screen, and typing in their homework over the same screen. Sincic, who has been working with artificial intelligence since her teens, has the utmost respect for computers. Yet one played a bad joke on her when it made an error saying she only completed one credit hour last semester, resulting in her funds for this year being held up.



"I plan to go back to my hometown," says Sara Paniyak, left, one of the approximately 350 Native students at Anchorage Community College. "I'll have a business of my own. I can't tell you what I'm planning to do, because I want to keep it alive inside me." Paniyak is a 3.0 honor student from Chevak. "Our survivor," says Abraham. School is often hard, but Sara finds the discipline to get her work done. "I feel good when I succeed," she explains.



Don Paulsen, above, could not be considered one of those people who fear the future. Paulsen, who reads science magazines like some people breathe air, is learning to be an electronics technician and is planning to come up with some incredible inventions using computers. Among them: a house which totally cleans and cares for itself, computers which think, a smart car, and then a tele-transporter like the one in "Star Trek," which Paulsen says would eliminate the need for cars altogether. "When you want to go somewhere, you could just step into the corner, be de-molecularized, and beamed away," says Paulsen, who proudly admits to being a dreamer. Raised in the Valdez area, Paulsen still has a strong feeling for the woods. The ideal life he seeks would have him living in the sticks with his family, with all the computer wizardry and technology he could get his hands on. At one time, Paulsen was a high school drop-out cleaning tables in a Mexican restaurant. With him is his son, Michael Angelo.



## PHOTOS BY BILL HESS

"I just have always loved working with kids," Fred Shanigan (right) a freshman from Kodiak Island explains why he has chosen to major in elementary education at ACC. Shanigan would like to return to his own village to teach, but would also like to work in some other Alaskan villages. He feels it is important for more Native teachers to work in rural Alaska. Fred was short on money and blankets when he arrived in the city. SOS helped him with both until he could get settled in. Although Shanigan lives a good distance from the ACC campus, he prefers walking through the woods to riding the bus.



"When I was young, my father told me, 'I'm not going to always be around to help you, so go out and fight for yourself,' Arlene Lord, an Inupiat-Athabaskan from Interior Alaska recalls. Even though he later drowned, his words still encourage the 3.25 grade point average honor student. Lord says math, a frightening word to many students, is her favorite subject. She is seeking a good education to help her find a job which will support her and the family she hopes to have. "I would like to work for Arctic Slope since they are putting me through school," says Lord.

A freshman at 40, Ralph Houston, a Tlingit from Southeast, has not forgotten the hard times of his past, nor the people going through them now. "I'm a recovering alcoholic," says Houston, who took his last drink in 1969. He is majoring in substance abuse and although he has already done much work as a counselor, he hopes the knowledge he learns at college will help him help others.

Houston, who has learned to live an active life despite a crippling case of cerebral palsy, has learned the patience needed to wait.

