

Individuals can make a difference

by Sen. John Binkley
for the Tundra Times

JUNEAU — Last week I was honored to address the annual shareholders meeting of Doyon Ltd. in Fairbanks. In this column I want to share parts of that message.

The Tanana Chiefs Conference also met last week, and I noted with interest that this year's theme was "Strength from Within." I'd already been thinking a lot about "Healthy Families," since that's the theme of the Governor's Interim Commission on Children and Youth, on which I serve.

It seems to me that the two are really tied together. Everyone must use the strength that lies within them to get involved if we are to be successful in promoting healthy families, healthy communities and a healthy state.

And I don't believe not having a problem yourself excuses one from being involved in helping others solve theirs. I use myself as an example:

My wife and I gave up drinking a long time ago, but when we were in the barge business in Bethel, several of our employees died in alcohol-related incidents. These really affected me profoundly.

At the time alcohol abuse and violence seemed to be at an all-time high in Bethel. I was on the City Council, and we decided we needed to do something to bring the situation under control. So we voted to ban the importation of alcohol for 60 days. We knew our action would be challenged in the courts, but we felt strongly that we wanted to send an important message to the entire community that Bethel could be a better place to live without alcohol.

The ban lasted about two weeks before the courts overturned it, but the result of that action for those two weeks was amazing. Crime was at an all-time low and people felt good about walking the streets at night.

The response from the surrounding villages also stunned me, and I began to realize how important this issue was to rural Alaska, how staggering the impact of alcohol abuse has been on all of us and how desperately people are seeking ways to cope with it.

That was back in 1984, the year I first ran for the Legislature. That one action with the Bethel City Council led to my work on the local option laws once I was elected, as well as my interest in providing people with the tools they need and ask for to deal with the problems of alcohol and drug abuse.

I can't stress enough how much I rely on the personal involvement of all rural Alaskans to help me do my job. In fact, almost every issue I take on comes from my constituents writing or talking to me about their concerns.

Constituents told me drug and alcohol abuse was one of their major concerns and that they needed additional tools and aid in fighting it. Parents told me they wanted to be more involved in their children's schools. Fishermen told me they wanted to catch more fish. . . and, of course, the need for jobs and rural economic development was eloquently expressed by many.

That's why I've made these issues priorities in my work with the Legislature. Individuals really can and do make a difference.

I know rural Alaska is facing some serious challenges in terms of health problems, alcohol and drug abuse, the increase in violent crime and suicide, and the economic vulnerability of its communities. But I am also filled with hope and optimism because of some of the initiatives being taken by in-

dividuals and communities around the state.

For example, the Alaska Federation of Natives' Blue Ribbon Commission on Drug and Alcohol Abuse strongly believes that the way to change things is through our young people.

In dealing with my own four children, I've discovered first-hand how trendy children are and how much they value the opinions of their peers.

A few weeks ago two teen-agers from Galena surveyed a large number of teen-agers in their community and were concerned with the numbers of very young people who drink, how frequently they drink and the age at which they first tried alcohol.

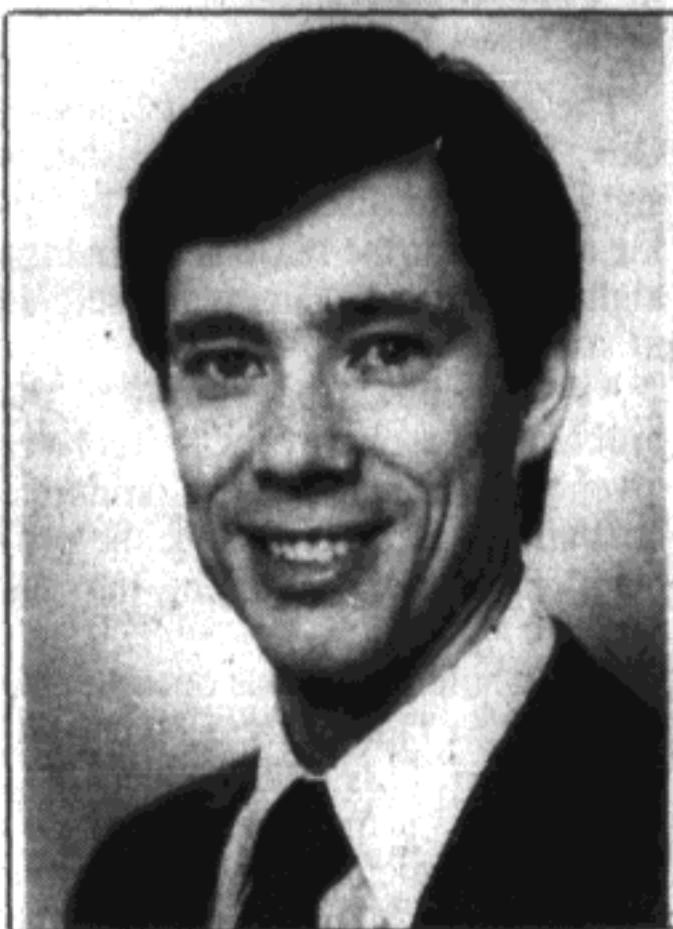
These two teen-agers (have

OPINION

developed a proposal for a peer counseling program. Why peer counseling? "Because kids will listen to other kids," they told me. These two teen-agers and others like them can make it trendy not to drink.

The people of Kwethluk have found their own "strength from within" and are discovering it by "getting involved." What started out as an effort to get the community involved in the school, and the school involved in the

(Continued on Page Sixteen)



• Binkley: There is strength in families

(Continued from Page Four)

community, has now become a major eight-week "get involved" project for everyone. Kwethluk is doing this all with the resources they have at hand: each other.

"Get involved" was also the message I heard time and again this past year as I traveled to hearings with the Senate Special Committee on School Performance. No longer can parents sit back and expect the schools to perform as we'd like.

We as parents have to take responsibility, set the standards and hold our schools accountable. The schools

should be responding to us; we shouldn't be responding to the schools. We all need to get involved.

After suffering from the tragedy of numerous suicides, many communities have begun projects to help build stronger, healthier communities in which every child, youth, adult and elder can experience life in a meaningful way. Whether they succeed is up to all of us.

An important focus of these is in getting people together and talking. Our lives become so busy and so involved that people just seem to lose touch with each other. We need to

change that.

Another encouraging sign across the state is the new sobriety movement. There appears to be a new awareness and an expanded sense of commitment when it comes to addressing alcohol and drug abuse problems. Individuals and entire communities are beginning to admit there is a problem, and that they want to deal with it.

A few years ago the Rural Alaska Community Action Program initiated a policy of "no alcohol at agency-sponsored functions." Numerous organizations have since joined the movement.

Elders groups like Denakaanaga are taking strong and outspoken stands against alcohol and drug abuse. Native leaders like Maj. Gen. John Schaeffer and Jonathon Solomon are speaking out, sharing their own struggles and becoming positive role models for young people.

We do have the power and strength to break any cycle, to change our patterns, our ways of life. That power and strength comes from within. . . from each of us individually and with the support of our families and our communities.