

Annual gathering energizes sobriety movement

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Alaska's *Native Sobriety Movement* has been expressed in many different ways over the past twelve years. It is expressed by individuals who make personal commitments to heal themselves and their families, by elders who take the time to share traditional knowledge with young people, and by leaders who exhibit courage in speaking out against alcohol and drugs in their communities.

Since its early days, the sobriety movement has been nurtured and energized by an annual gathering known as the *Rural Providers' Conference*. The list of participants and speakers at past conferences reads like a who's who of Native leadership on alcohol and drug abuse prevention in Alaska. From its humble beginnings in 1984, the RPC has become a driving force behind the efforts of rural people to heal themselves and their communities.

In the early 1980's, people began to realize that there was a need for those involved with the fledgling sobriety movement to come together to share information and resources. A seed was planted and from it grew an annual gathering of rural providers of substance abuse prevention and interven-

tion services. Since then this gathering has grown with the sobriety movement statewide and now includes family members and other participants who come to learn new skills and share in their recovery.

During the first RPC, held in Anchorage and sponsored by the Alaska State Office of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse (SOADA), Anna Frank realized that village providers were not involved in the prevention services planning process. She stood up and said, "Wait a minute. *We are talking about what people in rural Alaska need. Who knows better than those people your programs serve? They are the ones who need to design the conference.*"

Since then, the RPC has been planned and facilitated by the actual conference participants with logistical support provided by RurAL CAP, the Rural Alaska Community Action Program, and other cosponsoring organizations. The conference has been hosted by the communities of Tyonek, Glennallen, Copper Center, Tok, Tanacross, Kenai, Soldotna, and Nenana. For the first time this year, the RPC will move out of Southcentral Alaska to a whole new region of the state.

Although it began as a gathering of rural service providers, the RPC has evolved into a conference for anyone

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Ariella Bradley of Tanana at the 1994 Rural Providers' Conference.

Photo by David Hardenbergh/RurAL CAP

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concerned with sobriety, healing and sharing ideas. In 1988, Doug Modig, one of the RPC's "mentors" and a leader in the Native community, noted that, "From the 60 people who attended the first gathering five years ago to the 400 who came this year, the whole process is amazing. Just look around you; the feeling of hope and confidence in the future is undeniable."

Up to 1,000 people are expected to gather in Bethel this year to attend the 12th Annual RPC during the week of July 17th - 21st. Co-sponsored by RurAL CAP and the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC), the 1995 RPC will convene at the Bethel High School under the theme "Ellangcartukut - We Are Awakening."

The RPC is designed by rural people to address substance abuse in culturally significant ways. The conference is conducted in a style compatible with Alaska Native lifestyles and ways of communication and includes ceremonies, talking circles and cultural events. Rural people who attend include substance abuse service providers, youth, elders and family members interested in gaining new energy and celebrating their own sobriety.

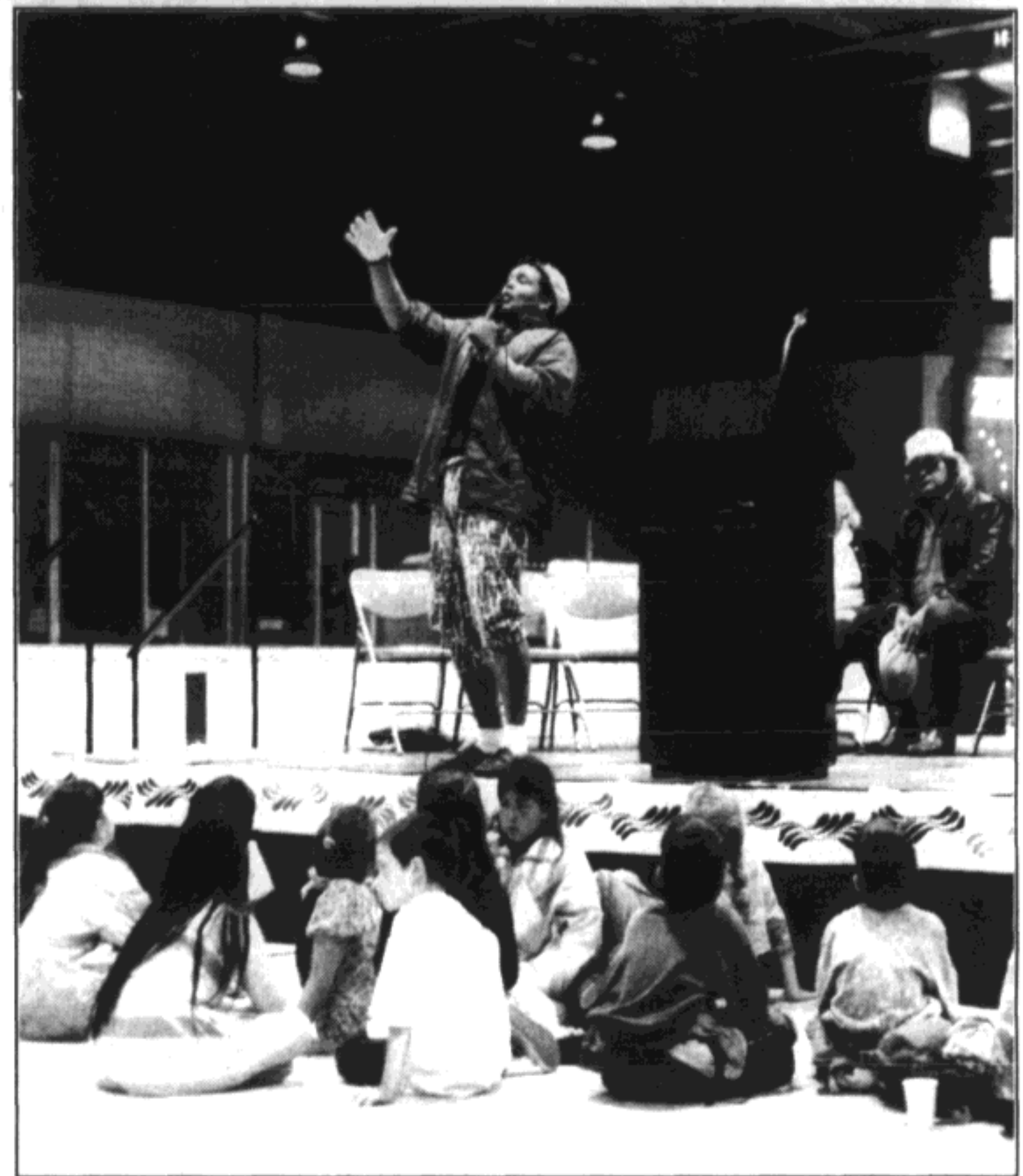
Although it has grown in both size and content and now includes inspirational speakers and workshops addressing an array of personal and professional

development issues, the RPC still holds firm to its original goal of providing a forum through which rural people can share information and ideas in a culturally relevant manner.

The 1995 conference agenda includes a forum for open sharing, Alaska Native cultural events, fiddle dancing, a potlatch, and a staking ceremony. There will be special sessions for children of all ages and adult workshops covering topics such as community-based alcohol prevention strategies, traditional story telling as culturally appropriate prevention, AIDS prevention, tobacco cessation, stress management for providers, rituals and ceremonies, public safety, healing of grief, healthy lifestyles and healthy parenting.

This year's keynote speakers include Stella Atkinson from Metlakatla and her granddaughter Amanda Peele from Sitka; Jolene John and her father Paul John from Toksook Bay; and Jonathon Solomon and his daughter Mary Beth Solomon from Fort Yukon. The conference will be organized into theme days for youth, elders and family. Participants are encouraged to take part in the dancing and other cultural activities, and also to bring traditional foods from their area for the potlatch.

A \$50.00 early registration fee will cover conference materials and several meals. Participants are required to make their own travel and accommodation



Earl Polk at 1992 Rural Providers Conference.

Photo by David Hardenbergh

arrangements. The travel day to Bethel is July 17th with the conference to open that evening. For a conference agenda, registration form or other information, please contact David Hardenbergh at RurAL CAP (279-2511 or 1-800-478-7227) or Wally Richardson at YKHC (543-3321 or 1-800-478-2905).

The success of this year's conference

in Bethel will influence the decision about where the gathering may move in the future. But regardless of its location, the RPC will continue to serve as a nucleus for Alaska's sobriety movement. As one participant from 1987 put it, "I didn't know what I came for, but when I got here, I found exactly what I have been praying for all my life."