

1991 calls for working together

by Janie Leask

President, AFN

The following is excerpted from a speech in Fairbanks, Dec. 5, 1984, at a 1991 conference sponsored by Doyon, Ltd. and Tanana Chiefs Conference.

In 1971, Alaska's Native community won an historic settlement. Thirteen years later, we are in the process of trying to improve that settlement. But just because it needs improvement doesn't mean that the leaders of the land claims movement were wrong - or that they sold out - or that it was all a plot by government to ultimately take away our lands.

Unfortunately, we do hear these charges from a few members of our own people. To me, the saddest thing about that attitude is that it threatens to divide us at a time when, more than ever, we need to hold together.

It is appropriate for us to be critical - if honest criticism leads to constructive change. It is right to air our differences, if such airing leads us to understand each other's views and to compromise. It is proper, even necessary for us to review the past - if we take lessons from it for the future.

If we let ourselves get bogged down in what is **WRONG**; if we spend our time and energy on trying to find someone to blame because life isn't the way we wanted it; if we look at 1991 as a time to dread - then we will gain nothing.

If we let ourselves be dominated by dread or division, we will lose our dignity. If we let ourselves get stuck in self-pity, we will lose our pride. If we let ourselves think only of "me and mine" instead of "we and ours" - we will have lost the most valuable legacy of being Native.

What is that legacy?

Many of you see it and live by it every day. It is so much a part of you and your way of life that you never think twice about it. It

is making sure your village elders eat first... It is taking in a child whose parents cannot care for him or her... It is opening your home - not only to friends, neighbors, and family - but to strangers as well.

It is respect for the land - not because you have a piece of paper which might say it belongs to you, but because the land is there for all of the people to share, respect, and protect for the future.

This legacy is an attitude about life; an attitude about why we are here on this earth and about our responsibility while we are here.

It is an attitude that says that my value as a person lies not in what I can attain for myself, but in what I can do for others. How I, as a individual, can in some way large or small, contribute to the well-being of my people! And maybe even the world, too.

"That's all fine and good" you might be thinking - "But like it or not, we are part of the Western world and the western world doesn't value that legacy."

And if you said that or thought of it, I'd have to agree with you - to a point. All around us, Western society is telling us to look out for number one. Never mind the others, it seems to say. Just get what you can for yourself.

Television tells us that and it's a big force in our lives whether we like it or not. A typical corporation - and our Native corporations are **NOT** typical; at least not yet - is founded on those same principles of individual gain.

How often have you heard people - your friends or even your family members - stand up at a meeting like this and demand: "Where is **MY** land?" Not "**OUR**" land, to protect for future generations - but **MY** land?

When I hear that, I get frightened and I wonder what is happening to us. Are we losing our sense

of community? Are we losing our traditional values which tell us that "**WE**" is much more important than "**ME**"?

As hard as it is to admit, I fear that it **IS** happening. Not everywhere and not to everybody - but slowly, the "**ME**" attitude is encroaching on us, as a people.

But it isn't too late to stop it; to turn it around. And that's why a part of me welcomes 1991... not the year itself, but the opportunity it carries. Look around you. What do you see?

I see a diverse group of people from villages throughout the region. People with lots of different thoughts and ideas. And we are all here together for the same reason: To figure out how we can ensure that a tool created for us and for all Alaska Natives can be used for the good of Alaska Natives - now and in the future.

1991 has given us an opportunity - an opportunity for us to re-evaluate where we are going... as individuals and as a people. 1991 is giving us the chance to ask ourselves whether the direction we are going in is right for us.

1991 is giving us the chance to break out from under some of the outside influences that are taking control of our lives - in ways so subtle sometimes that we don't even know it's happening.

If it weren't for 1991, there would be no crisis to pull us together. There would be no cause to rally around; one that forces us to talk to one another and ask questions - often very difficult questions, which require us

to step back and look at where we are and where we want to go.

Many people have said that we cannot just return to the old ways. I must agree with them. We do live in a different, and far more complicated world, than our grandparents ever knew. That is just as true - maybe even more so - for the villages as it is for those of us who live in the cities.

I see 1991 as an opportunity to use that change - bewildering as it seems sometimes - for the good of our people. It's a chance to take control of that change and use it as something good for our people, instead of letting it control us.



Janie Leask

Christian Singles meet at 7 p.m. for fellowship at Muldoon Denali Baptist Church (333-9588 or 337-5984)