

First Lady: Readers find wondrous worlds in books

by Barbara Crane

Tundra Times reporter

FT. YUKON — They may not have had a really good idea of what a crocodile is.

And they probably weren't really sure of where Egypt and France might be.

But youngsters in Ft. Yukon and Fairbanks knew a good story when they heard one, and "Crocodile, Crocodile," the story of a certain reptile's intercontinental travels, filled the bill.

As Alaska's First Lady Michael Cowper read to them Sept. 20, they gave her the enthusiastic response she'd hoped for when she developed her new Look To A Book reading program.

"The idea behind Look To A Book is to generate enthusiasm in young children about reading," Cowper said.

Cowper cited research which indicates that if children do not develop reading and language skills by the third grade, they grow discouraged and are pretty much lost in the educational system.

"Grown-ups forget how hard it is to learn to read," she said. "So I'm trying to stimulate kids to *want* to learn to read."

She began by selecting storybooks with interesting and colorful pictures to capture the attention of even the youngest non-readers.

"Intriguing pictures make them think 'I want to know what those pictures are about,'" Cowper said.

Then Cowper found corporate sponsors willing to donate copies of the books and pay for promotional videotapes and radio and television public service announcements, balloons, bookmarks and posters as well as her expenses in traveling around the state to read stories to the children.

Cowper says it's been hard to find appropriate children's literature for young Alaska Natives.

"I'm looking for stories about how Native children live today so they can recognize themselves and identify with the characters," she said.

"I'd like my foundation to seek out and publish or encourage the publication of well illustrated books that recognize their cultural heritage, but tell about the sort of things children do today."

Cowper plans to read books to children in more than 20 schools across the state this academic year, and a set of books will be donated to libraries in each of Alaska's 360 public elementary schools.

She would also like to meet with parents to urge them to encourage reading in the home.

"Even if parents themselves can't read, they can look at picture books together and later listen to their children read to them," Cowper said. "Children need their parents' support."

Cowper hopes parents won't worry that learning to read might mean their children will get good jobs somewhere else and leave home.

"Instead, maybe if they know how to read and enjoy it, they will be br



Stanley Jonas, left, and Janie Bridges of Fort Yukon listen to the First Lady.

pier staying at home without being so bored they need to drink or get into trouble just to have something to do."

Cowper is excited by the potential benefits of her Look To A Book program.

"There are wondrous worlds contained in books," she said. "The key is to be able to read them."