

Learning how to be a college student

FAIRBANKS — With the sun shining brightly overhead and temperature in the low 80's, it was a perfect day for a field trip. Working their way upstream, three students and a combination riverboat pilot and science instructor scanned the horizon for gulls, the object of the day's lesson.

"Hey, Sophie, this is just like home!" yelled Jolene Nanouk over the roar of a 60-horsepower outboard motor running full throttle against the quick currents of the Bates Rapids, a little-traveled section of the Tanana River just south of Fairbanks.

Gulls spotted, Sophie Sergie stepped off the riverboat and onto a mud island. Ignoring the screams of outraged gulls circling overhead, not to mention the wet soil sliding between her bare toes, Sergie herded several immature gulls off the island and toward her two partners waiting offshore.

Scooping the still flightless mew and herring gulls from the water with fish nets, Sergie's classmates tagged the birds' left legs, keeping a record of their species, weight and date of capture.

It was all in a day's work for the crew from the University of Alaska Fairbanks Rural Alaska Honors Institute. After several weeks of classes, projects and potlatches, they were ready for whatever their instructors threw at them — from soggy seagulls to the toughest trigonometry.

"We're not supposed to stay up all night to do our homework, but a lot of times we do," said Sergie, a Pitkas Point resident. "It's so demanding. Not only do you have to do your work, you have to do it right."

"It's a challenge, but we're the future leaders of Alaska," echoed Unalakleet's Nanouk. "I'm interested in Alaska Native issues and in someday going back to help the people in the Native villages."

Since its inception six years ago, nearly 300 high school students between their junior and senior years have enrolled in the six-week summer program on the UAF campus. Of those, 60 are currently enrolled in UAF programs, and others are enrolled in or have graduated from schools as diverse as Dartmouth, Princeton, Stanford, Wellesley and Notre Dame.

"The goals at the founding in 1983 are the same goals we have today," said Jim Kowalsky, RAHI's director. "The purposes are to develop future Native leadership and to prepare students for academic success in college."

The RAHI curriculum focuses on mathematics and writing. Other regular courses include speech, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, study skills, swimming and "College Knowledge." This year's specialty courses are natural sciences, engineering, education, business and ethnoarcheology.

Don Scheaffer, director of UAF financial aid, spoke to the College Knowledge class the morning of the bird banding expedition, explaining the ins and outs of what can be a scary subject — paying for college.

"Not many people can write out a check for \$7,000," Scheaffer told the class. "Don't panic. There are a lot of people who don't have a lot of money who are going to schools like UAF, or schools that cost much more. That's what financial aid is all about."

The RAHI program itself is underwritten by the UAF College of Liberal Arts. Sponsors, such as the NANA Regional Corp. and several rural school districts, support students as well. Alaskans enrolled in RAHI receive a full scholarship, which covers tuition, room, board, supplies and travel to and from their homes.

This summer, for the second year in a row, there are also international students in RAHI. In 1988, two students from the Yukon Territory completed the program. This year, there were three visitors from Greenland.

Johanne Rosing of Qaqortoq, Greenland, teamed up with Sergie and Nanouk during the seagull river round-up. Language was not a barrier. Rosing speaks English with a slight Danish accent, although she contends her English isn't quite as fluent as her Danish or Greenlandic.

"Many of the root words in the Greenlandic Native language are the same as in Inupiaq," said Rosing. "I can understand anyone speaking Inupiaq, even though the word endings are a little different. With Yupik, though the words are different enough that we can't really communicate."

Learning to communicate across ethnic, political and linguistic boundaries is, in large part, what RAHI is all about. According to Kowalsky, the friendships forged during the intensive six-week summer session may be the beginning of relationships that will last well beyond the end of this century.

"If the students become active in Native politics, there's a good chance they'll be dealing with each other for the next 40 or even 50 years," said Kowalsky. "This is where a lot of



Sophie Sergie of Pitkas Point, left, and Jolene Nanouk of Unalakleet alert their partners in a riverboat that they've captured a gull.

UAF photo/Jim Hussey

them will meet."

During RAHI, students learn what it means to be a college student, from living in the dorms to standing in lines at the bookstore. They also learn that the hardest subjects can sometimes be the most rewarding.

Sergie hopes to attend the U.S. Naval Academy after finishing high school. She's not afraid of the discipline of the academy, but admits to some previous fears about the academic skills that would be expected of her.

"Until now, I haven't been very good at math," said Sergie. "Here, they encourage you to work harder in class. With a lot of people in a class

like trigonometry, you get a better idea of what to do and how to study for it. It was hard for me before, but now I like it."

Students across the circumpolar North are invited to apply for RAHI. Minimum requirements are a 3.0 grade point average and finishing the junior year of high school. Initial contact with RAHI is usually made through high school counselors and principals, all of whom have information about applying for the program.

Morris Thompson, president of Doyon Ltd. and a University of Alaska regent, delivered the commencement address at this year's RAHI graduation ceremony July 28.