

AFN holds statewide youth conference

by Louise Donhauser

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The Alaska Federation of Natives are tapping a resource that may be the key to the future of Alaskan Natives. Over 50 junior and senior high school students from each of Alaska's school districts, regional and non-profit corporations have been brought to Anchorage to attend a three-day youth conference.

In her opening remarks AFN President Janie Leask said many people across the state wanted to know what the Alaskan Native youth thought about education and other social issues.

At Alaska Pacific University's Atwood Center Leask told the students, "The results of this conference are not going to be lost." She added that villages and regional corporations along with state and federal agencies also want to know what the students are thinking.

"There's a lot of people who want to know what your thoughts are," she said.

To record the students input and thoughts, each student is expected to actively participate in small group discussions with a "Facilitator" moderating the discussion along with a tape recorder.

Leask emphasized the importance of the group discussions.

She said, "What we're asking

you is to give us a commitment to actively participate in the small group discussions."

The students also heard guest speakers discuss education, alcoholism and suicide.

Sam Kito, Jr. who has served as past AFN president, and chairman, University of Alaska Board of Regent and State Department of Education board member said when Native students are expected to excel academically they will.

As an example he said last summer students from rural Alaska enrolled in a seven-week honors program at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks and test results showed they performed at the ninth grade level. By the end of seven weeks, the senior high school students had made a two-and-a-half year leap according to the test results.

"They (Native students) achieved in a setting where they were expected to," Kito said.

He told the students how he felt about education in general among Alaska Natives.

"I believe the most important issue facing us is the quality of education." The state has spent 32 percent of its budget on education.

The students also heard a panel of three people speak about health and social issues with an emphasis on alcohol

abuse, suicide and home violence.

Cook Inlet Native Association's Doug Modig said all social problems must be looked at if one problem is going to be studied. He said if alcohol abuse was going to be studied, home violence should also be looked at.

"We need to look at the whole. We can't look at mental health without looking at physical health."

Alice Abraham of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corp. reinforced his statement by adding that many suicides are related to alcohol.

Another panel member, Joan Hamilton-Cannelos of the Rural Alaska Community Action Program (RuralCAP) a tributed social problems, such as alcoholism and suicide to the Natives' lost sense of identity.

Hamilton-Cannelos said, "Our main problem is we have a lost sense of identity. We have an Anglo-European education. In talking with the Elders they think we don't know who we are."

Modig told how a part of that sense of identity have been lost.

He said, "Throughout history we've lost that ability to take care of 'ourselves' because of forced acculturation. Before, we had a good relationship with the land."

He said a large part of Native land has been taken away which has lead to the dependence upon another culture's way.

"Our whole system has been undermined. That brings stress to the community. Where it's going to get better is with the young people. We need help from the young people."

He said the younger generation would have to identify problems, then find solutions. He emphasized the importance of the three-day conference.

"This is a preparation for the day you will be addressing the problems at hand."

In preparation for their leadership roles, Hamilton-Cannelos said the students had to develop a positive attitude about themselves and Natives in general.

"We need to change our attitude. We're not hopeless Natives. You have to have a better perspective. Remember we were here first. This is our land."

While Hamilton-Cannelos said a positive attitude had to be developed in the Native youth, Reggie Joule told how the

Northwest Arctic Native Association (NANA) has an existing program to retain the pride and sense of identity among all Inupiat.

First he told how he himself developed his sense of identity.

"I found my Native awareness through Native games. They reflect the skill and discipline for survival."

Joule told the students that while a sense of identity is important, an education is equally important.

"We need you and we need you to get an education. . . to learn how to read and write. But at the same time we need you to get that sense of pride that made our people survive."

The Elders taught such values as sharing, hard work, cooperation, and humility. When the Elders were the teachers, those values had different meanings. People didn't brag about accomplishment. Actions spoke for themselves.

"It was letting those things that you were good at speak for themselves. Let someone else do the bragging."