

# ANS focuses on human side

By **BILL HESS**  
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The women of the Alaska Native Sisterhood (ANS) are committed to the human interest side of life, says Emma Widmark, pledging that as ANS Grand Camp President, she will look to the well-being of children, elders, and students.

Widmark was elected to her second one-year term as the leader of the Sisterhood during the 69th Annual Convention held earlier this month in Ketchikan.

"Traditionally, the women

are the keepers of the house," Widmark explains, "our traditional responsibility is to raise funds so that the Grand Camp can function." Widmark notes that when the Alaska Native Brotherhood (ANB) was organized in 1912, there was no group for the women to serve in.

It wasn't long before the ANB realized that without the women, they were only operating at half strength, and thus they invited them to form a sisterhood. "Now, we look

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# Children, grandparents of concern to ANS

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after the human interest side of life," Widmark says, "at those issues which will affect us as families and as individuals."

One major concern on which the ANS is focusing is the Indian Child Welfare Act. "We want people to really become aware of the intent of the act," Widmark explains. "It returns the control of the placement of our children to us." In the past, Widmark notes that non-Native organizations and state governments have had too much control over the placement of Native children.

"Churches would come and remove our children," she explains. "They would use phrases that are ideal sounding. When people start talking

about doing good for our children, our people would do it, even if it breaks their hearts! But it does not work. It is better to keep the children in the family.

"For us, our identity is so important. Even if people are kind and loving, they can't give that identity unless they are tribal members."

Widmark says that the ANS is helping in the search for Native foster homes for Native children. "I would encourage people who are interested in adoption to see about becoming eligible," Widmark says, promising the assistance of ANS wherever possible.

Seniors are another major ANS concern. "We want our children to have grandparents," she explains. "We must keep our elders with us. It's the love

and the education that grandparents can provide, which is so important to our children. It's important to help them to learn to care, to love, to be forgiving, grandparents teach them the essence of life. To me, they are essential."

Yet, children can be with their grandparents only if the elders can have their own needs met in their own communities. "They have needs for safe housing," Widmark emphasizes, "for nutrition, and for good health care. Often, there are very simple things which they can't afford. Things that many people would hardly think about. Things like hearing aids, false teeth, eyeglasses. They need to have exercise programs which do not over-exert them, yet which keep them fit.

In Southeast Alaska, where most of the strength of ANB-ANS is located, Widmark says that some Native elders reside in the Pioneer Home in Sitka, and many live in substandard housing throughout the different villages.

"As a people, we know we need them around. We do not perceive our elders like the dominant society does," Widmark claims.



Widmark greets supporter.

PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Education is a sacrifice which Widmark says her people have always been willing to make. Besides speaking to the young and encouraging them to obtain as much education as possible, the Grand Camp has a scholarship fund to help young Native Alaskans in search of higher education. Although the scholarships can be given to any Native Alaskan, Widmark says they usually go to young members of the ANB-ANS. "It is usually a small amount, like book money, maybe \$150 dollars," says Widmark, noting that the awards do vary in size depending on the number of applicants and the available funds.

Widmark detects a renewed

awareness of the young people toward the Grand Camp. "Once you pique their interest, they seem to be pretty excited. We have many junior members here (at the convention), and they are taking it pretty seriously. They are aggressively seeking to learn; they are asking questions, and assisting on the floor.

"We have much to be proud of in our organization. I feel most young people do not really have a knowledge of our fantastic history. We have an incredible record yet there is nothing taught about us in the schools. It is incredible that an organization such as this which has such accomplishments should be ignored."