

Families are key to stronger society

by David G. Hoffman

One of the strongest attributes of Alaska's Native community is its commitment to family. But recent publicity about social problems has raised doubts in the minds of some about that resolve. Suicide, alcoholism and drug abuse are not signs of strong, healthy families.

OPINION

Anyone who attended the recent Alaska Federation of Natives annual convention in Anchorage had those doubts dispelled, and, in fact, would have come away encouraged.

The theme of this year's convention, was "Restrengthening Native Families and Communities." The emphasis was on strong positive role models, and there were many there.

Most of the speakers could be described simply as normal folks — not politicians or sociologists or bureaucrats — but just normal people who have done things right. They spoke from the heart.

Instead of a Washington, D.C., focus, with an emphasis on a legislative agenda such as subsistence, Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act amendments or the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, the heart of this year's discussion was the people. I realize it's much more difficult to confront social issues than a legislative agenda, but it's what was needed, and AFN is facing squarely up to it.

We shouldn't lose sight, however, that the issues addressed at the convention are not solely "Native" issues; they face all of Alaskan society.

One of the most striking observations to come out of the AFN convention came from Cora Sakeagak of Barrow. As she participated in the panel "Our Families — Our Future" Sakeagak said something to the effect that no matter how good you are in the boardroom or at your job, when you come home your kids are going to see you as just "Mom" or "Dad."

You have to do as good a job for them at home as you do in the boardroom or at work. As the father of four children, I can certainly understand what Sakeagak was talking about.

There's real temptation to leave your best at work and give the family what's left over. But the whole point of the AFN conference, as well as the other events that week, is that the leftovers are not good enough.

One government program which has helped build strong, healthy Alaskan families for nearly 25 years is Head Start.

Established nationally in March 1965, the first Head Start program in Alaska was begun in Fairbanks a year later.

Now the program can be found in 51 communities across Alaska, involving nearly 1,600 children and their families.

The locally run programs receive funding both from the federal government through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and from the state through the Alaska Department of Community and Regional Affairs.

The key to Head Start is that it involves the family — it's a program for the parents as much as the children.

By working closely with low-income parents it teaches good parenting skills, develops leadership qualities

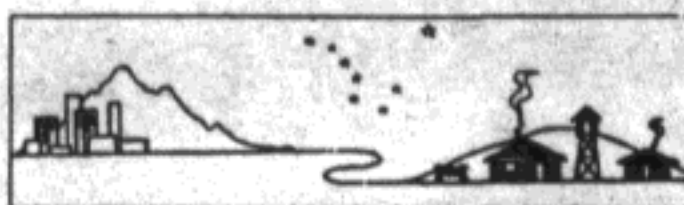
and provides job skill training. Most of all, it encourages parents to make their families "Job 1."

The payoff is seeing the kids — and their parents — become independent, contributing members of society.

An inspiring example is Valerie Davidson, a former Head Start kid. Now a legislative aide, she gave an excellent presentation on Head Start at the AFN convention.

The extent of Head Start's outreach was dramatically shown when Davidson asked all the Head Start "kids" in the audience to stand.

Many of the more promising young



leaders in Alaska stood in response. Their numbers should not be a surprise — 10,000 Alaskan children have gone through the program in the last seven years alone.

President George Bush showed his support for Head Start at his recent Education Summit of the governors of all 50 states when he stated his plans to pump more money into the program.

If the president and Congress follow

through, Alaska and the rest of the nation will be that much better. By placing the focus on Head Start, the president has recognized that realistically we are not going to solve all the social problems overnight. It requires a long-term perspective and a long-term investment in our youth.

The greatest strength of the Head Start program is that it recognizes that the ultimate opportunity and responsibility for building a stronger society lies with the family.

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