

# Spirit camps throughout Alaska offer healing, spiritual health for communities

by Katherine Ideus  
for the Tundra Times

The 1960s and 1970s saw the emergence of cultural pride movements among America's minorities.

Alaska Native, American Indian and Native Hawaiian communities began to re-assume local control of many aspects of community life, including education, governance, economies, health and resource management.

Part of this movement toward self-determination included renewed interest in aspects of traditional Native cultures by their members and others, hoping to assist in efforts to support the improvement of Native life.

During the 1980s many Native communities began the process of cultural revitalization. They examined their respective heritages to discover those elements of traditionalism they wished to retain.

They assessed their current needs and desires related to identity and survival (in not just the larger society, but the global community as well). They dared to dream about shaping their futures and taking their places as healthy, productive members of the world community.

This movement to re-discover, sort, retain, discard and create culture has not been a unified activity in any community, nor are all community members in agreement about how revitalization happens.

There is no coordinated definition of what it means, other than it is an effort by a group to examine their community strengths and weaknesses, and build anew upon certain aspects.

Because it is a dynamic process designed to bring about change, it often creates controversy as a by-product. Thus, in any Native community experiencing such internal change, as well as the external pressures and changes being experienced through the larger society as well, the birth of a healthier, more functional community is painful and uncertain at best.

In an effort to support this movement, the Alaska Native Human Resource Development Program of the University of Alaska Fairbanks began to sponsor a variety of "spirit" camps beginning in 1984.

For the past six years the program has worked with villages, Native organizations and communities throughout the state to provide technical assistance, consultant services and financial support to assist rural people in developing spirit camps.



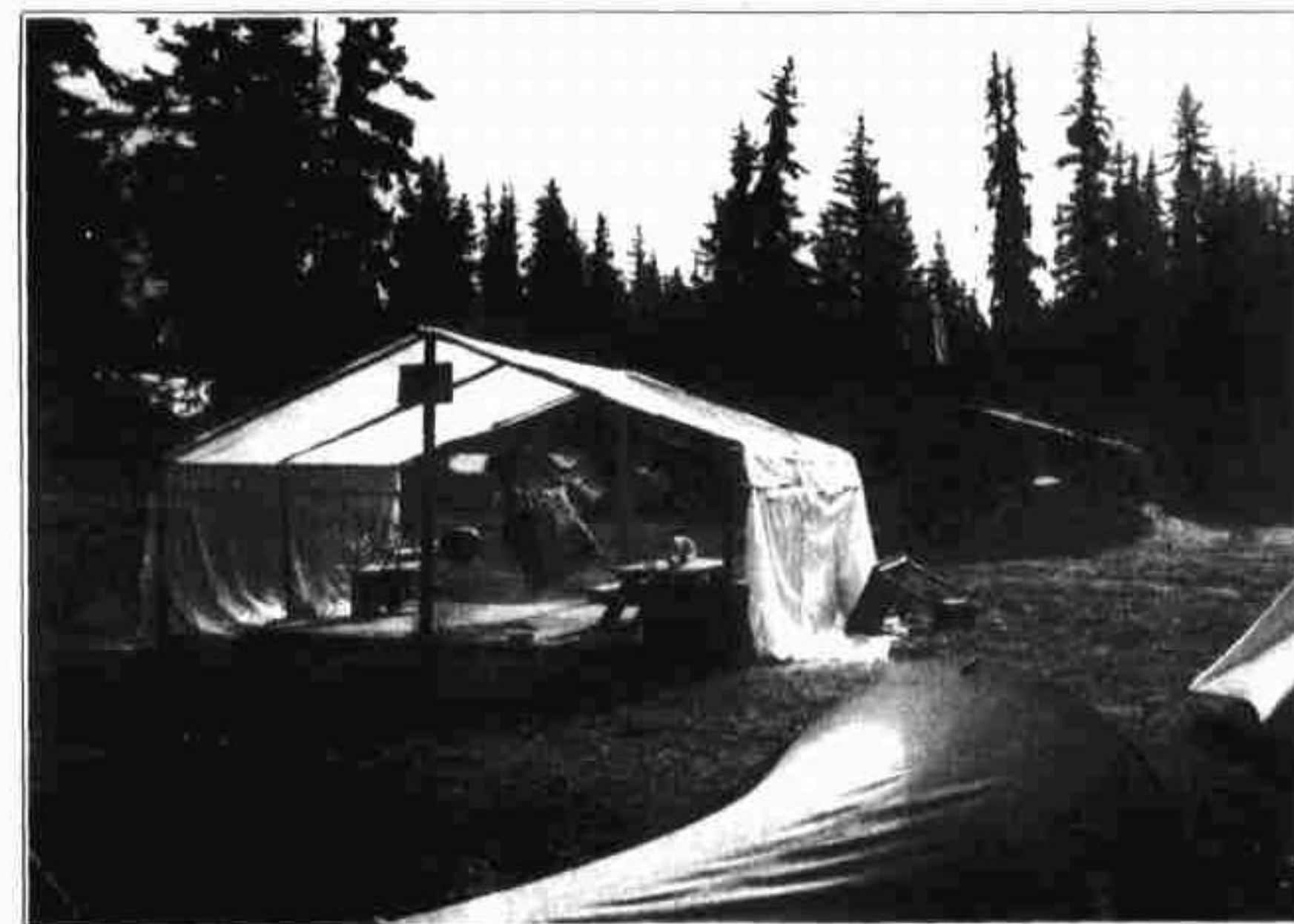
Staff member David West, above, takes a break during activities at the Howard Lake homestead spirit camp in Interior Alaska. Above left, a traditional structure at the site; and, right, a picnic area. Lower left, Germaine and Lionel Kimunwa, consultants from Everett, Wash., enjoy a lighter moment at the camp.



The Alaska Native Human Resource Development Program has as a continuing priority the provision of support, consultation, technical assistance and information to individuals and communities interested in developing spirit camps.

The philosophy is that the development of Alaska Native human resources depends first on building healthy, productive communities.

Anyone interested in further information about spirit camps or who would like assistance in developing one can contact Donald Peter or Kathy Ideus at ANHRDP, College of Rural Alaska, University of Alaska Fairbanks, 707 A St., Suite 205, Anchorage 99501; phone, 272-9531; FAX, 272-5625.



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This continuing support to the spirit camps is based upon the belief that the mission of the program to act as a liaison agency in the development of Native human resources statewide can be achieved only upon a foundation of strong Native communities.

The development of Native human resources to contribute to the social, economic and political life of Alaska must be based on a strengthening from within the Native community.

Spirit camps are a powerful way to make this happen.

The camps are the product of each community's unique needs and desires in its efforts to revitalize itself. There have been camps focused on recovery from alcohol and other drug abuse, prevention camps to teach youth values and cultural traditions, healing camps conducted as a model for culturally based mental health activities, and camps to celebrate the traditions, values and activities of family and community.

Each camp is flavored by the goal and needs of those originating it.

While the passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was positive in many ways for Native people, over the past two decades one unintended result was the division of

many families and communities.

In addition to the rapid social change occurring at the same time, the effect was a disintegration of villages, communities and families.

Natives were becoming more and more dependent and self-destructive. What was needed was a movement from within the Native world around social issues — a regeneration of traditional values of cultural pride, strong community, hard work, self-esteem, in order to take our place in state, national and global arenas.

The positive results related to the spirit camp movement are creating interest among human services providers and educators throughout Alaska. For those trying to design and implement mental health, substance abuse, community development, health and educational services for Native peoples, the spirit camps are being looked at as a serious approach to strengthening communities from within.

Psychologists and sociologists label movements like spirit camps as social revitalization movements. Many cultures throughout history have experienced such movements, each with its own unique cultural meaning and outcome.

Dr. James Clark, a community psychologist, wrote in a 1981 study of revitalization movements Outside:

"The mark of such a movement is found in its leadership structure which first puts forth a vision of a new order amongst men and then mobilizes action to make that new way of living a reality."

"Most often fueled by deprivation, discontent and despair of the world as it is, the transformative fires of revitalization movements turn these sentiments into the hope, enthusiasm and collective power necessary to bring about radical revisions in the social order."

According to the *American Journal of Psychiatry* such movements are characterized by:

- A high level of social cohesiveness.
- An intensely held belief system.
- A profound influence on its members' behavior.

The spirit camps are showing themselves to be a useful approach for community healing and development in addressing substance abuse, family violence and promoting cultural awareness.

Native communities are "doing it themselves" — from within. The

growing interest in the various types of camps continues to keep the Alaska Native Human Resource Development Program busy as a support to this "revitalization movement."

Service providers, both Native and non-Native, are taking serious note of the activity as a key to assist Native people in achieving their goals and realizing their dreams for the future.

*Katherine Ideus is the deputy director of the Alaska Native Human Resource Development Program. The program is part of the College of Rural Alaska, University of Alaska Fairbanks.*