

# Alaska Native attorneys form statewide association

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As the current president of the Alaska Native Bar Association, I'd like to discuss our organization and to reflect somewhat on

the practice of law by Alaska Natives.

Many Alaska Natives are aware of William Paul, Sr., the first Alaska Native lawyer. By force of personality, and by virtue of his training in law, he was instrumen-

tal in implementing some of the early Alaska Native land claims issues. Since Mr. Paul, there have been very few Alaska Native attorneys. The numbers are increasing, however.

In 1978, when I attended my first Alaska Federation of Native (AFN) Convention, I was aware of only two Alaska Native attorneys practicing law and living in Alaska. There were a small number living and practicing Outside, and a few of them were also members of the Alaska Bar. Neither of the resident attorneys was an active participant at the 1978 AFN convention. I took the Alaska Bar exam in Anchorage in July of 1978 and received the news that I passed on October 26th. A fellow Southeast Alaskan, Norman Staton, Jr., also passed the exam at the same time. Together, we doubled the size of the resident practicing Alaska Native bar.

Fifteen years later, during the 1993 AFN Convention, the numbers had increased significantly. There were attorneys and law school graduates participating on the resolutions committee, as panelists for presentations, and serving on the board of AFN. A Native law school graduate, Albert Kookesh from Angoon, was elected one of the AFN co-chairs for this upcoming year. 1993 also

saw a number of Alaska Native lawyers enter the private practice of law. Other Native lawyers and law school graduates are employed by the state court system, the federal government, the Native American Rights Fund, and various Native corporations, both profit and non-profit.

Becoming an attorney involves at least seven years of study. The aspiring attorney must first complete a bachelors degree, which generally takes from 4 to 6 years. With good grades and a high score on the Law Schools Admissions Test, admission to a law school and three more years of study follow. Upon completion of law studies, a Juris Doctorate degree, or J.D., is awarded.

Each state regulates the practice of law, and requires any law school graduate who wants to be an attorney to pass a rigorous, multi-day exam covering various areas of law. When you pass the exam, you are given a license to practice. This means that you can appear before state courts, state administrative agencies, and can give legal advice. As a member of the state bar association, you can petition for admission to practice in the federal district courts, before federal administrative agencies, the courts of appeal, and the U.S. Supreme Court.

This past summer, recognizing that there are over fifty Alaska

Natives living throughout the United States who have graduated from law school, a core of Alaska Native attorneys formed the Alaska Native Bar Association, modeled after American Indian Bar Associations located in Oklahoma and Colorado. A major purpose of the association is to give Alaska Natives involved in law a chance to get to know each other. We will share information about law and the practice of law with each other, assist law school graduates who are taking the bar exam with their preparation, help Native attorneys who want to go into private practice with their planning and implementation, and provide leadership on legal issues facing the Alaska Native community. In addition, with tribal courts becoming more prominent in Alaska, we have included in our membership a category for those individuals who work in tribal courts.

In future columns, members of the Alaska Native Bar Association will be writing about their experiences, how they became interested in the law as a profession, what it took for them to become a lawyer, and how they are involved in the community through their involvement in the practice of law.

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