

UA extension service is partial answer

FAIRBANKS — The University of Alaska's Extension Center in Arts and Crafts is a partial solution to a particular problem: how can artists and craftsmen who lack the education required for admission to formal art schools develop their talents?

Since its establishment on the university's Fairbanks campus in 1966, the center has sought out a limited number of such persons and provided them with a place to work, tools and materials, and guidance by accomplished artists.

Because educational opportunities are limited in rural Alaska, most of the students at the center have been Natives, but it is not a Native center, director Ronald W. Senungetuk emphasizes.

But it is primarily to the bush that he looks for his students, from his own Eskimo background, that many talented persons in rural Alaska likely will live out their days producing souvenirs for tourists rather than fulfilling themselves as artists.

"I travel a lot in Alaska and am pretty much aware of who's out there," says Senungetuk.

In addition to providing opportunities for such persons, the Fairbanks center encourages creativity in art indigenous to Alaska and serves as a resource center for the study of Native art.

A number of Alaskan artists have benefitted from their time spent at the center and there is a growing awareness and acceptance of their work.

The striking, hand-carved doors of the Alaska Supreme Court chambers in Anchorage with figures symbolizing the various Native cultures of the state were done by former center student James Schrock. A large panel nearby of 19th century-style ivory etchings in a modern art form is the work of Senungetuk himself.

An Eskimo seal hunter, done in marble by former center student Robert Wongittilin of Savoonga, caught the eye of RCA Corp. chairman Robert Sarnoff when he was in Fairbanks two years ago to receive an honorary degree and he immediately bought it. Melvin Olanna, currently with the center, is well-known throughout the state and most recently

won the Rasmuson Award for Sculpture for his marble, "Bird Form," an entry in the 11th Annual All Alaska Juried Art Exhibition now touring the state.

Senungetuk's salary and the costs of operating the extension center are included in the university budget each year, but the director must look elsewhere for financial assistance for his students. This is not easily found because the students are not in regular academic programs and most scholarships are tied to academic achievement, he points out.

Assistance has come in the past from the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, Exxon Corp., Arctic Slope Native Association, Tanana Chiefs Conference, and Alaska State Council on the Arts. The students usually are able to pay part of their costs.

A recent \$12,000 grant from the ITT Corp. insures that from three to six artists and craftsmen will be able to enter the center program next September and remain in it for at least a year. Senungetuk is now searching for these students.

Five students are currently enrolled at the center — Olanna, originally from Shishmaref, Rick Seeganna, from King Island and Nome, Roger Kanayak, Little Diomed Island and Nome, Leo Marks, Juneau and Phil Sanders, California.

Olanna and Seeganna, alternating with each other, are also teaching printmaking and soapstone carving on a half-time basis at Fairbanks' Hunter School, under a grant from the Alaska State Council on the Arts.

In the center's studio, the students learn silversmithing, woodworking, stone sculpture and bone-carving. Through a cooperative arrangement with the university's Department of Art, they may join any departmental class. It's a mutually beneficial arrangement. Senungetuk teaches for the department. At present time students from the art department in addition to his own center students are enrolled in his three-dimensional design course.

In the structured program of the center, Senungetuk lectures to his students, gives them work assignments and helps them with their various projects, offering advice and

demonstrating technique.

During the 10 years of its existence, the center has enrolled nearly 60 students. In that period, the average student participated for a year and a half. Seven students completed three to five years and 10 dropped from classes before completing a semester.

The backgrounds of the students have been diverse. Almost all parts of Alaska have been represented with the majority of students coming from coastal areas. Three northern Canadians have also participated in the program.

In addition to those mentioned earlier, Senungetuk counts among his outstanding graduates Alvin Kayouktuk of Little Diomed, now working as an ivory carver at Teller; John Penatac of King Island, now doing ivory carving and stone sculpture from time to time at the Visual Arts Center in Anchorage; Abe Ruben of Inuvik, in Canada's Northwest Territories, whose interest is in stone sculpture and printmaking; and Edward Hofseth, originally from Aniak and now of Fairbanks, who works with metal and paints.

Senungetuk himself is one of Alaska's most accomplished and best-known artists. A silversmith and woodworker, he makes jewelry and furniture.

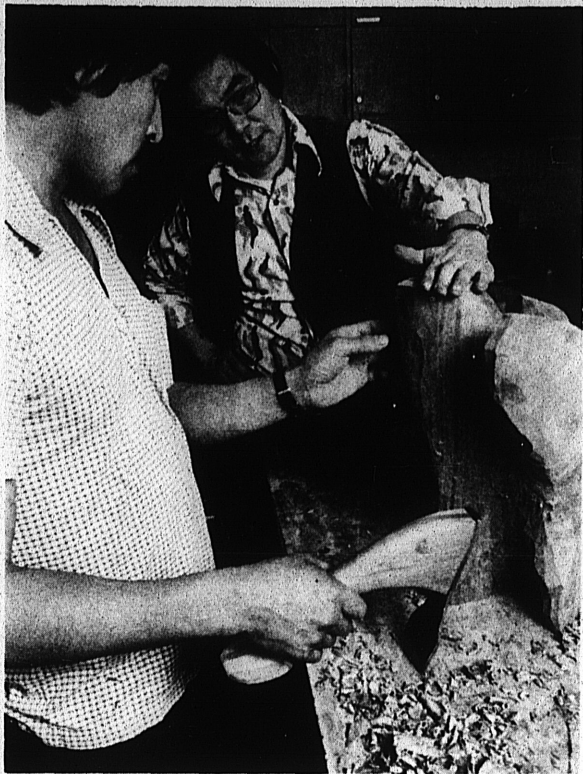
"Aside from this, my interest is in design," he says. "I'm a designer craftsman."

What do his students do after they leave the Fairbanks center? Some go into teaching, others go back to their villages and practice their art there. Some find their way to such places as the Visual Arts Center in Anchorage where they can work with fellow artists and hopefully make a living from what they create.

The Fairbanks center program, Senungetuk stresses, is not job-oriented but aimed at self-improvement.

"The center brings people together in a creative world and it's a great experience for them," he says. "They learn that the world cares for them and what they're doing and they develop self-confidence. This is a very important part of the program."

"I hope they become independent thinkers here, learn to stand on their own feet and create a new world for them-



DISCUSSING TECHNIQUE—Ronald Senungetuk, right, director of Extension Center in Arts and Crafts, confers with Melvin Olanna on wood piece Olanna is creating. —Photo By EVAN BRACKEN

selves."

The 43-year-old artist has a bachelor of fine arts degree from Rochester Institute of Technology's School for American Craftsmen and a diploma from the National School of Arts and Crafts in Oslo, Norway.

His work has appeared in exhibitions around the nation and in France and is part of a number of permanent collections, including those of the Indian Arts and Crafts Board in Washington, D.C., the Johnson Wax Co. of Racine, Wis., the An-

chorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum, and the office of the President, University of Alaska.

Senungetuk has traveled widely and participated in many conferences on art. He is a member of the American Crafts Council of New York, Northwest Designer Craftsmen of Seattle and the Alaska State Council on the Arts.

He is married and he and his wife Turid have two children — Christopher and Heidi.

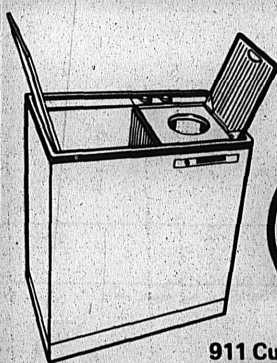
The State Board of Education will meet May 6th and 7th in Room 250 of the Consortium Library Building, Senior College, University of Alaska, Anchorage, at 9:00 a.m. The public is invited to attend.

Katherine Hurley,
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