

BORBRIDGE RESIGNS NATIVE AFFAIRS OFFICE AT PHS

Information Officer Betzi Woodman Also Resigns: Both to Work Closely with Natives

An interview with John Borbridge on the occasion of his leaving the U.S. Public Health Service after 16 months as the Alaska Area Native Health Service first Native Affairs Officer. This is prepared especially for the TUNDRA TIMES and their readers by Betzi Woodman, at the end of her tenure as Public Information Officer for PHS in Alaska. Both Borbridge and Mrs. Woodman resigned to take on other work closely related to their previous activity with the Native peoples of Alaska.

QUESTION: John, in resigning your position as Native Affairs Officer with the U.S. Public Health Service you have indicated your new work will not be too far separated from what you have done these past 16 months. Can you tell us what you will be doing.

ANSWER: Yes, I will be working closely with the Native people as I have been with PHS, but the new work will have more of a regional applicability. It will be associated with my home area in southeastern Alaska but a formal announcement of the precise nature of the work will be made a little later.

Q: In the nearly year and a half you have held this job you must have had a number of interesting experiences. Actually, you pioneered the position in Alaska. Can you tell us how it happened to be established here?

A: The Office of Native Affairs has had a counterpart in the South 48 for the past five years. This is the Tribal Affairs Officer working for USPHS. The position came into being here as a response to the fact that Alaska Native organizations—from vill-

age councils on up to regional organizations and to the state-wide Alaska Federation of Natives—had formed identifiable units which would be more representative of the Native Peoples. And with these the PHS anticipated working.

I think the beauty of the position is the initial reason for its creation: it was due to the action of the Natives themselves, their desires and efforts to grapple directly with those things which affected their lives.

Q: There was no pattern established on how you would proceed. What were your thoughts and feelings as you began the work?

A: I had a great curiosity as to what the guide lines would be. There was much pleasure in contemplating the vast challenges before me, . . . to realize the unique opportunity to form the guide lines. I was free to fit the office to the needs of the Alaska Native people.

Q: There was a word being used very prominently at the start of your position and it has continued to be present almost always as we talk of our work in PHS. That word is "involvement." What can you say about that word—what it means to you and what you encountered during your work in connection with the term?

A: The theme of involvement is best exemplified by Dr. Stuart Rabeau, (Director of Indian Health) in his "Report to the First Americans." In effect, he said that the Public Health Service is a program for people, which belongs to the people and should be worked out in conjunction with the people.

Basically, this posed—and still poses—a challenge for Alaska Natives in that involvement can run the gamut from just simple communications to helping to make

policy.

I would like briefly to take a look at some of the responses which are usually evident initially in the relationship between PHS and Village Councils or policies or their implementation is usually one of perhaps suggestions, complaints or grievances. Certainly I don't derogate the role of this type of approach because it is the personal one which is understood more clearly by village spokesmen.

The second response is usually the development of understanding of programs and policies, . . . how they are formulated, how they are evaluated.

I might add here that understanding is a two-way proposition which must be developed not only by our people in the villages, but also by the PHS professionals. The logical development from this is an input by the people to the actual program formulations and to the influence on the policies which are made both here in the Area Office and those which are drawn up at the Division headquarters.

It is this challenge which is before us at the present time because it is quite evident that participation in the program planning process will call for a more sophisticated approach and more preparation on the part of the spokesmen who will be participating on behalf of their organizations. It calls for continuity of effort and also for communications between spokesmen and the people they represent.

I might add here that part of this is my observation of the power of the pen. Many of our people in the village and other spokesmen are beginning to realize that government agencies are very cognizant of the desires of the people—if those desires are expressed in written form. This leads automatically to a further observation: the theme of involvement, inviting as it does the meaningful and significant participation of our people is going to rely to a great extent on the input from villages back to PHS. It is logical to assume that where there is no response to a query or an invitation to participate that such lack of a response can only act to the detriment of our people.

Q: Do you feel that the PHS professionals have addressed themselves genuinely to this program of involvement? Do you think they really understand what it means?

A: I think basically they do. I certainly feel the commitment to involvement is a very strong one. However, I wouldn't be completely candid if I were not to admit that there is a need not only for the education of our village people relative to policies and programs—but there is a real need for some education for people who come to Alaska the first time in behalf of PHS.

There is a philosophy which is prevalent not only just among a few PHS professionals, but it is true anywhere. It was said by some more elegant speaker than I that there is a certain mystique about power and authority that when it exists in a certain place it wishes to spare from mistakes the others who would gain and use such a position for themselves.

I feel that one of the very important philosophies that any of us working with our Native peoples must have is a basic premise that our people not only have the right to make the right decisions, but to make mistakes as well. The trial and error system has been used by all societies and certainly we Alaskans are no exception to this.

The type of thinking which sometimes goes counter to this is generally expressed as a feeling that perhaps the people are "not quite ready." I think very often that the ones who are not ready are those who would like to

hold on to the prerogative of position—or authority—or status, as it were.

The thing I want to emphasize very strongly here is that as we continue as a Public Health Service with the theme of involvement, our relationship to the people we serve is going to gradually change.

As our people have become more sophisticated—which they have—there is no question in my mind but that we will have to view ourselves (meaning us as PHS professionals) as consultants. . . as people in effect who will be offering expertise to supplement those ideas which are initiated by our village people.

CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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