

# Seasons of Recovery and the Road to Prevention<sup>1</sup>

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Perspectives and challenges in doing alcohol and drug abuse prevention in rural Alaska are described through a fictional narrative of two consultants to a rural Alaska village and one person's development as a village prevention specialist. The narrative describes struggles, problems, needs, and the village context of prevention work in rural Alaska. It highlights a set of innovative programs and approaches to training and intervention that have been developed in Alaska. Special attention is paid to programs developed locally by Native people that depend upon Native ways of knowing and knowledge bases as well as those of Euro-American social science. In providing this narrative, it should be clear that the authors recommend use of indigenous ways of knowing and knowledge bases in the design of training and intervention programs, and collaboration with tribal elders and local experts. Intervention should foster connections between people, agencies, and natural helping networks, and blend western knowledge with tribal wisdom. Interventions recommended focus on approaches that maximize community and personal choice, are non-intrusive and build community as an empowered collective.

## *Prologue*

In presenting the context for prevention work in rural Alaska as a fictional narrative, the authors have synthesized their experience of working in rural areas, knowledge of prevention programs, and discussions with individuals and communities about their needs and visions. This narrative presents many of the dilemmas, challenges, and innovations specific to Alaska in the prevention of alcohol and drug abuse and other behavioral health problems. The voices of the narrators and others are fiction. They do not exist. Their voices are our work and their thoughts are our construction.

Further, we understand that no one person's experience is that of another's. If a Yup'ik person writes of his or her experience, it does not represent that of another Yup'ik person. However, the Yup'ik person's experience may more closely resonate with that of other Native people than those of two of the authors, who are Euro-American. The story has been read and reviewed by several Alaska Native people, including elders. This process has allowed the authors—one of whom is an Alaska Native—to be true, to the extent possible, to the culture from which the story emerges. This is a story about

the struggles of Alaska Native people and communities and the ways they are coping with and resolving issues of alcoholism, racism, rapid social and cultural change, and communal and individual trauma. We consider it a story of hope. Although some individuals and communities are portrayed with problems, it is important to recognize that in all cases the people and communities are in the process of growth and strength-building. Alaska Native communities are remarkable for their resourcefulness and strength. Such a perspective must always be with us as we recognize the pain and problems that people experience. It is the reason that we advocate, as so many others do, for the education of an indigenous leadership in the area of behavioral sciences and alcohol prevention in particular.

It is necessary for us to explain that, although fraught with epistemological problems, we think that presenting material in narrative form with hypothetical characters enlivens the story and may allow people to think through context in a way that is more helpful than an academic presentation of programs. One of our motivations for writing in a narrative format was our desire to recognize and honor storytelling as one of the First Nations' primary methods of education and transmission of knowledge. As such, a narrative presents the issues immediately and clearly, so that statistics, program descriptions, and demographic presentations do not cloud the central issue of the critical nature of understanding one's position in a social context. This is the necessary point of departure for prevention work.

### *The Story Begins. . .*

Gripping the edge of her seat, Rachel caught sight of the sod and metal roofs of log homes, the blue-roofed school, the village church, and the drug and alcohol rehabilitation center as the Cessna 206 banked to the left on its approach to the gravel airstrip. The leaves on the birch trees were yellowing, a stark contrast with the deep green of the stunted black spruce so common in Alaska. A black bear lumbered along a nearby lake looking for berries and squirrels in the low-lying willow and alder. Rachel had been traveling to villages in the region as a public health nurse, consulting with health aides and local councils on communicable diseases for several years. She thought her town, a small northern Pennsylvania farming community, was rural. But Alaska's remoteness, its lack of immediate transportation and the distance between villages has given her a new sense of what is rural. She's grown fond of the sparsely populated areas with their rich history, traditions and diverse customs.

As the trees and ground rushed up to greet the airplane, Rachel spotted her friend Annie walking to the airstrip to meet her. Rachel's stomach always

protests during landings. Most of the time motion sickness pills work. But she will never forget a flight that was exceptionally rough. As the plane descended over a rugged mountain range, she thought her insides were going to erupt and leave her hanging inside out. She counts her blessings when flights and especially the landings go as well as this one.

Rachel saw Annie and Jack waving as the plane rolled to a stop. Jack is a guidance counselor for the school district and travels by plane to all the villages in the district. He usually stays in a small apartment next to the school when he is in the village consulting with teachers and counseling students. Jack, a bit shy and somewhat quiet, is originally from Idaho. He has lived in the regional center, a village of about 1,000 people, for the last ten years. Rachel has made plans to stay with Annie and her son Ben for the next few days. As she squeezed out of the plane, Annie took Rachel's large duffel bag from the pilot, who was helping to unload the cargo. "How was your flight?" Annie asked, knowing how Rachel dreaded bumpy flights. "We've been berry picking. There's a lot more to pick before the sun sets."

"That sounds like a good idea. My stomach actually behaved this time!" Rachel replied as she took two large boxes from the pilot. Annie's cousin, who was loading things onto his four-wheeler, said he would take the duffel bag and boxes to Annie's house.

An hour later, Rachel watched Annie's fingers deftly search through the tundra bushes gathering juicy blueberries. A flock of geese honked overhead, wings pumping on their migration south to warmer waters. The tundra's color glowed with hints of crimson, burnt sienna, and amber, absorbing the dusty greens of summer's growth. Spiky burgundy seed pods of fireweed along the river bank were all that was left of summer's industry.

"We worked hard this summer at fish camp," Annie said as they stood to stretch their cramped muscles. Her father, mother, sisters, and brother all helped cut and hang to dry hundreds of salmon caught by the family fish wheel.

"How are your brother and your cousins?" Rachel asked.

"Fine, they're out hunting with my uncle George," replied Annie.

Rachel reflected on how many thousands of years Annie's family and their clan have been gathering and storing berries, fish, and meat in preparation for the long, cold winter months. Her eyes scan the cotton-clothed skeletal remains of fireweed and beached salmon along the river bank, signs the land has begun its descent into dormancy. They remind her of the past season's sad events. Two young community members committed suicide, one early in the spring just as the daytime thaws began, the other six weeks later. The people were shocked and full of disbelief and grief that this could

happen in their village, to their relatives. The crosses the families carved and painted are plainly visible on the ridge overlooking the river where the village cemetery lies. She remembers the grave markers on Memorial Day, the traditional day the village tends the graveyard, cutting away the weeds, painting the fences, and planting fresh flowers, honoring their ancestors.

*"Our Lord, please forgive these young people who take their own lives. They filled summer tents with life and laughter. We raise the children to be a part of this community, to help the community when they realize their strengths. This is how we build our wisdom, how we work; as the cords of the tent give strength in the wind, our young people give our community strength.*

*"Now, I'm afraid the cords are loosening. I don't think our young people are drunk, they just have no set goals; they are in darkness, groping. People who were once taught to respect one another now waste away like something rotten, like a garment eaten by moths. Their roots dry, their branches break, their steps weaken.*

*"While our children are in school, they are hopeful, life has meaning, they grow and learn. They were taught to get jobs after finishing school, but there still are none in our small community. Some of these children grow quickly like a flower, but when we look at them mature and ready to shine, the light goes out.*

*"Please forgive them, seems like so many now. Amen."*

Too many men in Annie's village have died young. Whether by accident or by violence, their deaths were often attributed to alcohol abuse. The river claimed one just two years ago. He had been drinking while hunting. He stood up in his boat and lost his balance and fell into the river. He wasn't wearing a life vest. He was a good man, quiet, a Gulf War veteran. He loved music and dancing. Rachel didn't know him, but she has talked with his widow many times.

Rachel knows the tragedy of these deaths have been felt by the extended family throughout the region. They are still healing, sharing their grief. Elders have shared stories with Rachel of better times before contact with Westerners. Times when the People governed themselves, guided by cultural traditions and spiritual beliefs. Times when they relied on the land for their sustenance and strength. But, in the past two generations, the combined influence of government institutions, practices and laws, missionaries, teachers and technology have changed village life. More and more, food and clothes are bought at the store. Mushing has become more of a sport that shortens the winter; hardly anyone uses dogsleds for trapping anymore. Guns, snow machines and high-powered boats have made life easier, but require cash to use and maintain. Ten years ago, many families spent summers at fish camp. Now fewer do. One consequence is felt by all: so many

children in too many communities cannot speak their Native language. And, increasingly, alcohol and drugs exert a powerful influence on people's lives.

Alcohol has been a problem in the village since it was first brought in to trade for beaver, fox and wolf pelts. Although many people in Annie's village do not drink, everyone is affected by alcohol's influence. Elders want the alcohol problem resolved. It will be one of the main topics of discussion at tonight's village council meeting.

Last winter, Mayor Frank, Annie's father, encouraged her to run for village council member. Annie was surprised when she was elected, because she had returned home just a year ago. Like many people her age, Annie spent several years living in Anchorage and Fairbanks going to school and working, thinking city life was better. Television and boarding school, with their promises of happiness and jobs, taught her that life outside her village was better and more exciting, enticing her to leave a life she thought was boring. Now, she has learned the hard way that the Eskimo culture's family and community values are stronger, more rewarding and enduring than the city and its temptations. Her path home was neither straight nor without resistance. Annie went through a personal hell in her recovery from alcoholism.

Jack met Annie when they were both invited by a mutual friend, Janine, to a week-long spirit camp on the Tanana River. A recovery group was meeting at the camp to share experiences and to work. Jack felt uneasy and was skeptical, wondering how a spirit camp could affect people's recovery from alcohol and drug abuse. He was still learning about the importance of culture and spirit in healing. Annie also feared going to the spirit camp but her apprehension arose from a different source, her own dance with alcohol. To her relief, Janine explained, "While some share recovery experiences, others do camp chores."

Annie arrived at Janine's home early on the morning their group was to leave for the spirit camp. Janine introduced her to Jack, just another member of the group going to the camp. Half-asleep and groggy as they drove toward the river landing, the group continuously poured and drank coffee from Janine's big Thermos bottle. Janine quietly drove, drawing deeply on her cigarette. No one said much of anything. Later, Annie told Jack the silence felt strange. She imagined hearing the laughter of her drinking buddies early in the morning, saying "Let's go for an eye opener."

After driving two miles through the dust raised by other cars on the bumpy gravel road, they pulled into a turnaround at a riverbank bordered by willows. As they unloaded their gear for the week-long camp, other cam-

pers piled out of overloaded cars. Heads turned at the low roar of a riverboat. A white-haired Athabaskan man expertly guided a flat-bottomed boat over the turbulent current of gray-brown glacial silt water. The elder greeted them as he landed the boat, then helped them load all their gear into the boat. Once aboard, the passengers teased each other for being unprepared for camping and joked about one man's snoring. "He's so loud he'll scare off all the fish." Everyone laughed. Their guide piloted the boat down the river, around sandbars and islands, to a flat open area where they saw tents, a fish wheel, fish-drying racks and smoke-house, and what seemed to be places to cook and eat. The joking, the sight of the fish wheel and drying racks and the clear smell of the river relaxed Annie. The river was home.

When they landed, Annie grabbed the anchor line, jumped out and tied the boat to a tree, then helped the older people disembark. The riverbank was steep and a well-traveled ramp led to the camp area. Some of the stronger people remained in the boat, handing the camping gear to two youths on shore. When the boat was unloaded, the Athabaskan elder pointed the bow toward the opposite shore, gunned the motor and piloted upriver to pick up another load.

Camp elders hugged Jack, Annie and the others as they carried their gear into the camp. Jack noticed the other campers included Alaska Natives, Indians from the Lower 48 and a few non-Natives as well. Janine went up to one of the older women and was wrapped in a big hug. As Janine introduced the group, the older woman grabbed Annie with a hug and told her to make sure to set up her tent away from the snorer or she wouldn't get any sleep.

Janine and Annie pitched their tent and threw in their duffel and sleeping bags, then helped two teenagers with their tent. Jack made sure to pitch his tent away from the others. Being a light sleeper, he didn't want to be awakened by the nocturnal nasal rumbling of his fellow campers. Three youngsters ran around chasing a husky. A mother nursed her baby in the shade and elderly women gathered around tables and pots preparing food. A father and son were gathering and chopping wood. After setting up camp, Janine suggested to Annie and Jack that they help prepare supper.

As they approached the elderly women, Jack whispered to Annie, "I'm not sure what to do."

"Don't worry," Annie replied, "Just stay with me. Even though I've spent these past years in the city, I still remember how to do camp chores."

Janine went with two men and a youth to gather firewood for a bonfire after the meal. Jack and Annie peeled potatoes, carrots, and onions until their tears flowed.

"So, you miss your boyfriend?" an older woman teased Annie.

After eating all the caribou, moose and salmon their stomachs could hold, everyone pitched in to clean the dining area, packing away the food and garbage so as not to attract bears. The men built a fire and everyone drifted over, visiting. When their chores were done, Annie and Jack joined the group by the fire, now sitting in a large circle. An Athabaskan elder stood holding an eagle feather.

"Each of you will receive the feather as it passes clockwise, the path of the sun. In this way, we will all have a turn to speak. There are only two rules for the circle. One is to not interrupt the person who holds the feather. The second is to speak from your heart and with respect. You will be heard by everyone present, including our ancestors and wildlife." He sat down and passed the feather to an elder on his left.

The elder spoke of his long life and the pains he experienced in boarding school, the punishments he and others suffered for speaking their Athabaskan language. Although his parents spoke English poorly, when he was home they would only speak English to him. They wanted him to be a link to the new age. Toward the end of summer his uncles would take him hunting. They told him to watch how the animals lived and to learn respect for them. Each summer he dreaded returning to school where the staff would punish him for speaking his language and ridicule his culture. But he obeyed his mother and father and returned year after year.

When he finished school, he had trouble finding a job in the city and his subsistence skills weren't equal to those of friends his age who grew up at home. He felt lost. After years of alcohol abuse, he could no longer bear the shame. He was ready to die when an uncle came to town, a hunter who never drank. In the past this uncle had told him to watch the animals, to find the animal he admired and to learn from that animal. The uncle now told him to come home, to come to the village and winter camp with him. He spent the next two years following his uncle and finding a life he had forgotten. At first he craved alcohol, but later forgot it as he watched wolves and learned of family and fidelity. Like the clever fox he learned to avoid that which was harmful. The elder told the group he would speak more about this later. "For now, you should not forget, life is never over. Giving up is not for Athabaskans or anyone else."

He passed the feather to an elder woman who spoke of luck and the importance of being prepared for it. For her people, luck drew you and followed you, but your skills had to be honed. Her grandmother taught her to sew skins and make clothes. These skills and her grandmother's love helped her to see and use opportunities as they were presented. "We must respect

each other and share our skills," she said.

The circle continued with personal experiences or old stories and some old songs with stories. When the feather finally came to Jack, he didn't know what to say. What did strike him was how much pain was similar and shared. Yet each experience and associated pain was personal. He was amazed how similar two Yup'ik women's boarding school experience were to the Inupiat man's and the Athabaskan's. He did not know what to say so he simply told them where he came from, how unfamiliar he was with speaking from his heart and how much he appreciated being allowed to be a part of the circle.

Annie found the feather in her hand. She thanked the people for listening and sharing their recovery experiences. "I didn't know what to do last week," Annie told the group. "Should I go with my friends to a party, or join Janine? I told her I'd come, but I didn't want to talk. When I was young, leaving my family seemed best for me. The village had too many painful experiences. I don't know what to think now. Maybe there is more to the village than I remember. I miss my son, Ben." She sat quietly for a moment, then gave the feather to Kenny, one of those who had ridden in Janine's car.

Kenny thanked the circle for the recovery opportunity. He was born and raised in Fairbanks, but visited relatives at a Yukon River village for a week each summer. The thoughts and experiences shared by those in the circle introduced him to a world that he knew little about, one he would like to experience. Every day at school in Fairbanks, he wonders if he is accepted. He gets angry at the racist jokes he hears from students, jokes about the "Nates" on Second Avenue, staggering with a bottle in their hands. His parents and favorite uncle don't drink or abuse alcohol. If he lived in the village he would learn more about other opportunities and ways of thinking, ways unlike the stud culture he's been attracted to, something different than just trying to be popular. Since hearing others' experiences, he has realized that taking drugs and drinking alcohol is not the norm for Native people. "Most Natives don't drink or take drugs. I want to be one of them."

Finally, as the fire burned down to embers, the last person spoke. The elder talked of the great death in the early 20th century. It lasted for years. So many people died of the flu and other diseases, the People doubted the shamans. After so many deaths, the People lost faith in the old religions and gods. Moravian, Russian Orthodox, Catholic, Episcopalian, Quaker, Lutheran and Presbyterian stepped in to save, to capture their souls. She is sad for the loss of the language as the boarding schools raised the children.

She told the people around the circle that the communities have to work together to recoup their losses, to become whole once again. "We have to work hard. As when making a dog sled, we do it until it is finished. As each



piece of wood is lashed into place for support, so must we rebuild our communities, our clans, frame them together with strength to carry the load of our healing."

The sun reached the horizon as the circle closed with a prayer to the Great One. The people in the circle hugged and then parted, emotionally spent. That night many slept the deep sleep of those who have burdens lifted and work accomplished. Others, like Annie, slept restlessly.

She saw someone motioning for her to come. She wanted to go but her feet were deep in muck. The more she struggled, the more stuck she became. She couldn't move. Struggling awake, she heard Janine's soft breathing and saw her own breath in the chilly August night in the light of the half moon. Her watch read 3:07. It was perfectly quiet, only the river's ripples broke the silence.

During the next two days, the campers cut and smoked fish, cleaned and painted buildings, chopped wood and boiled water. Some people picked and stored berries. Two men worked on a boat motor, preparing it for moose hunting upriver. At dusk, the circle shared. With the feather, Annie shared, telling how she grew up with alcohol all around her. She spoke of taking her first drink at age eight, her first binge at ten. She stopped going to school at 15 and spent the next four years drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana, living with whoever would keep her, traveling between village and city.

*"Annie was a difficult pregnancy. Born six weeks early, she had visceral problems immediately. The black poop in her intestines wouldn't pass and she weakened. My mother was with the mid-wife while my daughter gave birth and stayed in touch with her during the intense first days. To heal Annie's problem, the mid-wife boiled bearded seal blubber, stuck a small twig through it and gave it to Annie as a pacifier. Tiny Annie worked that piece of blubber as though she knew it was a medicine that would provide her with relief. The next day, she passed that black poop, the poisons were released and she began life.*

*"Dear Lord, watch over Annie and bless her with your kindness. Keep her safe and help her to make good choices, help her to find her way home."*

At 16, Annie became pregnant. She lost her daughter a year later to social services because of drinking. Since then, she has learned of fetal alcohol syndrome and hopes the girl is okay. "I pray her mother and father are Eskimo and that someday we will meet."

Annie was sober for a while when she met Jim. She can remember her second pregnancy more clearly. She and Jim lived in Fairbanks. He was working on the pipeline and she had returned to school. But when she became pregnant, she dropped out and instead passed the GED exam. She tried to

stay sober for her new baby, Ben. But Jim drank heavily when home from Prudhoe Bay and often beat her, erasing her newly built confidence. Jim's father had treated his mother the same way.

She decided they had to leave him when Jim started spanking her son for small mistakes. Annie has drunk steadily since she left. She told the group that she does not want to lose another child. Her love for Ben has forced her decision to become sober. "I want to go to Anchorage for treatment in a recovery program. My mom said she will take care of Ben while I'm there. After the treatment, I want to return to the village, to my family and my cultural traditions."

At breakfast the next day, Annie told Jack about the dreams she had been having. Last night the figure motioning her seemed clearer, more defined and more familiar. She still didn't know who it was, but the muck wasn't as strong.

"I dreamt about my father for the first time in 20 years," Jack shared in return. "Growing up with alcohol in my family was difficult. It was like the booze controlled my family. I never knew who I was. My dad drank beer every night while watching TV, sitting in his big leather chair eating crackers and cheese. I remember one night when my parents argued. A loud screech woke me up. My Dad had driven away in the car. When I went out to find Mom, I could tell that Dad had hit her. Her eye was swollen. I wonder now how she was able to drive me and my sister to our grandparents. Dad followed us. He kept racing the car up and down the driveway, threatening to ram the house. I was so frightened. I promised to myself that I would never drink alcohol. But in college all my friends drank, so did I. I'm lucky I never became addicted, although I came pretty close."

On the last morning they packed their camping gear and with tears for farewells boarded the riverboat for the return trip. They waved to the camp elders and others who remained behind to prepare for the next recovery group. During the ride into town, the young adults talked about returning next year. Many wanted to go back to their villages and fish camps for the summer.

*"Our Lord, what would the ancestors have done when their children were out of line or pulled themselves away from the family? How can our traditions help us to fight the illness of alcoholism, and everything else that weakens the security of the tent? Are the traditions but a shadow? Our community members are related, they know each other. . . support each other. As it has been done for thousands of years, we elders must give our knowledge and love to the younger generation. Amen."*

A month later, Rachel visited Annie at the alcohol-and-drug treatment center. The treatment center staff were all Native Alaskans. They described the program as created from an AA model but organized to be Alaska Native in orientation. After Annie had checked in and unpacked her luggage she joined a group of newcomers in a talking circle run by one of the staff members. This experience differed from the treatment program in Fairbanks where the counselor and group members challenged everything she said, causing her to feel unworthy and ill at ease. In the circle, the recovery group members were encouraged to open up, to release emotions. Annie explained to Rachel how this treatment program was allowing her to voice the rest of her story.

Part of the problem, Rachel thinks, is that like most Alaskan villages, Annie's offers few paying jobs. People can work on the school maintenance staff, for the village corporation, the tribal and village council staff, as a village public safety officer or a community health aide. The families rely on their members who are employed for staple foods, fuel and clothing. In Annie's village, a few men are employed building HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development] homes and a new laundry, and the forest fire crews provide seasonal employment.

When cash is plenty, Rachel has heard of people talking of cocaine coming in on planes. Annie told Rachel she was not familiar with cocaine and was not sure anyone was using it in her village. But the rumors, floating in the villages about substance abuse, are bothersome. Last winter, there was a rash of inhalant abuse among the region's high school youth. Marijuana has always been available since for many years Alaska State law allowed people to possess a couple of ounces for personal use.

Yet, in the village, there is a strength in the bond between relatives, a close familiarity that Rachel does not quite understand and probably will never share. The relative ease shared among the people allows clan members to sit for hours visiting, teasing and joking, or just in silence. The village is a magnet that draws everyone home to its both wonderful and sometimes tragic life. Since the two suicides, the village council has been debating whether or not to ban alcohol. While many feel banning alcohol is the only solution, others feel banning won't solve anything since people will smuggle it in to sell for two, three or more times the actual cost. By voting for a strong village council, Annie's village has pulled onto the road to prevention.

A poke from a tundra rose startled Rachel away from her daydreaming. A distant star glimmers in the eastern sky above the snow-capped mountains, as the sun lowers on the horizon. The women want to attend the council

meeting, which will start soon. Picking up baskets of berries, they hike the short distance across the tundra back to the village.

As they near the village, Rachel is warmed by the sight of Annie's comfortable home nestled among the other log homes. Unlike the new, large, square, framed HUD homes being built on pilings on the other side of the airstrip, Annie's home is a small, one-story structure her uncles built almost thirty years ago. Earth is packed up around the foundation and the roof is covered with corrugated tin so the winter snows easily slide off.

They leave the berries in a corner of the large porch and take off their shoes as they enter. Annie takes pride in her clean house. Three small windows allow in a surprising amount of light. Rachel's duffel bag and some sleeping bags are in a corner of the living room. Like many village homes, Annie doesn't have running water or indoor plumbing. Toward the back of the living room is the stacked bunk bed she and her son Ben share. A small curtained space in the arctic entry way contains a plywood box with a toilet seat topping the honey-bucket. They also share an outhouse with her sister and her husband and children who live next door.

Rachel brought two boxes containing fresh fruit, vegetables, coffee, eggs, and tissue to share with Annie and Ben in exchange for her stay. The community members who enjoy visiting Annie, sitting around her table drinking coffee and listening to the radio, will relish the opportunity to eat fresh fruit and vegetables. Their one station, produced by a Christian organization, is broadcast from the regional center. The radio is usually on because they play Annie's favorite music, country and old-time fiddle, and broadcast messages and news from around the region. Ben likes listening to a Saturday night youth program that plays rap and rock-and-roll. Annie plans to buy him a Walkman with headphones for Christmas.

Because Annie doesn't smoke cigarettes, Jack has to go outside to smoke when he visits. Annie is always teasing him, encouraging him to quit and not model smoking to the youth he counsels. During his visits to the village, Jack has noticed more youth smoking and chewing tobacco. Annie and her sister Jessica, who also doesn't smoke, have decided to bring this health issue up at this evening's council meeting.

Jessica has the stressful job of Tribal Family and Youth Services worker. Several of the children live in homes where parents drink. When the parents are Jessica's aunts and uncles, it makes her job more difficult. Jessica has tried talking with them about their drinking and the effects on children. Last spring, the school principal called and said her cousin hadn't been in school for over a week. She found him at home watching TV. Her aunt and uncle had been gone for a couple of days. Jessica took him over to Annie's for a

decent meal before going to school, then went back to her office to file the necessary report. Rachel remembers all the anger from the clan that followed. Because Jessica and her husband have never drunk alcohol, it is sometimes hard for her to comprehend addictions and community members' reactions. Talking with Annie allows her to better understand.

With their jackets in hand, Annie, Rachel, and Jack left for the community hall. As her eyes adjusted to the light, Rachel noticed a schoolteacher sitting with the village elders on benches along the wall. One of Annie's nieces was serving them coffee. Mayor Frank sat at a table with the other council members. Jack was talking with one of the school teachers about a prevention project the regional school board wants implemented. They plan to ask the council for its advice.

Waving Annie forward to sit with the council, Frank showed her a flyer received by fax that afternoon. It announced an upcoming prevention symposium in November sponsored by the Alaska Council on Prevention of Alcohol and Drug Abuse. He told her he wants someone from the council to go to the symposium.

Rachel found a seat next to Jack as Mayor Frank asked everyone to stand. Jack and Rachel stood respectfully as an elder offered a prayer in their Native language. Like many people her age, Annie understands the prayer but does not speak her Native language. Annie has heard about the strong efforts in other villages to bridge the gap left by boarding schools. Elders have been leading the way by going to the local schools to teach the youth their language and by hosting story-telling nights at the community hall.

Thanking the elders for their leadership in rebuilding traditions, Mayor Frank moved the agenda to the alcohol ban. Elders stood and spoke against drinking and admonished parents and youth who do. They spoke of the need for youth to learn their culture's traditions and skills, to make snowshoes and build sleds, to learn sewing, hunting and food gathering, to become intimate with the land. They encouraged the council to stop alcohol from coming into the village.

The mother of the young man who committed suicide last spring demanded the council take action to keep the youth from drinking. Frank shares his sister-in-law's loss and promised to do whatever he could help the village youth.

Annie's uncle John stood up, "Banning alcohol isn't the solution. People should be able to drink in their homes. The VPSO just needs to do her job and stop the fights that break out, and where was she the other night when someone came to my house with a gun?"

"It's hard for me to respond to every situation that involves alcohol,"

Sheri, the Village Public Safety Officer, answered. "My life has been threatened many times. I'm tired of putting my safety at stake and not having support from the council or the community."

"I agree too many people are drinking, causing trouble and dying from alcohol," Annie said as Sheri sat down. "Instead of fighting with each other, we need to learn more about what we can do to help our people and our youth. We need to learn more about the Local Option Law and what other people are doing to deal with alcohol and drug problems in their villages."

Rachel raised her hand. Mayor Frank, who asked her to attend the council meeting to give a report, acknowledged her. She passed out information as she described how villages have banned the sale of liquor or the sale and import, while others have banned all possession of alcohol by using the Local Option Law. In one village, any public drunkenness is immediately punishable by a \$500 fine and the person is taken to the regional center jail for five days. In other villages, community members ostracize those who continue to drink until they stop. Village councils have sent letters to the airlines to post on bulletin boards, urging all not to import alcohol into their village. They convinced the bush airlines not to profit from helping bootleggers smuggle in their booze. In those villages, parents now spend more time with their children, community members give more respect to elders, and there are fewer four-wheeler and snow machine accidents. Although she has heard there continues to be alcohol problems in some villages that have voted themselves dry, it's been her experience that in dry villages there are more subsistence activities and other healthy social activities. At the end of her report she suggested the council organize a committee to do more research and generate ideas for ways their community can deal with drug and alcohol problems.

Mayor Frank looked down the table, his eyes settling on his daughter, Annie. "Annie, would you be willing to chair a committee and report back to the council? Does anyone want to volunteer to work on this committee?"

Jessica, who walked in during the discussion, and Sheri raised their hands. Annie knows a few more who might want to volunteer and are not at the meeting. She'll talk with them tomorrow and encourage them to help.

"Perhaps we can send you to the Prevention Symposium to learn more," the Mayor concluded. "Ben can stay with me and grandma."

The next day, as they sat drinking coffee and listening for the mail plane to circle the village before landing, Annie told Jack and Rachel of her apprehension about attending the symposium. They acknowledged her concerns and assured her the symposium shares the same atmosphere as the spirit camp. "Besides, we'll both be there. We'll treat you to Mongolian Barbeque,"

Rachel teased.

The village awakened with the escalating buzz of a single-engine plane. Four-wheelers rumbled, overloaded for the rush to the airstrip. Usually one plane a day brought mail, freight and passengers. The arrival of guests, family members and long-awaited packages was a welcome distraction.

November blew in Arctic temperatures and shorter days. Two feet of snow and a frozen river limited travel to snow machine or airplane. The temperature hovered at a crisp -15° Fahrenheit (-26° C), the sky was a clear forget-me-not blue with the sun low on the horizon, bathing the winter day in a pinkish glow as Annie and Jessica boarded their flight to Anchorage.

On arrival, cousin James, his wife Sarah, and their two children, Josh and Mary, met them at the airport, the children excitedly embraced their aunts. James worked for the school district as a janitor and Sarah worked as a teacher's aide in an elementary school. They've often discussed returning to the village, but their jobs offer long-term security. Not too long ago, James and Sarah's life was governed by short-range goals and alcohol. They spent many days and nights in the bars down on Fourth Avenue, while a babysitter looked after Josh. It's been five years since they sobered up, after which they waited before having the now two-year-old Mary. They plan to celebrate their sobriety anniversary by attending the opening Healing Day Ceremony at the Prevention Symposium.

In the Convention Room at the Egan Center, tribal elders had already begun the ceremony with prayers, drumming and singing as Annie and Jessica wove their way in. They were surrounded by tribal members from all over Alaska—Tlingit, Tsimshian and Haida from the southeast; Aleut from the islands running southwest of the mainland between the Bering Sea and the Pacific Ocean; Yup'ik and Chup'ik from south-central and western Alaska; Inupiat from the Bering Sea and northern interior above the Arctic Circle and along the coast of the Arctic Ocean; and Athabaskan from the rivers and mountains of Alaska's interior. They wore brightly trimmed parkas and kuspiks, moose hide beaded slippers, dresses, vests, and Chilkat blankets with killer whales, ravens, otters or eagles, all showing the pride of cultural heritage. Traditional dance groups sent by many communities to perform filled the room with songs, dancing and drumming. Native Americans from Lower 48 tribes also shared their songs and drumming, some were even moderating the day's activities. A few non-Natives attended the Ceremony and were urged to join in the dancing.

A young Haida man welcomed a South-central dance group as Rachel sat next to Annie and Jessica, smiling. A young Athabaskan woman intro-

duced herself and the youth group: "Our mission is to bring the message to our peers of the harm that drugs and alcohol bring to youth and their families and to promote peaceful relations among all peoples as an end to racism. The youth in this group dance and act out dramas using both traditional dance and music from today's youth culture to achieve our goal of preventing alcohol and drug abuse. We travel all around the state, wherever we are invited, performing for school groups and communities from Barrow to Ketchikan and Kotzebue to Eagle. This group is an example of the positive way youth can contribute to our communities and to our culture."

Rachel was impressed with the young woman's confidence, energy and conviction. One skit depicted a girl's dance with alcohol and drugs as it tore her away from the care and love of her family. Her parent's love finally helps her to break away from the destructive dance and return home. Another skit showed young children learning hatred and racism from parents, damaging healthy friendships between children from different backgrounds. The young friends bring their parents together, creating friendship. The group closed with various dances illustrating and celebrating the world's cultural diversity.

After the performance, Rachel and Annie, wanting to compliment the young woman leading the youth group, threaded their way through the milling audience. Accidentally, Annie bumped into a woman carrying a little girl. "Annie!" Janine exclaimed. They hugged tightly and excitedly tried to catch up on their lives amidst the clamor. Janine smiled as she introduced Annie and Rachel to John. John and Annie, after telling each other their hometowns and which clan they belonged to, found out they were related. One of Annie's paternal aunts was married to his father's cousin. John is a leader in the Alaska Federation of Natives Sobriety Movement and wore a button with a bright red ribbon that stated, "Our spirit, strong, sober. Let it begin with me."

"Where did you get your button? I'd like to get one." Annie said.

"You get them at the sobriety booth when you sign the pledge," John explained. "All the pledge signatures are going to be put on microfilm and given to an Alaska Native musher to carry on the Iditarod dog-sled race this winter. From Anchorage to Nome, 1049 miles (1706 km), he'll carry the sobriety pledges in ceremonial fashion, honoring the serum of commitment needed to cure the devastating effects of alcohol and drugs in our communities."

*"Our people have suffered through many diseases. The disease of alcohol has haunted us for a long time. Since the white man came to trade with us, the demon spirit has haunted us. God, bless the young men and women who are working so hard to get rid of this evil spirit. Help them to stand strong. Help those who have fallen*



*to not give up, to find the strength in their cultural heritage and traditions. Let the ancestors guide their path. Bless those who have come to dance and celebrate their sobriety."*

At one of the sessions on Wednesday, Susan from the State's Division of Rural Services talked about the community-based suicide prevention projects funded by her office. "Before being considered for a grant, each community must meet to determine its needs and develop a community prevention plan." Susan went on to describe the wide-ranging projects currently implemented in Alaska cities and villages, from teen centers to traditional campsites for teens, where they learn subsistence skills and knowledge, to centers where traditional carving and other artworks are taught. Each project acknowledges and draws upon the diverse cultural traditions of Alaska. The projects target the groups at highest risk of negative influence, youth and young adults.

"What kind of resources are offered?" asked Rachel, thinking that great ideas have a way of lacking funding and technical support. Susan explained about the grants and other supports, such as the Prevention Council's library, available to help communities begin their projects and to keep them operational. At lunch that afternoon, Rachel shared with Annie what she had learned about the state grants. "It's hard to start a program in the village when so many are in denial," Annie explained. "But, it's time we started something and I know there are people in my village who I can count on, who want to live a better life. We'll just have to stick together and keep working on the others to get them to see things differently. . . . with Jessica's help, I know we can get everyone working together.

Annie attended many other presentations and workshops during the week of the symposium, including Rachel's, which explored Public Health models of drug and alcohol abuse prevention. She and Jessica attended a variety of sessions: suicide prevention, inhalant abuse, the harmful effects of smokeless tobacco, smoking cessation strategies, youth programs, community development and Native spirituality. On the last day, Jack and Rachel joined Annie and Jessica at a workshop on healing community grief presented by Josie and Rita. Josie is a social worker and Rita is a teacher in the Rural Human Services Certificate Program. The Athabaskan and Yup'ik discussed multi-generational grief and trauma as experienced by Alaska Natives and how it has kept, and continues to keep, individuals and communities locked in symptoms of unresolved trauma. Using illustrations and personal stories from the group, they showed the cycle of grief and its relation to culture and spirituality, and introduced ways people and communities can break the cycle and allow healing.

In early January, the air was so cold, -50° F (-46° C), ice crystals were suspended in a fog-like curtain. Even Ben doesn't like going outside when it's that cold. But the village council met despite the cold and, early on, commended Annie for being accepted into the Rural Human Services training session at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. The material she received from the program said the first training session would begin with a week's training on family systems. The second week would focus on rural counseling, and the third on case management. In future sessions, Annie would learn about addictions treatment and prevention, personal development, interpersonal violence, grief and healing, processes of community change, principles and values of Alaska Natives and cross-cultural bridging skills. She noted that each session was scheduled so as not to conflict with subsistence activities. She also noticed how the instructors were from different backgrounds and experiences; some lived and worked in rural areas while others were tenured faculty at the university. Some instructors were Alaskan Natives and almost all the students were Native; many already were alcohol counselors, prevention or mental health workers in their villages.

Arriving the Friday before classes began, Annie and a few other students were met at the airport and driven to a beautiful log lodge nestled among spruce, birch and aspen trees, with a panoramic view of the Alaska Range and the Tanana Valley. Annie and the other students would all live at the lodge, spending three weeks together learning and exploring, from breakfast until bedtime every day. The Program Director and her assistant greeted Annie as she came in the door carrying her suitcases. Annie recognized the assistant's family name, one of the families who lived upriver. The other students continued to arrive over the course of the weekend, young adults and grandparents alike.

Early Monday morning the session began with a prayer followed by a brief program orientation. Afterward, students introduced themselves, many shyly with just their name, village, and job. The resident elders weren't shy. They shared their long lives with the students, revealing wisdom and pain, not shrinking from speaking about their failures, and telling what they value in life. Their casualness and their tendency to joke a bit helped everyone feel more comfortable. The first week's instructors were a young Alaska Native man and woman. They facilitated several group exercises to help bond the students and encourage learning. That evening, the students completed homework and shared their life experiences, many were exhausted and went directly to bed. After visiting with her roommate, Annie easily fell asleep.

Once again the person beckoned. This time the person felt more familiar and was surrounded by other figures. Annie felt as if she could come closer

to the woman and maybe recognize her and those with her.

During the next week, the students learned of a recovery camp from one of the elders. The camp was started several years ago at an old campsite downriver from his village. It was a way to recapture social values and spirit the community and elders felt were lost. The one rule was to be clean and sober. Youth and adults alike attended the camp and within a few years they voted the community a dry village. Now, very few people drink and no one drinks while in the village. More teenagers are graduating from high school, and several have gone to college for study or to technical school to learn a trade. His eldest daughter graduated from the RHS Program.

The other elder told of her village's fight to get alcohol banned. About ten years ago, a few adults and elders tired of being woken in the middle of the night by drunks yelling in the streets, so they decided to run for village council. When voted in, they took steps to clean up their village. The first step was to win the vote to ban alcohol from the village. It took a long time, but they persisted despite physical and verbal abuse from those who didn't want to change. The elders went to the airstrip and searched all the bags that came in and went to their children's homes if they knew there was alcohol. When they found alcohol, they would dump it out right there on the airstrip or in front of the person's home. They gave written warnings from the council for the first offense and thereafter the person would be fined. If the person continued to bring or drink alcohol in the village, the council took a vote to expel the person from the village. It was always a hard decision. But eventually alcohol and its abuses were overcome and her village is now dry and healthy.

Jack was in town one weekend and visited Annie to see how she was doing. "I've been thinking about the spirit camp and the symposium," Annie shared. "When I go home, I want to help our families treat each other better . . . especially the children. . . with love and respect. The elders have always told me that when children are born their spirits need nurturing. . . quietly and calmly. . . and they need welcoming as family and community members. When raised with traditional values, children never feel lost."

One of the things Annie likes about the certificate program is the instructors' way of blending personal development with teaching the subject matter. It encourages the students to ask questions. Some of the instructors and elders demonstrated Native dances from their region, then explained the benefits of a local cultural dance group. They also shared their region's songs, art, and games with the students and were available during the evenings and weekends. One teacher encouraged the students to organize a cultural day.

The day was spent singing and drumming, playing games, preparing and drinking camp tea, playing guitar, and listening to stories from the elders. The day ended with a talking circle.

During the three weeks, Annie and the other students often felt like they were on overload. They all looked forward to the evenings when they could visit and relax, share emotions and help each other make decisions. They all missed home.

Annie was given a research project by one of her instructors to talk to the people in her village about their views regarding recovery issues and their ideas for an alcohol and drug abuse prevention program. Annie was hesitant at first. But as she spoke with her family and council members, and sought advice from elders, she gained encouragement and confidence. She heard their concern for the youth and the need to have social activities during the evenings and on weekends. They also wanted the youth to learn their Native language and traditions. Annie and the other committee members made lists of their ideas for prevention, noting their community's strengths and needs, and added more ideas as they talked with community members.

After taking all the ideas and suggestions into account, and looking at what they could get done in the short run with the resources at hand, the committee decided to start a traditional dance group at the school. The principal, an Athabaskan woman, thought it was a great idea. The youth were initially shy but, as the dance group continued to meet and enjoy the dancing, excitement spread through the village. More youth joined and elders came to participate and teach the youth how to speak the language. After hearing from the elders about traditional regional gatherings, the youth decided they wanted to organize an invitational dance. Annie and Jessica helped them to prioritize their tasks and identify people and other resources they would need to make the event happen. The whole community got involved, arranging places for their guests to sleep, preparing food and beading costumes and raising money to help pay for supplies.

The river ice groaned and cracked and the patches of snow were crusty. With all the mud and shush, Rachel was glad she remembered her break-up boots. Everyone hoped break-up would go well this year. Last year, when the ice jammed downstream, the river flooded the village's lower sections.

The regional gathering began with a welcoming performance by the host youth dance group. Seven dance groups from surrounding villages showed their pride, using dance fans and rhythm to tell ancient stories as they danced. A great-grandmother joined her progeny. Her agility and expression were remarkable, her head bobbed just like a bird. She invited everybody to join

in the dancing. Traditional storytelling and speeches giving thanks lasted until well after midnight. No one drank, there were no drugs, and all had a great time. Mayor Frank told Annie and Rachel how grateful he was the village was sober for a full weekend and the people showed their pride in their cultural traditions. The gathering had been a success.

As they sat in Annie's kitchen drinking coffee, Annie shared with Rachel the changes she was seeing in her village, "The community is talking about the problems they see with alcohol and drug abuse. We're breaking through the denial. They're real supportive of our committee's ideas. It was so good to see so many people getting involved and helping at the youth's dance invitational. We've really brought some life back into the region."

At the next prevention committee meeting, the prevention group talked about getting a youth center started; an old vacant building near the school would be ideal. "The youth center could hold dance group meetings as well as other activities," Jessica explained, "It could help develop leadership in the high school youth by having them take responsibility for their center and planning activities."

One of the other committee members suggested the youth buy an espresso machine and have a coffee shop to raise funds for special events. Two committee members volunteered to mentor the youth. "I will talk to my father about our ideas for using the old building," Annie said. "We may have to write a grant to fund the renovations."

However, none of the committee members had ever written a grant. Annie suggested asking Jack or Rachel for help since she has found them easy to work with. They make suggestions rather than telling people what to do. They don't interrupt, take their time and listen, and encourage people to develop their own ideas and ways of problem solving.

The ice finally left and the river flowed freely as spring took hold of the land. Birch and aspen buds fringed the hillsides with the delicate green of new growth. Ducks, geese, and cranes flew over the village, honking on their return journey to nesting grounds. The village men took youths duck hunting and, in the community hall, the older women taught girls and other adult women to sew and bead during the evenings while telling about their cultural history.

Rachel flew in to give a workshop on domestic violence and discovered Annie had organized a women's group. The women sew and work on other projects while they talk about their hopes and give advice. Annie and the other women hope at the next council meeting a motion to vote on banning alcohol in their village will pass.

Looking forward to a productive summer, Annie asked Rachel, "I want to invite the village youth and their parents to my fish camp. Do you think I can organize it into a spirit camp?"

"I don't see why not. Who do you know can help you with it?" Rachel replied.

Before Rachel left, Annie telephoned the elder from the Rural Human Services training program who spoke about starting a spirit camp. She asked him if he would help her and the women's group organize a spirit camp at her fish camp. He quickly agreed.

"Rachel, I'm inviting you to the spirit camp. Tell Jack he can come, too."

One bright July afternoon, as the fireweed began to bloom, the women's group finalized their plans. Their husbands and some elder relatives helped with the preparation. At first, the elders didn't appreciate the idea of outside influence in the camp, but warmed up to the RHS elder when he and his wife visited the village and told how their camp had helped their people.

On the weekend that began the spirit camp, the community members pitched tents and set up cooking areas. Ten couples and ten young adults who just graduated from high school were invited to share in the event. Everyone rushed to shore to greet the visiting elders as their boat arrived at the spirit camp. The day was busy with people taking salmon from fish nets, cutting and hanging them to dry, cooking for the group, visiting and telling stories about their children and remembering friends who had passed on. The older men talked to the young men of snaring rabbits, trapping, and hunting caribou and moose.

Sitting around the evening bonfire, Annie spoke to the group for the first time about her recurring dream. It had been bothering her because she could not understand why her feet were still stuck. After a pause, Frank spoke. "My father said good shamans had a gift of healing through dreams. His grandfather would go to sleep and travel to an ill person to heal them. Dreams are a gateway to another dimension of life."

He continued, telling how the Eskimos lived with care, listened closely to Nature and listened as closely to their dreams. He, too, had a recurring dream. He remembered how the old traders tested the quality of gold coins by scratching them across a rock, a touchstone. He told of the loss of a friend that started the dreams, leaving a mark on his life. His wife joked, "He remembers his dreams but not the chores to be done," drawing smiles.

Another elder told the group she, too, believes in dreams. "The ancestors speak to us through them. Dreams can sometimes pull jokes on us, so we should be careful when interpreting them," she warned.

On the last night, the group gave thanks with a prayer. Because all enjoyed the spirit camp, they wished to make the gathering an annual event. The next day, Annie told Jack about her dream. It had returned the night before, this time very clear. "I saw the person who was beckoning and my feet felt lighter. I was in control as I walked toward the person. The light in the dream brightened and the person's outline became clearer, more defined and, as I got closer, I looked around the person and saw very clearly that the people near me were my grandparents, my aunt that I love so much, and a young cousin who drowned. They were smiling at me! The other people were dressed in jeans or beautiful squirrel skin parkas. . . and two-piece suits! Some of the women from the women's group and other people in the village were there too. They stood real close, almost touching the figure. Though there were also many who were at a distance from the person smiling at me, I knew they were supportive, too. I stepped closer and looked at the figure. It was me! I was so startled, I woke up!"

*"Yes, your dream is true. Just like in the old days, our people are strong when we are together, respect and support each other. Our Lord, thank you for giving my grand-daughter the strength she needs to do good work. Thank you for helping our people find their way home. Give us strength and peace so that we may live in harmony with your creation. May the ice always flow freely away from the village. Amen."*

It was the recurring dream Annie reflected on while berry picking. Jack reminisced about all the past events as he watched her fingers deftly pick through the berry bushes. Annie and her village have taught Rachel and Jack the positive effects of community cohesion. Just as the ice in the river, attitudes are beginning to thaw and clear up. Helping each other stay sober, more parents are involved in social and tribal activities, including school meetings. More people are interested in the quality of their children's education and have taken an active role in the local school advisory committee. Rather than accepting whatever school administrators think should be taught, parents now insist the school be more responsive to cultural traditions and incorporate more traditional knowledge in classroom instruction.

Just like a river has sweepers that impede its flow, dry communities often have members who continue to drink or feed the addictions by bringing in alcohol and drugs. Jack realizes it will take time and lots of support and encouragement to totally heal the village. However, the river of alcohol is losing its grip and its ice is no longer feared, but its devastating power must be prepared for and defended against. It takes a combined effort to protect

a community and it takes more than a single will to heal and grow. As the land survives, the People have survived. The village will continue to be challenged. Family, technology and education must be woven together with traditional knowledge, creating new understandings and ways of surviving for the grandchildren. Jack has hope.

The sound of an airplane engine breaks his thoughts; it is time to return home. From the hillside, Jack watches it taxi to the end of the runway, rev its engine and take off. . . climbing into a cloud.

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#### Endnote

1. We would like to thank those who reviewed the story and provided insightful comments and challenged us to deal with our biases and misperceptions; we hope that this teaching story is more honoring because of your honesty. We would further like to acknowledge and honor the hard work and dedication of people and their innovative projects that inspired and provided substance for this teaching story. Their story is truly one of strength and self-determination.