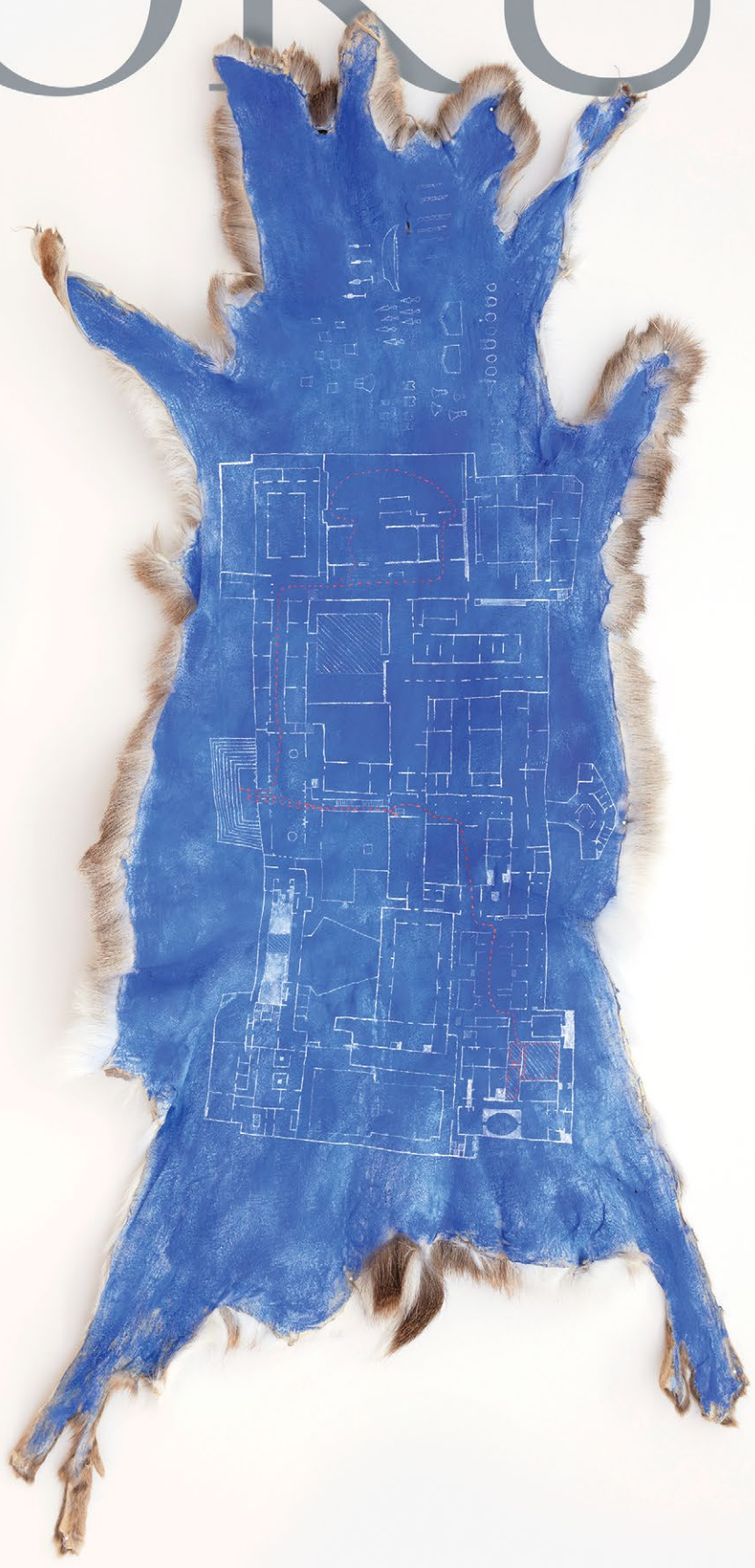
THE MAGAZINE OF THE ALASKA HUMANITIES FORUM

SUMMER 2020

FORUM



Encounter between Alutiiq and Deaf cultures

The role of the arts in a time of pandemic

History made visible in Sitka and Juneau

A positive vision for self-governance

Last month, George Floyd was laid to rest. His name is still being spoken by protesters worldwide, protesters who have not rested, who will not rest in their pursuit of justice. These protestors line the streets of Minneapolis, streets George Floyd walked every day, and they line the streets of more distant places: of New York and DC, of London and São Paulo, and here in Alaska from Kotzebue to Ketchikan.

George Floyd's murder is unprecedented for what it has set off around the country and around world, but it is not unique in its demonstration of the deadly consequences of systemic and institutional racism embedded in our society.

The Forum cannot fight racism without first recognizing that we are part of this system...

Nearly twenty years ago, three Alaskan teenagers targeted Alaska Natives in downtown Anchorage with premeditated and racially motivated drive-by paintball attacks. The incident provoked a statewide response that led the Alaska Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights to hold community forums and produce a bipartisan report, "Racism's Frontier: The Untold Story of Discrimination and Division in Alaska."

That report included recommendations to promote change—recommendations that led to the creation of some of the Alaska Humanities Forum's longest standing programs: the Sister School Exchange and the Educator Cross Cultural Immersion and also deeply influenced the direction of Leadership Anchorage, which had been founded only a few years earlier. The work of those programs has inspired additional efforts to promote equity and inclusion: the Creating Cultural Competence (C3) program for rural educators and the Tengluni program for rural youth.

The work we are doing today is the direct result of the work that people did nineteen years ago in response to an incident that forced us, for the moment, to contend with systemic racism. In 2001, Alaskans chose to harness that momentary attention and energy, channeling the momentum into a sustainable framework for change. They were playing the long game: they understood that cultural norms and perceptions need to shift in order to see long-term, lasting social change.

The moment we find ourselves in now shows us just how much work there is yet to do, and just how long that game is. Reading "Racism's Frontier" today, we can see many ways that the report has not aged all that well. It seems to equate all experiences of racism in Alaska, chalking them up to a rural/urban divide and failing to acknowledge Black experiences, Filipino experiences, Latinx experiences, Samoan experiences, and all the many distinct experiences of systemic racism that show up in Alaska.

We, the Alaska Humanities Forum, cannot fight racism without first recognizing that we are part of this system and reflecting on how we are complicit in preventing change. We are committed to starting this work from the inside and playing the long game as we pursue our vision of a culturally diverse, economically vibrant, and equitable Alaska where people are engaged, informed, and connected. An Alaska where Black lives matter. Watch us. Work with us. Persevere.

Warmly,
Kameron Perez-Verdia
President & CEO

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FORUM

ABOVE: Sitka Home Mission, 1887. On the left is Austin Hall, built by missionaries and students in 1882 with materials from an abandoned cannery at Old Sitka. On the right is Kelly Hall. PRESBYTERIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY, SHELDON JACKSON COLLECTION

COVER: "Architecture of Return, Escape," by Sitka artist Nicholas Galanin, 2020. Deer hide, pigment, and acrylic. Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art; installed at Peter Blum Gallery, New York City.

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In November of 1997, the editor of the *Daily Sitka Sentinel* assigned me an article on a young filmmaker in Sitka named Ellen Frankenstein. It was my third or fourth major assignment since taking the job at the newspaper. I had left college in New York City, taking a Greyhound across the country, and ending up in Alaska, where I intended to write a great novel. I lived on the Sheldon Jackson Campus, working at the salmon hatchery for room and board. I had become, at the age of 19, one of two reporters in town.

Over coffee at the Backdoor Café, Frankenstein discussed her Sundance-nominated film *Carved From the Heart* alongside her co-producer and friend, Louise Brady. The film intertwines the story of a Tsimpsean totem carver in Craig who loses his son to drugs, and the community eager to help him heal. Both carver and community use art to see themselves through trauma.

Over twenty years later, FORUM magazine asked if I would once again write about Frankenstein—specifically, *14 Miles*, her 37-episode series shot in Sitka, which examines everything from Sitka's secondhand store to the annual cabaret; the local quilting klatches to what it's like to be queer on the island. In one episode, to create a new awareness, Frankenstein attached a Go-Pro to a wheelchair so that viewers could see what it's like to travel down a Sitka sidewalk from that perspective. A compilation of the episodes shown by Alaska Public Media has over 200,000 views, and the Anchorage Museum displays episodes on a continual loop in their atrium.

"My goal from the beginning was to do a kind of collage of a time and a place, like poems or short stories," Frankenstein said.

When we did our second interview, in March over video-phone, things had changed. COVID-19 had landed in Alaska. Frankenstein was particularly interested in the role of Alaska artists in the moment—and also suggested that *14 Miles* might reboot in an effort to better understand—and help others understand—the present moment.

14 MILES

Alaska artists consider distance and the role of the arts in a time of pandemic

By Brendan Jones

ABOVE: A still from the *14 Miles* episode "Before the Curtain," which examines tradition, geography, and community through the Sitka School of Dance's annual Nutcracker preparations.

"As artists at this time, we can be the mirror, the door, the window," Frankenstein told me. "Right now, we might be a door, creating a way for people to walk through these tough times. That's always been something that has interested me."

Compared to other states and the rest of the world, Alaska has been relatively untouched by the virus. As the rest of the country has 129,000 deaths at press time, Alaska has had just twelve, with fewer than 800 cases. COVID-19 threatens to kill half a million people across the earth.

Nevertheless, the virus has altered how Alaskans, who often live in small communities historically susceptible to virus, engage with the world. Libraries, cafés, docks, bars—the same institutions Frankenstein investigated with *14 Miles*—are suddenly endangered. How do artists across the state respond?

"On the one hand, as a filmmaker, I could do a video postcard of 'What I did in quarantine,'" Frankenstein says. "But that's not enough. We need something more right now. Our culture is going through a shift, and both documenting and trying to understand this shift is critical. As artists, we're going need to start answering questions such as, 'What does it mean to live in a post-corona time?' And, 'What is community, and what can it be?'"

As medical workers put their lives at risk, writers, painters, musicians, and filmmakers are naturally viewed as "non-essential." They watch from the sidelines as lives are lost and saved. Exhibitions, performances, and readings are cancelled. Artists as a stripe tend to socially isolate—it's endemic to the species. But what should the time be used for? To build a record of the days, with the goal of arriving at a better understanding of this fraught moment? To finish a novel gathering dust in the bottom drawer? Or perhaps the best thing to do is step away from art, and give a hand at the local food bank. If not that, then use art as a salve—more like Bob Hope performing for the troops, there to give a laugh, create a distraction from the misery and hopelessness at hand.

Sitka artist Nicholas Galanin had a series of flights booked around the world to attend and display his work at international art openings. The Biennale of Art in Sydney, Australia, Galanin told me, was the only one that didn't cancel. He has since returned to Sitka.

"One of the things both artists and Alaskans are really good at is working with what's in front of us, and making use of what's around you. This moment tests the ability for an artist to be resilient," Galanin said.

He's been using his time to move his shop to a bigger space near home, fishing with his kids, pressing a record, giving virtual artistic talks, and creating new work. He has an exhibit with the Anchorage Museum that is online.

"As artists, we're not performing in front of people anymore," Galanin said. "We've had to make a shift. It's our job now to capture stories. I mean, that's what we do. Right? We use the moment."

Tom Kizzia, a former longtime journalist for the *Anchorage Daily News*, and author of the best-selling *Pilgrim's Wilderness: A True Story of Faith and Madness on the Alaska Frontier*, deployed his "journalistic chops" to help the Homer Foundation, on whose board he serves. The foundation runs a COVID Response Fund. Kizzia wrote an op-ed for the *Homer News* on the town's response to the pandemic and the role of the fund.

"The basic job of writing is enhanced by the forced isolation,"

"One of the things both artists and Alaskans are really good at is working with what's in front of us, and making use of what's around you."

—NICHOLAS GALANIN

Rachel Chew, left, an Artchange intern, and filmmaker Ellen Frankenstein drive the roads of Sitka for the documentary series *14 Miles*.
PHOTO COURTESY ELLEN FRANKENSTEIN

Kizzia said. "It's just a little hard to write something that has any sort of conclusion when we're all just kind of hanging out there wondering what's going to happen next."

In May, Kizzia also wrote a piece for the *Anchorage Daily News* series "Our Towns." Departing from the traditional journalist third-person point of view, Kizzia wrote from the first person. Much like Frankenstein in *14 Miles*, Kizzia used snippets of life in Homer to help draw a larger picture of what's happening in a small community.

"The shift to a new voice was an opportunity given where I am in my career, but also felt like the right response to the shared pandemic," Kizzia wrote in an email.

Alaska novelist Don Rearden, whose 2011 book *The Raven's Gift* [*see page 24*] envisioned a snow-swept landscape following a global pandemic, sees the role of the artist as a guide, providing a number of different services—one of them being distraction.

"The frontline workers are doing what they can to keep us fed and safe—keeping the lights on—so at the very least we can use our talents to bring perspective, levity, love, and perhaps a momentary escape to everyone," Rearden wrote in an email. "I love how artists of all genres have taken to social media to share their work with the world, not only sharing their work, but also their struggles and concerns."

Rearden, who said he'd gladly trade COVID for a virus that would make people want to read more, agreed with Frankenstein's assessment of art as transitive: a vehicle for understanding, and moving through a difficult moment. He also said that the virus, instead of causing people to dismiss art, might, in the end, make people value artists more.

"This pandemic has the world locked away and consuming media... As we turn away more and more from the written word (books!) and to digital media, it's the understanding that someone wrote the content and that writers and artists play an important role."

But is that role as simple as distraction? When hardship plagues a nation—indeed, a species that has dominated the natural world for the past two hundred years—perhaps the artist plays the role of Shakespeare's Fool, both capturing attention, and presenting truth "at a slant"—observing the situation from a new and unexpected angle. We can leave pure distraction to Moonpie Starbox, the Dachshund on tiktok singing Bob Marley's "Three Little Birds."

"But I think it's more than that," Galanin said. "It's not just about getting attention, or even holding it. Our role as artists has always been to collectively engage community. That means you step up and give support where support can't be found."

The Irish poet Eavan Boland, who died in April, put forth a similar argument. She said that art (speaking specifically of poetry) constitutes a powerful voice when it introduces what Boland called tonal rectitude. "[Tone] grows more sure, and more painfully, from the ethics of the art. Its origins must always be in a suffered world rather than a conscious craft."

In other words, in order to achieve success in one's craft, one must experience the world in all its vicissitudes, the good and the bad, the pain and the pleasure. All of it shows us who we are as a people, as a nation, as a global community.

This privileging of real-life experience suggests a perpetual dance between isolation and engagement, presence and absence—a dance Kizzia alluded to in his suggestion of artists valuing alone-time. Solitary and intentional creation are balanced by lived experience in the community, at the libraries, cafes, gyms: all those aspects *14 Miles* worked so hard to record.

"So much art is socially really intense followed by long periods of deep reflection and alone time," says Roger Schmidt, who runs the Sitka Fine Arts Camp (SFAC), where I have taught for five years. "With the virus, I feel like now is the time for that."

While SFAC has been offering an eight-week correspondence writing course, Schmidt said that camp has largely gone quiet.

Nicholas Galanin photographed by Will Wilson.

"What we offer every year is not something that can be replicated by online sessions. It's just not the same. All our business is in the business of social nearness. We're just waiting."

Schmidt has furloughed the staff, putting the program into a holding pattern, and has been spending more time with his trombone, the instrument he studied at Oberlin Conservatory for Music.

"We need to be in the business of how we get kids back to experiencing their lives. We should put that in the primary position. That should be the question we ask ourselves every time, so we can get back to making the artists that will help us understand this moment in the future."

Nobel-prize-winning poet Seamus Heaney, who was deeply interested in this question of the role of the artist in times of need, wrote that "moments of freedom" from pain in art come from "a sense of the complications and difficulties of life." In other words, as the poet Rainier Maria Rilke suggested, "trust in what is difficult." Art is an accumulation of knowledge, followed by reflection, and sharing. This cycle allows listeners and viewers the opportunity to move beyond the present moment. Despite what Proust in his cork room might argue, art does not come out of stasis, or solitary confinement.

In his final essay in *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney brings this idea to life by recounting a passage in the Bible, in which a woman accused of adultery is brought

"We need to be in the business of how we get kids back to experiencing their lives... get back to making the artists that will help us understand this moment in the future." –ROGER SCHMIDT

Roger Schmidt

14 Miles
14miles.org
https://bit.ly/2MFxm7b (YouTube)
facebook.com/14miles
instagram.com/14milesalaska

Bunnell Gallery
www.bunnellarts.org

before a mob. Standing in front of the crowd, Jesus draws words in the sand. Heaney points out that we never learn what these words might be. Nevertheless, the mob disperses.

Heaney goes on to write that the role of the artist should be someone who can "hold attention for a space, function[ing] not as a distraction, but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves."

Understood like this, art works as a catalyst, a combustible engine for simultaneous realization, and self-realization.

In one of our conversations, as she reflected back on our original meeting in 1997 over *Carved From the Heart*, Frankenstein emphasized her belief in something similar—that a finished piece of art should be active, holding attention. Offering, in exchange for attention, a new awareness.

"At a certain point, people really started to engage," Frankenstein said. "They'd tune in to see what was next. People's response fed us. Response led to interest and followers. I think the episodes changed the way people saw a place. You can only hope that happens."

I can recall in Sitka, between 2017 and 2019, the sense of anticipation as people waited for the release of *14 Miles*, which came out on Thursdays. As soon as an episode posted, long exchanges spooled out, allowing community members to visit issues through an online forum that now seems prescient. Some episodes have clocked over 30,000 views on Facebook.

Frankenstein, who has a degree in Visual Anthropology from the University of Southern California, says that projects like *14 Miles* are critical in moments of loss. Like the carver from Craig, the act of original creation—art—directs loss. The totem conducted despair, orienting artist and community-member simultaneously.

"At the end of the day, it's about building empathy," Frankenstein said. "Giving people voice. Creating understanding."

Rearden also pointed out the importance of creating a "record" of the moment—far from an objective exercise.

"The perspective of artists and their work has been an important barometer throughout history, and it would appear the importance for that role is only growing," Rearden wrote. "The artist's role during this pandemic is to help us all understand and negotiate our circumstances a little better."

Perhaps, as Rearden suggests, art allows us to understand change without fear. It is transitive. It "gives life to supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it," as the poet Wallace Stevens writes. So often viewed as an alternative to reality, art actually becomes a way of understanding, and moving through a difficult moment. People just need to join together.

Which brings up the main problem—which is, of course, distance, when the virus spreads so easily. Luckily, distance has been a challenge that Alaska has been negotiating since statehood. Organizations like 49 Writers are used to bringing folks together.

Since the beginning of April, 49 Writers, a home for Alaska writers and readers, has been publishing "Writing the Distance," a series of broadsides by writers. On May 3rd, John Morgan published a Zuihitsu, a Japanese poetic form comprised of an aggregate of prose sections focusing on a single subject—which was, naturally, the virus.

I said, "I hope he gets it."
She said, "I hope he gets it and it kills him."
"Well, I wouldn't go that far, just let him suffer a bit."
"I want him dead!"
"I'm shocked. A nice person like you…"

Meanwhile, Bunnell Art Gallery in Homer, directed by Asia Freeman, has started a weekly podcast called "Inspiration in Isolation." The innovative program examines how artists are staying active during the pandemic. Freeman also told me that the gallery continues to pay artists on contract, and has created an interface to sell art online.

Bunnell has also been instrumental in the creation of banners and installations honoring health care workers. Hundreds of handmade postcards have been distributed to local hospital and food service workers and emergency personnel. The gallery also collects donations for artists struggling due to the cancellation of programs.

Rearden, who hopes to take advantage of this virus to

TOP: *14 Miles* title image created by Rachel Chew.
MIDDLE: Gayle Young appeared in an episode of *14 Miles* about housing in Sitka.
BOTTOM: Viewers discuss issues raised by *14 Miles* at an event in Sitka in July 2019.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF ELLEN FRANKENSTEIN

finish his novel told from the point of view of a whale, wrote, "I think the situation of hunkering down or sheltering in place creates an atmosphere ripe for the creation of beautiful and meaningful writing."

This raises the question of what effects will the virus, and the quarantine, have on people? It has already fostered a mistrust and fear that anyone could be a potential carrier; each person must be treated as a mortal threat. Particularly with kids; I have two, ages three and five. How will the pandemic affect their worldview?

This is a question that concerns Schmidt.

"The kids I've spoken to, they're somewhere between really mad, and really sad. Especially when you feel like the current world isn't able to handle it. They will have a critical role in getting us out of this disaster. In fact we will lose something in our world if we don't let them, as artists, lead the way to bringing people close together again."

There is just no substitute for person-to-person interactions, especially in Alaska, whose inhabitants place such a high premium on closeness of community, Schmidt believes.

"There's the movement toward distance learning. But I think we'll all realize there's no substitution for genuine in-person contact. Going into the bookstore and buying the book. That experience in itself. We take it for granted, but that is something that could be forgotten. If kids don't have the experience of deep and meaningful social interaction, they won't know what they're missing. Then they won't advocate for the value of connecting people down the line."

Having recently turned 42, I often wonder how my life might have turned out differently if I hadn't connected with people in Sitka at the age of 19. Taking on assignments such as meeting Frankenstein that rainy November morning and discussing *Carved From the Heart.*

Over the years, town has changed. A cellphone tower rises over a mountain. No one uses CDs at the radio station, they just plug in a playlist. Sheldon Jackson College, where I lived, has become the Sitka Fine Arts Campus.

While I never went to an arts camp, I recall exactly what Schmidt addresses about being young: how every moment was critical, and also how I was learning to shift my focus according to what the moment presented. Dropping out of college felt right, buying a ticket on a Greyhound felt right. Taking the job at the newspaper—all of it felt like part of some larger plan that could change at any moment.

For what is art, after all, other than being both nimble and constant at the same time? Able to change your approach to the project, while also not losing sight of the end-goal. Especially in times of hardship. Flights might have been stopped, camp shuttered, galleries closed. But we, as humans, continue to create, in order to show, to tell each other that we're okay. That we're still here. A way to acknowledge our own changes, while also appreciating our togetherness, what joins us.

"Art, at its best, puts us in a social mirror, an empathetic position," Frankenstein told me in our last conversation. "In a way, then, art is no different from the virus. Both remind us why we need to be able to be together." ■

Brendan Jones of Sitka is the author of the novel The Alaskan Laundry*, awarded the Alaskana Prize by the Alaska Library Association. He has also written for* The New York Times*, NPR, and* Smithsonian Magazine.

LEFT: Clara Barton with Susan Malutin at Dig Afognak culture camp. **RIGHT:** Melissa Silugngataanit'sqaq Borton.

Connecting

IN THE SUMMER OF 2018, Melissa Silugngataanit'sqaq Borton and Clara Barton met at a summer camp at Dig Afognak, where tribal members, youth, and visitors can be immersed in the Alutiiq culture. The women struck up a friendship. Melissa, who now works as Indigenous Advancement Director at First Alaskans Institute, was, at the time, the Tribal Administrator for the Native Village of Afognak and camp director. Clara, who works for the Alaska State School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing at Russian Jack Elementary School, attended camp as a participant in the Forum-sponsored Educator Cross-Cultural Immersion program. They recently reflected on the unexpected connections they discovered through the experience.

"Something so simple, to make sure we were communicating in a respectful way with her, made all of the difference."
-- Melissa

CLARA: Two summers ago, I was deeply honored to have the opportunity to go to an Alutiiq language and immersion camp at Dig Afognak. I remember, as the weeks led up to camp, I was nervous as could be. As a Deaf person going to "their" language and music immersion camp, I wasn't sure how I would fit in and I also wanted to be able to show respect to their culture and to their people.

MELISSA: In the summer of 2018, I received a call from the Alaska Humanities Forum regarding a unique opportunity to host a Deaf teacher from Anchorage at camp. Remote camps that are situated far from towns and cities have limited modern conveniences; evaluating risk when bringing in new people is always a concern. However, Dig Afognak is known for being an inclusive camp, celebrating our people, educating our youth, and striving towards an equitable future for Alaska Native youth. We welcomed Clara with open arms and worked through the challenges to ensure she would be safe and benefit from the experience.

To be honest, there was a bit of apprehension from all of the staff in having Clara join us, mostly because the camp is on an active bear trail and our method of identifying danger is through sound. Our primary goal is keeping campers safe—if they can't hear the horn when there's a bear in the area that could put them in danger. Thankfully, Clara was accompanied by an interpreter and we made sure they were together when necessary.

CLARA: Melissa greeted me when I arrived and brought me over to the log cabin that I was to be staying at. There were four people already there just kind of hanging out and talking. Everybody turned to look at me and Melissa said, "Hey, this is Clara, and she'll be staying here. Would you mind introducing yourselves?" So everybody introduced themselves and then went on with their conversation, completely ignoring me. I wanted to be like, "Hey, you guys, I'm Deaf, I'm part of a marginalized group, I know how this goes. I know I look white, but I'm Japanese. I've experienced oppression..." But I stopped myself and thought "this trip is not about me. It's about them." So I held all of those thoughts back and on we went.

MELISSA: Growing up in Kodiak, we rarely had opportunities to interact with Deaf people, so we had very little knowledge of how best to communicate with them. This became apparent to me at the start of camp when I began noticing that campers didn't know how to act around Clara or how to communicate. I approached her during a meal early on and asked her several questions about being Deaf, such as, "Do I look at you when I speak to you, or your interpreter?" Something so simple, to make sure we were communicating in a respectful way with her, made all of the difference. We sat there visiting and asking questions back and forth and I began to realize that the oppression she feels every day as a Deaf person is the very same oppression, racism, and inequity we feel as Native people.

Across Cultures

CLARA: The Elders that were part of the camp were a little standoffish at first. But one evening, one of them came up to me and said, "Hey would you mind, if you're comfortable, when we're in our sharing circle in the yurt, could you tell us a little bit about your experience as a Deaf person?" So when the night came, we were in the sharing circle talking and somebody asked the question: "Hey, so you're Deaf but I just heard you laugh. Deaf people laugh? How does that work?" I answered all the questions they wanted to ask; it was interesting to hear what they wanted to know.

"I began to realize that the oppression she feels every day as a Deaf person is the very same oppression, racism, and inequity we feel as Native people." -- Melissa

MELISSA: I was a bit nervous at first when Clara agreed to answer questions and anticipated nobody would ask anything. Just in case, I came prepared with a list of questions. After one of my questions, the kids' hands started popping up like popcorn. The time flew by and the discussion was rich and meaningful. After that moment, everyone in camp was attempting to sign to Clara, they were speaking to her instead of her interpreter, and welcomed her into camp like she was no different from them.

CLARA: The camping program itself actually has several parts and you can rotate to different sessions throughout the day. I went into the language class and people were speaking Alutiiq and then I had my interpreter and it was really hard to kind of muddle through that. But when I got to the music class, I was just drawn to it.

In the music workshop they were dancing, telling stories in their Native language, and there was a group on the side that was drumming. It just gave me chills to be a part of that experience. I didn't want to make a mistake, so I just hesitantly started to drum and then I started to take in the dancers and I could see the story and I felt more confident in my drumming. I really got into it. I started to think, "Why am I feeling so connected?" As part of Deaf culture, rhythm is really important. We have a lot of drumming in our cultural celebrations, in our gatherings. I started to see so many parallels between my culture and the Alutiiq.

"As part of Deaf culture, rhythm is really important. We have a lot of drumming in our cultural celebrations, in our gatherings. I started to see so many parallels between my culture and the Alutiiq." -- Clara

MELISSA: We chose to have Clara attend the language and music camp because we strive to teach our youth the importance of learning and being proud of their language. Since Clara also uses a language other than English, we felt this could be a valuable bridge and an amazing learning opportunity. In addition, with music throughout camp, Clara could "feel" how important our culture is to us.

CLARA: Another connection I saw was that in the Alutiiq culture, you introduce yourself by sharing your name, your parents' names, and your grandparents' names. And then what tends to happen is people will say, "Oh, I know your grandma, your grandpa—we used to sit down and chat all the time." And it's the exact same thing in the Deaf culture. We are a very small world in the Deaf community, and so if you meet somebody you say, "What's your last name?" and that often leads to, "Oh, I know your dad, you know. We were in the same class, we graduated together."

Another parallel that really stuck out to me is that in the Alutiiq culture, their language is a dying language. English has oppressed it, and everybody has been encouraged to speak English—that's one of the reasons that the camp was actually established. And that is very much happening to American Sign Language (ASL) as well. We get the message that it's important to speak, read, and write English and that it's more valued than ASL.

There's a tradition, too, in the Deaf culture with name signs. We have a name sign that is a specific identifier for who we are, and it's usually associated with our personality, given by a Deaf family member or the Deaf community. It's an honor and almost a rite of passage to be given your sign. Alaska Native people also have a Native name and an English name. In both cultures, outsiders ask if they can be given a name. I tell people, "No, these are very cherished things and you can't just get one for free unless you're part of the community."

DIG AFOGNAK BEGAN IN 1993 as part of a community-wide effort to regain, restore, and carry forward the Alutiiq culture following the Exxon-Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound. As clean-up efforts to restore the damaged coastline disturbed archaeological sites throughout the Kodiak Archipelago, the Native Village of Afognak enlisted archaeologists to work alongside Native landowners to recover and preserve culturally significant materials and artifacts. Dig Afognak was transformed into a haven for cultural exploration, and summer camps were developed to immerse tribal members, youth, and also visitors from outside in the Alutiiq culture through hands-on activities in the ultimate outdoor classroom, completely unplugged from modern day distractions (afognak.org/dig-afognak).

The Alaska Humanities Forum partners with Dig Afognak and other culture camps across the state to provide an immersion experience that is a critical element of its Educator Cross-Cultural Immersion (ECCI) program. Each summer, about 30 teachers from the Anchorage, Fairbanks, Matanuska-Susitna Borough, Kenai Peninsula Borough, and Juneau school districts travel to camps to build skills and understanding that will help them to better serve their Alaska Native students, communicate across cultural differences, and incorporate Alaska Native Ways of Knowing and Learning into their classrooms. In addition to the immersion experience, educators earn graduate-level credit for coursework in cross-culturally competent pedagogy. The program has been funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Alaska Native Education Program since 2001.

"Deaf people get many of the same reactions from people that Native people get. Such as, being treated like an outsider, expected to assimilate into a society instead of honoring the uniqueness of our own people."
-- Melissa

MELISSA: My one takeaway from this experience was how amazed I was that Deaf people get many of the same reactions from people that Native people get. Such as, being treated like an outsider, expected to assimilate into a society instead of honoring the uniqueness of our own people. As someone who works professionally to right inequities towards people of color, I'm a bit embarrassed that this was a lesson I had to learn at all. I value the experience I had with Clara so very much. In fact, she and I have a dream of being able to host deaf Native students at culture camp one day.

CLARA: I remember feeling really sad about the ending of camp. The whole time that I was there, there was one elder, just one, who kind of kept his distance from me. I was a little intimidated by him, but he came right up to me at the end—he was very direct in his style—and he said, "Did you have fun at camp?" I looked at my interpreter and I was like, "Mmm-hmm. Yep, yep." He said, "Oh, that's good. I'm Bobby." And I said, "Oh, OK, well my English name is Clara, and my name in my language is [the sign]," and he gave me this big hug. I just had this incredible sense of connectedness with my Deaf identity and confidence about who I am, more than ever before. And imagine, I got that from a language and music immersion camp full of hearing people who don't sign. ■

SALMON FELLOWS MOVE FORWARD

With the edgy leadership program wrapped up, participants reflect on the good, the bad, and the experimental

By Debra McKinney

Charlie Wright grew up along the Yukon River, fishing and trapping and learning the ways of his ancestors. He remembers well his first gathering as an Alaska Salmon Fellow, held in Kenai, about 600 river, air, and road miles from home.

Awkward.

"We were in a circle, all staring across the room at each other, like, *What the hell am I doing here?*" he recalled recently from his home in Rampart, about 75 miles upriver from where the Tanana and Yukon rivers join forces. "It was all these people that usually are adversaries. Subsistence and sports fish, for instance. We don't like each other."

In his world, salmon feeds family, community, and soul. Fishing for sport, catch and release in particular, does not compute.

"We don't bother wild animals like that, play with our food. We call it hʉtlaanee. When we were growing up in the fish camp and you did something wrong, our elders would say hʉtlaanee. Disrespecting a food source in any way was bad luck."

This gets to the bones of the Alaska Humanities Forum's Alaska Salmon Fellows program, which began in the spring of 2017 with its first 18-month cohort and wrapped up this spring with its second, with funding by the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation. The 32 participants came from all walks of salmon life: from subsistence, commercial, sports, and personal-use fishing; from habitat conservation, regulatory agencies, scientific research, resource development, tourism, and tribal entities. Some grew up in villages without refrigerators or plumbing, some in Lower 48 cities with dishwashers and manicured lawns. All entered this program with one thing in common—a passion for salmon, whether as a means of making a living or a means of making living rich.

Salmon brought the various sectors together, with sessions held online, in conference rooms, and on docks, rivers, beaches. Salmon was the catalyst, and systems change was the holy grail. The idea was to get salmon people brainstorming ways of fixing flaws in a complex system; ways of making it more sustainable, equitable, and culturally sensitive. But how do you get people with different life experiences and points of view—in some cases radically different—to work together? To unfold their arms, step away from their various corners, lean in, listen to and learn from each other?

> "We were in a circle, all staring across the room at each other, like, *What the hell am I doing here?*"

"One of the things I found really valuable and powerful for building relationships up front is to help people get to know one another as humans before they start learning the resumes and bios," said Kitty Farnham, one of the program designers. "The beginning of the program is about forging relations with perfect strangers, developing trust and group agreements. And then to start thinking about, what can we do together that we can't do alone?"

After sorting out a few bugs, this approach was a breakthrough for Wright.

"It was a great eyeopener for me," he said. "It really made me accept other styles of fishing and the way other people do things. I realized we're all connected in one way or another through salmon. A kind of brotherhood-sisterhood was created."

Benjamin Stevens of Stevens Village on the Yukon Flats had a similar experience as a member of the first cohort.

"That was genius, bringing together those different folks," said Stevens, tribal advocate with Tanana Chiefs Conference. "Everybody left their armor and weapons at the door. We were able to say a lot of things that normally we wouldn't say to each other.

"Without this program and its design there would be absolutely no way in this world I would have ever sat down for a cup of coffee with some of those characters. We've grown and developed a relationship. So, whether we agree or not, down the road we're all coming to the table."

Nurturing leaders

The Forum has a long history of building and mentoring leaders, particularly with its Leadership Anchorage program, now in its 23rd year. Kameron Perez-Verdia, president and CEO of the Forum, described the Salmon Fellows program as an innovative, experimental version of that, more fluid and ever evolving with participants helping forge the way.

"How do we impact these really difficult, sticky, challenging, systemic problems that we have, salmon being one of them?" he said. "There are all of these cultural and economic and political factors that play into why it's an inequitable system, and in many cases, as people believe, an unsustainable system. At the heart of really difficult change like this are people, human beings. They are the problem and at the heart of this solution.

"For example, in the first cohort there were people who were on very opposite sides of the Pebble Mine debate and didn't want to be in the same room together. They saw themselves as very opposite, not only in terms of that issue, but at a deeper level as well. And they were not only able to work together but, in some cases, became friends. So, the experimental piece was trying to bring things up in a controlled, relatively safe environment and seeing if we could make connections that traditionally aren't made."

The moment that sticks out most during Taylor Evenson's fellowship came at the end of the first cohort and beginning of the second, when the two overlapped at a gathering in Kodiak. During that session, Frances Leach, executive director of United Fishermen of Alaska, and Freddie Christiansen, who grew up in the Alutiiq village of Old Harbor, sparked a painful discussion.

"She was talking about the limited entry, which a lot of people see as a very successful program within the state; her dad helped design it," said Evenson, a third-generation commercial fisherman based in Anchorage and the Kenai Peninsula. "Freddie Christiansen basically disagreed that it was successful because of what it did to a lot of the Native community."

From Christensen's perspective, the Limited Entry Act of 1973, designed to address overfishing, dashed the dreams of village kids. With the cost of permits beyond reach and other barriers, many spiraled into self-destructive behavior.

Fellows Ben Stevens and Mary Peltola chat with sport-fishing guides David Wartinbee and Joe Connors during a gathering of the first cohort in Kenai. PHOTO BY JOSH CORBETT

"Both sides were being really honest and genuine and empathetic," Evenson said. "It was a very, very contentious moment, and the contention was real and the truth was real, and people handled it with absolute grace."

"That's what the Humanities Forum is really gifted at," said Donna Aderhold, a wildlife researcher based in Homer and member of the second cohort. "They really taught me a lot about how you have a conversation, how you frame questions so you aren't coming at things like a couple of rams hitting each other. It allows people to develop some common ground, or at least some empathy, before you really start having more difficult conversations.

"I think the most difficult ones were around racial equity. From my perspective, I got a much better understanding of my white privilege, how much I have and don't even see it, and how that affects other people."

Building a stronger voice

Michelle Ravenmoon, a subsistence advocate and Dena'ina language instructor, lives in Pope-Vannoy on the south shore of Lake Iliamna, where, as a child, salmon returning to the creek near her home were so thick she could catch them with her hands.

"Our first salmon that we would catch we shared with our whole community," she said. "We would make a big soup so everybody could have some of it. Even today, the first salmon we catch in our community we divide up so every household gets a piece."

Ravenmoon was surprised by how quickly her cohort developed synergy. "It was pretty amazing what a safe space we created for each other."

But those racial inequity discussions were a struggle for her.

"I was really, really uncomfortable with that," she said. "I thought maybe I could just skate on by without getting into it. And I did for that first discussion when limited entry was brought up. It was a huge deal and very emotional for all of us to witness."

During a later gathering in Girdwood, prejudice and racial equity issues were tackled head-on at a session facilitated by the First Alaskan Institute, one of several program partners.

> "It was a very, very contentious moment, and the contention was real and the truth was real, and people handled it with absolute grace."

"First Alaskans asked some tough questions," Ravenmoon said. "That's where I started having these deep-thought moments. I'm stronger because of it. I can't just continue to pretend it's not there."

She put her stronger voice to use at her cohort's final gathering in Ruby. She and some others felt their sessions didn't involve the community enough. And, there was too much talk around hypothetical situations.

"Speaking from a Native perspective, we rarely do hypothetical very well. [Elders], they only speak in the now. It's not a culturally appropriate way of approaching life for us. A few of us finally spoke up about that."

In fact, she and others who felt the same way ended up taking over the agenda.

"The Humanities Forum supported that growth," she said. "They commended us for taking leadership and doing what we needed to do."

Program facilitators, as well as participants, grew from uncomfortable situations like that, Perez-Verdia said.

"There were parts of it we knew clearly what we were doing and how we were going to do it. But there were

"There were parts we went into intentionally in a very experimental mode knowing that the people involved were going to influence the development and the course of the program. And they certainly did."

Alexanna Salmon speaks at community forum held with the fellows in Igiugig. PHOTO BY JOSH CORBETT

parts we went into intentionally in a very experimental mode knowing that the people involved were going to influence the development and the course of the program. And they certainly did. If shifted significantly over time."

Engaging through projects

The fellowships came with $10,000 awards, plus travel expenses. But the program was rigorous and recipients worked for it, including teaming up for projects. Actor Map Roadshow, for instance, researched and mapped out perceived versus actual power within the salmon system. The Salmon People Podcast focused on the history, biology, and cultural importance of salmon through the art of storytelling.

Anjuli Grantham, who grew up commercial fishing out of Kodiak, is a curator at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau. Her team created "Salmon Shadows," a traveling show of art, writing, and other creative work that took on such issues as hatchery versus wild salmon, the carbon footprint of processing, and white privilege and power within the system.

"The idea was that there are all these things about the salmon system we don't like to talk about," she said. "We are so good at projecting onto salmon all the best qualities of Alaska and what it means to be Alaskan—wild, free, sustainable. We are constantly patting ourselves on the back for being the best last place for salmon, and in so doing we are ignoring ongoing threats to sustainability and not doing much to address the racial equity issues within the salmon system.

"It was provocative, as a call for art should be, right? We got a whole bunch of flak.

"A lot of people were horrified that we were airing the dirty laundry of salmon in Alaska. But then the conversations we had in communities were wonderful. People were really respectful. They weren't scared of questioning things."

At the conclusion of the fellowships, some were disappointed all this work hadn't made a bigger impact toward system change.

"I could sense a lot of anxiety and maybe even some anger about feeling like we didn't succeed," Ravenmoon said. "But I didn't feel that way at all. It's not something tangible that we can say, 'Hey, look how we changed the world.' But we're doing all kinds of projects in the salmon world and influencing different parts of the salmon system. You can't measure that kind of success because it's going to happen in years to come."

Systems change doesn't happen overnight, so this isn't the end of it, Perez-Verdia said. Many of the cohorts are continuing to meet on their own through Zoom and other means. The Forum also will be looking for funding for a similar, though smaller, program to take all that was learned to the next level.

"I think the ripple effects are going to be significant," he said. "We've already seen people who've gone through this program ascend into higher leadership roles within the state and their communities. My hope is that this planted a seed within them, a seed that will really begin to shift the way we do things in Alaska."

"It's broadened my horizons, I'll tell you what," said Charlie Wright. "The networking is incredible. And I'm still using it. I'm more confident in the work I do now. I'm on many more fish and game boards. I never say 'no.'

"I raised my kids on the river and I was raised on the river, so I figure I've got to give back as much as I can, to make sure there's fish in the river for future generations." ■

Debra McKinney is a frequent contributor to FORUM. She is the author of Beyond the Bear.

Charles "Lew" Tobin

DONOR SINCE: 2010

WHY I GIVE: The Alaska Humanities Forum is working to reawaken us to what has gone before and how it is affecting us still.

Lew Tobin, 1978.
PHOTO COURTESY OF LEW TOBIN

Not Here to Sit Behind a Desk

I GREW UP IN NEW YORK CITY and went to college in Wisconsin. In 1972, as soon as I could afford it after graduating, I bought a Volkswagen bus and drove to Alaska. At the time, it was as far away from NYC as I could get without a passport. I got to Alaska and was teaching when it dawned on me that I didn't come to the state to sit behind a desk. I quit teaching and found my way to Nome, where I tried everything I could, eventually working on a tugboat as a deckhand and then captain. I am now retired and still living in Nome where I have also served as a school board member, Arts Council president, PTA president, and City Council member, among other things.

How did you first come to connect with the Forum and why do you support our work?

The Forum came to Nome to do a program in the mid '80's or so—there was a great speaker and an assembly at the UAF Northwest Campus. Since then I have read each of the *FORUM* magazines cover to cover to not only learn more about what is happening in our state, but also to understand more of why it is happening and some of the histories and personalities behind the news.

For our white culture, the idea of "old" in the U.S. is contingent on where you live. On the East coast, when they speak about antiques and old ideas, they are generally thinking about revolutionary days and even older European history. In the Midwest, it is usually from when the wagon trains started moving west. On the west coast, it is usually around the time of the gold rush and big logging operations. In Alaska, it is generally what your parents or that generation brought with them after the World Wars. Then there are the original people whose history goes back through millennia, but was not respected or appreciated as the new waves of people came.

For our white culture, the idea of "old" in the U.S. is contingent on where you live.

What's one thing you have been curious about lately?

I am most interested in what I don't know about Alaska. That is where the *FORUM* magazine is so interesting. It is eclectic and provides insight and viewpoints on parts of Alaska and Alaskan culture I never knew anything of before. This is a big country with an awesome history and vibrant people.

What conversations do we need to be having (or having more of) in Alaska?

It bothers me that there is so little mentioned about mixed races. Everyone seems to be pigeonholed into one race or another, even though it seems to me that Alaska is one of the places in our country with large groups of multiracial people. I was amazed that the U.S. census only added a multiracial classification to their forms in 1990, and even then in Nome only 25 people in the city checked off that classification. If more people were to embrace the idea of mixed race maybe we could be mixing more as well. ■

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GRANT REPORT

TWO PROJECTS IN SOUTHEAST ALASKA, one in Juneau and another in Sitka, delve into the complex histories of Alaskan communities, presenting nuanced (and at times disruptive) retellings of the predominant histories of place. While the *Voices of Sheldon Jackson School and College* and the *Juneau Voices* project approach the concept through different mediums, they both engage participants in ways that enhance continuity between past and present, and remind the audience that history is not simply in the past.

A Sense of Place

By Maisie Thomas

VOICES OF SHELDON JACKSON SCHOOL AND COLLEGE

The Voices of Sheldon Jackson School and College project uses the words of alumni and former staff to tell the complicated history of the Sheldon Jackson School and College. Sitka is in the heart of Lingít Aaní, owned and stewarded by Tlingit clans for millennia. The school began as a Presbyterian mission for Alaska Native children in 1878, moved to its current site in Sitka in 1884. In 1917, Sheldon Jackson became a high school, with college programs added in the 1940s.While the high school was phased out in 1967, Sheldon Jackson remained a private college until it abruptly closed in June of 2007; Sitka Fine Arts Camp took over much of the campus in 2011. Other nonprofits also share stewardship of the historic campus.

There were hard feelings in Sitka toward the school stemming from its debt and abrupt closure, and from its legacy of suppressing and denigrating Native languages and culture, causing devastating and ongoing harm to generations of Native people. Yet there were also former students who were fond of the school, and staff who had dedicated a lifetime to service there.

Rebecca Poulson and her friend Alice Smith felt the need to document the story, the good and the bad, before it was lost. They began conducting interviews with former students and staff in 2012. Poulson said she was immediately surprised by the interviews. "Every person we interviewed completely subverted our expectations," she explained. Considering the reputation of missionary boarding schools, she expected the stories to be grim and the memories to be dark. However, this was not the case. Despite the school's suppression and dismissal of Native language and culture in the high school years, and perennial financial and administrative struggles in the college years, all but two alumni and every former staff member interviewed expressed a deep affection for "SJ."

"The story is really, really complicated and relevant," Poulson explained, "as more conversations [are] being had about systemic racial bias now." Sharing the interviews and the complicated history of the school is a way "to get beyond simplistic, stereotyped narrative of our history, and to understand how racial bias in the past continues in the present."

The project has two components: a set of eight interpretive signs, installed in December 2019 on the campus, and a website with photographs, interviews, documents, yearbooks, links and recordings, and where site visitors can also contribute their own material (sjvoices.org). The website is an ongoing project, with more material added regularly.

Four of the signs are chronological and introduce the different eras of the school (The Training School Era, The Cottages Era, The High School Era, and The College Era), while the other four focus on important facets of the school's history. The goal is not to tell people what to think. Instead, they relay the history of Sheldon Jackson through the words of those who lived and worked there, allowing viewers to connect the material to their own experiences and come to their own understanding.

"Every person we interviewed completely subverted our expectations."

ABOVE: This photograph, displayed on an interpretive sign by the *Voices of Sheldon Jackson School and College* project, depicts the graduating class of 1946. Left to right: Ed Benson, Ruth Frank, Herb Didrickson, Ione Felton, Bob Sanderson, Arlene Didrickson, Alvin Faber, Irene Benson, Harvey Jabobs, Harriet Bennett, and Melbourne Booth. SHELDON JACKSON COLLEGE COLLECTION HOUSED AT THE ALASKA STATE LIBRARY HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS

BELOW: Dedication of interpretive signs at "SJ" in Sitka. PHOTO BY JAMES POULSON

The most important aspect of the project, Poulson says, is that the content of the signs was developed by a steering committee of alumni and former staff. Each sign also features quotes from staff and students of that era. The goal is to share the story of the school as much as possible from the perspective of those who were part of it. In addition, important corrections came from review by alumni, former staff, historians, and cultural experts including the Sitka Tribe of Alaska's Cultural Resources Committee. The entire project is only possible due to the generosity of those who shared their stories in interviews.

Poulson said the reaction to the project has been positive. "I think we are ready for a more complex narrative, without heroes and villains, trying to understand what people did in the context of the time, to better understand the continuity where we are now." This at once simple yet complex notion is what Poulson hopes people will take away from the project.

Project directors Ryan Conarro and Lillian Petershoare examine a *Juneau Voices* sign in downtown Juneau. PHOTO BY BEN HOHENSTATT, JUNEAU EMPIRE

JUNEAU VOICES PROJECT

Juneau Voices, led by Ryan Conarro and Lillian Petershoare, grew out of the City and Borough of Juneau's desire to illuminate and celebrate the diversity of the Juneau community and its history.

At this critical juncture in the town's history, artists saw an opportunity to tell the history of Juneau, and to tell it in a way that embraces its complexity and multiplicity. As with the Sheldon Jackson project, the *Juneau Voices* project lifts up the fact that there are many more vital histories than the prevailing historical narrative of the city as a gold rush town and the state capital. While Juneau's mining past is undoubtedly a crucial aspect of the town's identity, that story is already well-told. Lesser known stories, such as those of the Tlingit clans indigenous to the area, also warrant even more recognition. By delving into the past and telling stories that have been erased or silenced, the hope is to emphasize a shared human experience in order to create a stronger and more inclusive sense of community going forward.

To gather the stories, the City and Bureau of Juneau collaborated with Ping Chong + Company and Southeast Alaskan storytellers. Ping Chong + Company artists Ryan Conarro and Lillian Petershoare held community story circles and individual interviews, from which they identified a number of storytellers whose stories and memories became a set of site-specific audio installations. This fall, a new system of signs will be installed throughout downtown Juneau. Eleven signs—ten plus an introduction—are linked to five-minute stories from a diverse range of Juneau locals, which are accompanied by soundscapes from X̲'unei Lance Twitchell and George Kuhar.

In Conarro's words, the goal of the project centers around the question: "How do we share a sense of the complex place that is Juneau?" The installations showcase lesser-known perspectives from a range of Juneau populations, including Indigenous and Filipino voices, stories about Southeast Alaska's fisheries, and contemporary perspectives. The stories themselves are as diverse as those telling them: some are fun, while others deal with difficult topics.

"It's important for all to have their voices heard," said Petershoare. And, referencing the COVID-19 pandemic, she said that it is more important than ever to find effective ways to talk with one another and to build community. Stories are a vital way of connecting, because, by demonstrating both diversity and a shared humanity, they help individuals understand and appreciate others.

Hearing stories in the first person adds depth and meaning to the accounts, said Petershoare. Listeners feel a connection with the storyteller,

> The project's medium—a system of signs, eleven recorded stories, and site-specific audio installations—"asks people to go and be in the world."

ABOVE: Aak'w Wooshkeetaan Elder Marie Olson and Ryan Conarro revise an audio script. PHOTO BY LILLIANE PETERSHOARE
BELOW: Lilliane Petershoare and T'aaku Yanyeidi Elder Butch Laiti record a story, along with Laiti's grandson Phillip Cadiente Laiti Blattner at KTOO's studios in Juneau. PHOTO BY RYAN CONARRO

a kinship which does not require physical presence. Similarly, Conarro explained that the strength of the project's medium is that it "asks people to go and be in the world." In addition to hearing stories told by first-person voices from Juneau, the audience shares the actual spaces with the storytellers, which provides an important sensory experience. The juxtaposition of history with the present, according to Conarro, is felt in a "visceral" way.

The installations are organized by the way cruise ship passengers and other visitors might likely experience the city. They begin at Marine Park, head north, zig-zag through town, and end in the Aak'w Village District; this is where the Aak'w Ḵ'eeneidi, the first inhabitants of the area, established a fish camp known as Dzantik'i Heeni. The stories are ordered by place and are specific to the sign's location. Specificity of location was a central requirement for the "challenging task" of selecting stories, according to Conarro. While Conarro and Petershoare have a vision for how people will interact with the project, Conarro suspects people will not necessarily start at the beginning. Rather, individuals will likely stumble upon one of the signs in the middle of the sequence and begin with that sign's audio installation as their own unique starting point. To remedy this, each piece can stand alone, but also works as part of a cohesive whole that is, as Conarro puts it, "the journey" through downtown Juneau.

A lifelong Juneauite, Petershoare is excited by the project. She believes *Juneau Voices* is important because historical narratives have traditionally ignored the Indigenous perspective. It is "almost as if we were forgotten," Petershoare said. Sixteen of the 20 featured in the audio installations are Indigenous (one is Unangan from St. George; four are from Tlingit-Filipino families sharing stories about their Filipino fathers; one is Tlingit and Haida; and 10 identify as Tlingit). Petershoare feels validated by the telling of her past; the project shows acknowledgment and a sign of respect for Indigenous peoples. Moving forward, Petershoare said she hopes that the City and Borough of Juneau will incorporate more new signage featuring additional Tlingit place names and Tlingit language. "Indigenous peoples are the reason the town exists," Petershoare said, "and it would be fabulous for the Indigenous voice to be more centrally represented." ■

Maisie Thomas of Nome is a 2020 graduate of Whitman College in Washington. She has received two 2015 Alaska Press Club awards for articles printed in the Nome Nugget.

A conversation with Don Rearden, author of the Alaska pandemic novel *The Raven's Gift*

The Future Our Past Creates

By Joe Yelverton

"**After several months** he ventured outside the school for the first time. He'd spent days watching and listening for any sounds. Everyone in the village was either hiding out, had fled, or were, like so many others, dead."

This passage comes early in *The Raven's Gift*, a novel written by Alaska author Don Rearden in 2013, about southwestern Alaska in the grip of a deadly pandemic. Told through the eyes of John Morgan, a school teacher and newcomer to Alaska, the story is as much about a rampant virus as it is an essay on Alaska's troubled history, its endangered culture, and a statement about greater America and its seeming indifference to the perils of life without a rich culture or deeply rooted traditions.

"He didn't go far," Rearden tells us. "Just out to get his bearings, get some air, and see if things were as bad as they looked from his peephole above the village."

"They were worse," Morgan discovers.

The naive educator suddenly comes to terms with the realization that he's completely cut off from the outside world, especially where he came from in the Lower 48. Even more dire, he realizes he's been betrayed by his own sense of independence, learned in a world full of amenities and abundant food. Our protagonist feels the kind of gravity that few people ever experience: isolation in the middle of a vast landscape, dominated by tundra that's not easily traveled, far from the conveniences and safety of urban living.

John Morgan arrives as a foreigner in a place where the burden of subsistence is constant, even under the best of circumstances, but after the virus begins sweeping through villages we see him experience the worst circumstances imaginable. Most everyone around him is either dead or dying.

"Before the sickness," writes Rearden, "the weathered plywood houses stood without paint."

"Beside the houses rested the rusted carcasses of boat motors and old red three wheelers and four wheelers with flat tires, white five gallon buckets, shredded blue tarps that covered sheds and flapped in the wind. Even then everything possessed a worn appearance, as if the hand of god brushed and burnished each item in just the right spots so that outsiders would know the irrelevance of time in such an ancient land."

Rearden knows this ancient land well, having spent the first twenty plus years of his life out on the tundra, with four of those years teaching at the same high school in Bethel where he graduated. Now a professor at University of Alaska Anchorage, and Chair of the Department of Writing, Rearden is a student of Alaska history and cultures, having immersed himself in the study of early diseases that plagued Native Alaskans, resulting in the decimation of many communities.

With COVID-19 at the forefront, *The Raven's Gift* is all the more relevant, as much about human vulnerability as it is a cautionary tale of what can happen, especially to people who live in isolated places like Alaska, where a single outsider can trigger a chain reaction, leading to the infection of hundreds if not thousands of people, many of whom have limited access to advanced health care.

On March 18 of this year the *Anchorage Daily News* featured an opinion piece by Alaska's Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Anne Zink; in "The Time to Act is Now," she wrote:

> As reports of an illness began spreading across the United States, reactions were mixed. One city took it seriously, closing the schools, isolating the ill, advising citizens to "socially distance" themselves and wash their hands frequently. Another city, against the advice of health officials, held a large parade.
>
> Within days, many in the city where the parade had been held became ill. Within six months, 16,000 people in that city—Philadelphia—had died. In St. Louis, however, where strict health measures were enacted within days of the first

"I grew up with the horror stories from the elders who survived or were raised amidst the outbreaks of the last century.

Don Rearden. PHOTO BY JOE YELVERTON

Yet we did nothing to prepare or learn from them."

"I hope to hell the book remains fiction."

reported illnesses, only a fraction of that number died. History buffs will recognize this story from the 1918 flu epidemic that killed more than 675,000 Americans. Between 20 million and 50 million people died worldwide.

I continued reading the article with some anticipation that Dr. Zink would go one step further and mention the early epidemics in Alaska, especially in light of the fact that the threat we now face is magnified in our rural areas, where residents may seem protected by their isolation, but are actually much more vulnerable because of it. But she didn't mention Alaska's dark history. And, while I'm genuinely thankful for her service to Alaska—without her and other experienced public health professionals, we would likely be facing even greater danger—her omission ignited my curiosity about the way we deal with history; in this case, a history that still runs in the bloodline of many native Alaskans.

So I recently revisited *The Ravens Gift*, seeing it as somewhat prophetic, not just of our current situation, but also a prediction of what's possible in the future, after we put the current virus behind us. Rearden's story not only illustrates an acute crisis, but another one that's moving much more slowly—the insidious problems associated with overwriting culture. After all, ignorance and arrogance spreads more than just disease.

I reached out to *The Raven's Gift* author, Don Rearden, seeking his insights: not just those he collected for his novel, but also on the unique realities we face in Alaska.

Joe Yelverton: What inspired you to write a book about a devastating pandemic?

Don Rearden: I wrote *The Raven's Gift* partly out of anger for the loss of so many of my close friends, classmates, and former students to what is essentially an epidemic of death by suicide and substance abuse. Suicide alone has taken the lives of over forty to fifty people I knew on a first name basis. Then there were the deaths from infections and illnesses usually only fatal in third-world countries. I didn't understand how such a disparity of wealth and living conditions could exist in a state as rich as Alaska. As an educator I found myself dumbfounded that while I grew up hearing stories of disease and famine from Yup'ik Elders. I was never taught any of that in high school or college. Then when I moved to Anchorage for graduate school, I would hear people refer to Bethel, my hometown, as looking apocalyptic. I never saw it that way. I saw it as beautiful and special. Then as I became more aware of pandemic potential hitting Alaska, I realized if we didn't understand history, or if we had no appreciation for history, we might be destined to repeat the mistakes of the past. And I fear there's a risk of that coming to fruition.

Joe: There has been criticism of white people telling the stories of Native history. Can you address this?

Don: The idea of publishing *The Raven's Gift* tormented me. There was a risk that I wouldn't ever get to return home, for fear of being ostracized. I asked many of my close Yup'ik friends to read an early draft and their approval gave me enough confidence to take the risk, but I was painfully aware of the history of colonization and white guys stealing Indigenous stories. There was a tipping point in my decision making—the loss of another friend in a pointless shooting, and it was then when I decided that the risk was worth it. Some stories are important enough that they need to be shared, no matter who the storyteller is. The underlying message needed to be captured and shared, but also in a meaningful and respectful way. But I never imagined such a warm reception from all of Alaska. Back when I first wrote the book, I would have laughed if someone had told me that someday *The Raven's Gift* would be taught as curriculum in many school districts across Alaska and in college classes. Thankfully, when I go home to the Kuskokwim Delta, I'm welcomed with open arms and I'm often asked to visit with students, and give readings to the classes studying the novel.

Joe: Besides the extensive research you performed for the book, do you think you might have been channeling the story of someone else?

Don: That's a great question—there are spooky occurrences that happened while writing and revising the manuscript. This is the part of all of this that scares me now to even say. For example, I wanted to get the traditional stories right, and so one night while revising the story about the last of the lake monsters, hovering over a single paragraph in the middle of a completed novel, I couldn't find my specific notes on the story. I've got books stacked all around me, and I'm having no luck. At the same time my wife is flipping through the channels and she skips over Alaska 360 North and I hear the voice of John Active, an Elder and radio personality from Bethel. I tell her to change the channel back, and there he is retelling the exact story in an old documentary that I didn't even know existed. So yes, I think in some ways I was channeling something much bigger than me. But I hope to hell the book remains fiction.

ABOVE: Crosses in a Bethel cemetery evoke victims of earlier pandemics. PHOTO BY DON REARDON
BELOW: A sign outside Kokhanok sets forth protocol for entering the village during the COVID-19 pandemic. PHOTO BY BETH HILL

Joe: Can you explain your connection to John Morgan, the main protagonist in the book?

Don: I think, in many ways, as the main character, John is so many of us. Lost and without a community. We have no culture, or at least not in the sense that what we pass along to future generations will matter. The word culture itself has Latin origins of the word "colere," which is a term of fostering growth, nurturing, and tending to the earth. If I turn the mirror on myself, and think about the Montana-born kid growing up in Southwestern Alaska, immersed in Yup'ik culture, to have something of my own, I clung to what little culture I could identify with, which in retrospect was so silly at the time. I'm of Irish descent, so I wore Notre Dame and Raiders clothing because I'd inherited that sense of culture from my grandfather. Back then, I think those choices helped me feel like I too belonged to something bigger. In terms of the cowboy culture I inherited from my parents? I know how to saddle my horse and shooting pistols and rifles comes as second nature.

Like the main character in the book, I began my teaching career in Southwest Alaska, but unlike this literary cheechako, I'd returned to give back to the community which I'd come to love so much. John shares some of my teaching approach, but in other ways he is the naive educator coming to a place that has far more to teach him than he'll ever give his students.

Joe: Is the epidemic a metaphor?

Don: The novel is a metaphor. The epidemic in the book is truth. The truth that scares me most. Alaska has been negligent in both the teaching and learning of our history, and of acknowledging and appreciating the vast wisdom present in the rich indigenous cultures of this state. We've already had epidemics that devastated entire communities, yet we never prepared. I grew up with the horror stories from the elders who survived or were raised amidst the outbreaks of the last century. Yet we did nothing to prepare or learn from them. Did I learn that in school or in college? No. Do we teach it now? You know the answer to that. The epidemic I wrote about in *The Raven's Gift* is theoretical, but based on research and projections from when scientists were warning of a bird flu pandemic. I took my knowledge and experiences of inadequate sanitation, our horrific health disparity, and other third-world diseases like active tuberculosis (which we still have in rural Alaska) and that became the genesis for the pandemic in the novel. I leave all sorts of uncertainty for the characters, because the origin doesn't matter when you're quarantined and out of food and the electricity and communications are cut off.

Joe: In one of Dr. Anne Zink's recent opinion pieces in *ADN* she referenced the early epidemics in the Lower 48, but not Alaska. What's your perspective on this?

Don: Although Dr. Zink neglected to mention Alaska's horrific history of epidemics, this kind of omission is common. Regardless, Alaskans need to turn the mirror inward.

"The children are our future, but if we don't have cultural knowledge and historical knowledge to pass on from the elders we aren't leaving them with anything worth saving."

This is a state built on the graves of those who died from diseases. What we need to do is acknowledge that history and tap into it. We have elders still alive today who know all too well what it means to live in a time where a disease like smallpox, measles, or diphtheria destroyed entire villages.

What I don't understand is why we're not taking more drastic precautions right now to protect rural communities. I feel like the guidelines being offered to urban centers are impractical in the villages, where many people sometimes live together in close quarters. Telling village residents to remain with only your immediate family is confounding and confusing. Think about the communities where there's only one source of water for drinking, bathing, and laundry, but not the resources or manpower to sanitize those facilities after each resident leaves. Additionally, we need to realize there are villages with home post offices, where everyone goes into a single residence to retrieve their mail. I'm relieved so many of the villages themselves put into place orders to protect their citizens. We needed more of that sooner from Governor Dunleavy, to shut off nonessential, interstate air travel, and mobilize the health support needed in villages. [*Note: Governor Dunleavy halted nonessential travel on March 27.*]

Joe: What can we learn by applying a Yup'ik perspective to our current situation?

Don: I could only turn to an elder for that perspective. I find comfort in the knowledge that Harold Napoleon, author of *Yuuyaraaq: The Way of the Human Being*, shares in his book a story all Alaskans should read:

> "There is no end to what good people in the villages can do for one another, no end to the kindness and small considerations they can give to each other. The first step is for families and the village to come together as a family. Their health and happiness depends on each other."

My hope is that the knowledge of medical providers and the elders who have seen this before will prevail and we'll close off our communities in time and spare some villages. COVID-19 has the potential to take the lives of our elders, and then we lose even more history and knowledge.

I also hope that the biggest takeaway from my book will be that what matters in life is love and community. We need to focus on two things to get through this, the children and the elders. The children are our future, but if we don't have cultural knowledge and historical knowledge to pass on from the elders we aren't leaving them with anything worth saving.

Joe: Given the situation Alaska faces at this moment, is there anything you would change in *The Raven's Gift*?

Don: This is tough to admit, but given the circumstances of the day, there is a part of me that wishes I never wrote the book. I imagined an Alaska full of untold horror, because we've seen such devastation before, and now I want our hearts and minds not to dwell on the fictional possibilities I concocted, but instead on an outcome where we pull together and leave no one to suffer. I think it might be time to imagine a new path forward for Alaska, one centered on the vast wealth in culture and wisdom residing amongst us.

Joe: Speaking of vast wealth, many of Alaska's industries seem to be in peril this year, like a perfect storm converging. Should we be looking at the benefit of Alaskans relying on our own resources, rather than selling all of them?

Everyone wants to get their old lives back. There's a huge investment in continuing the status quo. But if we can divest from this collective desire for "normalcy," at least for a moment, what's the existential lesson Alaskans can learn?

Don: I would hope the lesson we can take away from both the book and this current crisis is to understand that for over ten thousand years Alaskans lived sustainably. The "outside" people relied on was simply nature, not the Outside of today where we export all our natural resources at reduced rates, allowing others to profit, and then paying a premium to import all of the goods and services we need to live. I'm not calling for a return to the old ways of living, but rather a way of learning from the old way to chart a new path that focuses on healthy and vibrant Alaskan communities. Honestly, we already had a crisis here long before COVID-19. The number one killer of youth in Alaska is suicide. Our youth are choosing death over a future in this state. That to me is unconscionable. No profits from one gallon of oil, ounce of gold, or a single salmon go to anyone beyond our state border until the kids and the elders of Alaska have been taken care of. ■

Joe Yelverton is an Anchorage based writer and photographer. www.joeyelverton.com. This article first appeared in the Anchorage Press on March 31, 2020.

Perhaps now, as everything we thought we knew is contested, we can stiffen our spines and do what it takes to set forth a positive vision for self-governance

By Wendy Willis

The Founders We are Waiting For

YESTERDAY, I got a text from a friend saying—and excuse the language here—"I'm gonna go out on a limb and say the Founding Fathers really fucked up by punting on slavery. Thanks a lot guys."

It would have been easy to respond: *I know, right?* Or: *Seriously.* Or some other smooth, reassuring expression of agreement. But I still haven't answered her. It's not that I disagree. I don't. Of course. And yet, in my heart, I feet annoyed and irritable even though I know full well that punting—or worse—is exactly what the "founding fathers" did at the Constitutional Convention, with the anti-slavery contingent looking the other way in order to form a functional government.

I'm not sure why I am so bad-tempered about the whole matter. Of course it was barbaric and cruel to found a supposedly free and democratic country on the backs of more than half a million people suffering as enslaved workers. And heaven knows we can't continue to deify a gaggle of white male founders who weren't really looking out for the vast majority of us when they contended that *all men are created equal.*

And yet, I love the Constitution. Or really, more accurately, I love having a Constitution. As my friend Daniel Kemmis put it in his book, *Community and the Politics of Place*: "A constitution is more than a legal document. It is the single most expressive act by which separate, individual people *constitute* themselves as *a people*." There are plenty of friendly governments in the world—even friendly democracies—that don't have one. Those countries get to make it up as they go along, they get to adapt and shift with the times. And that sounds appealing, doesn't it? Being able to do what we want and need, when we want and need it, without having to contend with foundational documents. Without having to negotiate covenants with past and future generations.

But the truth is, I want to keep faith with my neighbors. I want to have a covenant with my ancestors and with my descendants. I want to be tethered to them in fate and in aspiration. And a constitution is one way—maybe the only way—that we bind ourselves together in such a sprawling and pluralistic country.

But right now, we are in a painful and precarious in-between space with regard to the Constitution. As Harvard historian Danielle Allen presciently described it in the December issue of *The Atlantic*: At the time of the founding, there was a social and racial hierarchy that served as an "informal constitution" underpinning the formal one, rendering the rhetoric of freedom and equality much less radical than it seems on its face. For the past fifty years—under the leadership of the civil rights movement and the women's movement among others—we have been trying to replace that informal constitution with a new one based on a more just and egalitarian order. But that work is nowhere near done, and the future feels fraught.

Of course, Danielle Allen and I are not alone in this push-pull with the Constitution. The last public event I attended before we were all sent to our rooms by COVID-19 was at Loussac Library in Anchorage. And I have to admit that I walked in with a skeptical heart, joking that maybe the snowy Friday night of Iditarod weekend in an otherwise closed library might not be the best time or place to host a community conversation about the Constitution. But boy, was I wrong. At first, we made a modest circle. But people kept coming, so we pushed back the chairs to make the circle a little bigger. And then again. And then again after that to accommodate yet more newcomers.

We settled in and took off our coats. We discussed the powers of the presidency and the electoral college. We talked about the Second Amendment and the makeup of the Senate. We closely read the First Amendment and fretted over the thin line between free speech and violent action. And we also asked ourselves: If we could rewrite the Constitution now, what would we do with it? What would we add to it? What would we take away?

It was a lovely conversation. A lively and earnest one. An inspiring one. But the truth is, though many people were deeply concerned about the future of the Republic, it was a bit of a theoretical one.

Oh, what a difference 80 days can make. I write this essay in the third month of a state stay-at-home order in the midst of a global pandemic. And I write it on the morning after the fourth night of nation-wide protests following the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. And I write to you from under a city-wide curfew order.

Since we gathered shoulder-to-shoulder that night in Anchorage—a closeness that is unthinkable now—churches have sued the State of Oregon and the State of California and others, alleging that the COVID-inspired ban

Maybe this turmoil is not just born of what we are against, but perhaps it also bears the seeds of what we might become.

on in-person worship services violates the right to freedom of religion. Armed protestors took over the gallery of the Michigan Senate and much of the rest of its Capitol, rallying in favor of their Second Amendment rights and against the state shut-down order. Gun rights protestors hung an effigy of Kentucky Governor Andy Beshear outside his home in Frankfort. Thousands of Americans have taken to the streets to protest white supremacy and police brutality against black men and women. In some communities, including my own, the police have fired on demonstrators with tear gas, flash-bang grenades, and rubber bullets. Some of the protestors have smashed windows and set fire to buildings. Reporters have been tear-gassed, knocked down, and arrested.

The Constitution—*our* constitution—is suddenly (once again) very real and very contested.

We Americans are clear about what we are against—government overreach, creeping authoritarianism, police brutality, white supremacy, invasion of privacy, money in politics, gun regulation—even if we're not all against the same things at the same time. And that makes sense. We have organized ourselves—constituted ourselves—around negative rights. And by that I mean that the individual rights guaranteed by the Constitution protect us from things, particularly from nefarious things the government might get up to. Even the First Amendment, which we often assert as a positive right—free speech and free association and freedom of religion—is actually framed and enforced as a negative right: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

Don't get me wrong. There are plenty of things to oppose right now. Plenty of things to resist. But, as a people, we are less clear about what we *do* want than we are about what we don't.

I spent a lot of last night awake and fretting, worrying about my family and my friends and my community. Worrying about my children. Worrying about other people's children, about black mothers' children. Worrying about the safety of the protestors downtown. Worrying, worrying. But just before the sky started to gray, I felt a stirring. And it wasn't just a stirring of anxiety or fear, this one. It had a silvery underlayer. It had a sense of possibility in it. The tiniest shimmer of hope. Maybe, just maybe, we might actually use this moment to re-constitute ourselves.

Maybe this turmoil is not just born of what we are against, but perhaps it also bears the seeds of what we might become. Maybe we are on the precipice of new American founding. And maybe this one carries the possibility of a more just, equitable, and human-centered democracy. And, truth is, the work is already well underway. As Hannah Nikole Jones put it in the remarkable "1619 Project," produced last year for the *New York Times*:

> "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" did not apply to fully one-fifth of the country. Yet despite being violently denied the freedom and justice promised to all, black Americans believed fervently in the American creed. Through centuries of black resistance and protest, we have helped the country live up to its founding ideals...
>
> Without the idealistic, strenuous and patriotic efforts of black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different—it might not be a democracy at all.

I think this may be part of what annoyed me about my friend's text. Deep down, I think I was irritated because I really wanted to agree. Because I want our democratic failures to be the founding fathers' problem. I want them to be somebody else's fault. I want them to be somebody else's responsibility. But I know they aren't. They're mine. They're ours.

Perhaps now, (and I say this as a white American) there's an opportunity for all of us to follow the lead of our black friends and neighbors. Now, as everything we thought we knew is contested, we can stiffen our spines and do what it takes to reconstitute ourselves, to form a new covenant that reaffirms the founding principles, sure, but that also sets forth a positive vision for self-governance.

Several times, I have heard Georgia Congressman and civil rights icon John Lewis speak about what he calls *the beloved community.* As Congressman Lewis puts it, "We've come a long way, but we still have a distance to go before all of our citizens embrace the idea of a truly interracial democracy, what I like to call the Beloved Community, a nation at peace with itself." But Congressman Lewis also says that the beloved community begins in the faith that it is possible. So even though we have a long way to go, he calls us to live as if the beloved community is already arrived. So let's take a step in faith and imagine ourselves into a new and more just constitution, a new covenant with and for one another. Let's lean in close—metaphorically until we can lean in physically—and whisper our fondest hopes. Let's dream big and bold and just. Let's—once and for all—resolve to do better, to be better. Let's grab hands and get ready to jump. Because if we can imagine ourselves into that beloved community, especially now, amidst all that is shattering around us, then we can get busy being the founders we are waiting for. ■

Wendy Willis is a poet and essayist living in Portland, Oregon. Willis visited Alaska in March 2020 to lead a series of discussions and writing workshops as part of the Forum's Danger Close Alaska *programming with 49 Writers.*

PANDEMIC POEMS

What impacts our capacity to care, as individuals, and as a society?

Poems by Kim Stafford

IN THE PAST FEW MONTHS, the ways we show up for one another are increasingly marked by a physical absence. We cancel the event. We cross the street when someone approaches us on the sidewalk. We make phone calls to the ones we love, even if they live close-by. Amidst all this change, we are still finding solace and energy in connecting with one another. Using the "Pandemic Poems" written by Kim Stafford as a touchstone, we encourage you to reflect on your own or within your community—how has *your* capacity to care changed recently?

If you would like to host a conversation based on this theme, visit our website to download our toolkit and apply for a conversation stipend.

These poems are part of a series of pandemic poems and other poetry resources at kimstaffordpoet.com and are reprinted here by permission of the author.

Shelter in Place

Long before the pandemic, the trees
knew how to guard one place with
roots and shade. Moss found
how to hug a stone for life.
Every stream works out how
to move in place, staying home
even as it flows generously
outward, sending bounty far.
Now is our time to practice—
singing from balconies, sending
words of comfort by any courier,
hoarding lonesome generosity
to shine in all directions like stars.

Email from the CEO

I feel your pain—the pandemic
touches us all, reaching our millions
of loyal customers who make possible
my eight million dollar annual salary, so
now more than ever it's important to keep
those premium checks rolling in so we can
take care of you if something goes wrong—
I mean something really bad, like a car accident
that might impair your ability to maintain
your premiums. Remember, we're all in this
together. I'm rooting for you!

KINDLING CONVERSATION

ALASKA HUMANITIES FORUM

Dig Deep and Host Your Own Conversation

Are you interested in bringing these conversations to your community?

www.akhf.org/kindling-conversation

Springboards for Discussion
Articles, films, images, exhibits, and texts create common ground and allow everyone to contribute.

Conversation Toolkit
A facilitator guide, promotional materials, and participant surveys are ready to go.

Facilitator Training
We'll walk you through the process and materials to ensure your community event is a success.

Funding
A non-competitive $200 micro-grant defrays the cost of hosting.

Dr. Virus Prescribes

All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.
—Blaise Pascal

1. I prescribe a quiet life at home.
2. I want you to avoid crowds.
3. Wash your hands—while singing.
4. Hoard calm—never too much of that.
5. Instead of handshakes, glances of admiration.
6. To friends nearby, write long letters.
7. Reveal your secrets now.
8. Let your compassion cross borders.
9. Guard the young, cherish the old.
10. Notice your sweet, clear breath.
11. Tend your garden.
12. To all in your kinship circle,
    Hail and farewell.

Convent Print Shop

After the pandemic, in the second spring,
when, at last, we all began to get about again,
the good Sisters, who had been sheltering in place
for a thousand years, began to hear, when children
came to help or be blessed, legends of ordinary
saints in hard times—the homeless man who carried
food to camps and buried the lost when no one came,
the mother who taught school to hundreds by Zoom,
mechanic who repaired the ambulance again and again,
girl who played her flute from the rooftop, singing
her soul for the housebound, farmer who delivered
produce boxes to anonymous curbs, nurse who
ministered when the doctor died.

They printed these as verses, stories, hymns and psalms,
like the little flowers of Francis and Clare, to give away
in all directions, as the plum trees burst into bloom.

Kim Stafford, author of "Pandemic Poems," worked and taught in Alaska in the '60s and '80s. He is pictured here in his studio in Oregon, where he lives.
PHOTO BY KEN DIXON

KIM STAFFORD

Kim Stafford has written a dozen books of poetry and prose, including *Having Everything Right: Essays of Place*, and *Wild Honey, Tough Salt*. He is also an associate professor and founding director of the Northwest Writing Institute at Lewis & Clark College in Oregon, where he has taught since 1979. He holds a PhD in Medieval Literature from the University of Oregon, and has worked as a printer, photographer, oral historian, editor, and visiting writer at a host of colleges and schools. Stafford served as camp cook atop Ninilchik Dome on the Kenai peninsula the summer of 1968, and taught writing for several summers at Kuskokwim College in Bethel in the 1980s. He is a co-founder of the Fishtrap Writers Gathering in 1987. At this annual retreat each July, readers, writers, journalists, historians, publishers, and lovers of the arts from all over the world gather at Wallowa Lake in Oregon to share their love of good writing, challenging conversations, and the American West.

In 2018, Stafford was named Oregon's ninth poet laureate. In this role, he has visited over a hundred groups statewide to share the reading and writing of poetry. Other recognition of his work includes creative writing fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Steward Holbrook Award from Literary Arts for his contributions to Oregon's literary culture.

Reflecting on the importance of his craft in an interview with Damien Sherwood of *the Cottage Grove Sentinel* in January 2020, Stafford said:"I really see writing as a part of something bigger, which is one's calling in the world. That calling will be active, but those words and stories can enrich that action." ■

Toward Solvency and Wholeness

The Forum and NEH help humanities and cultural organizations weather the pandemic

As March came to a close, Alaska's museums, community centers, libraries, and cultural organizations found themselves shuttered by COVID-19. As we braced for the resulting loss in revenue from cancelled ticket sales, workshops and tours, educational programs, venue rentals, and fee-for-service work, the federal CARES act rolled out relief funding that included money to help sustain the $878-billion arts and cultural economic sector through the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

NEH received $75 million in funds directed to reach "large and small cultural organizations, as well as educators, curators, scholars, filmmakers, and other humanists." Approximately 40 percent of the appropriation, or $30 million, was sent directly to the 56 state and jurisdictional humanities councils to support local cultural nonprofits and educational programming around the country.

$425,750
awarded across the state

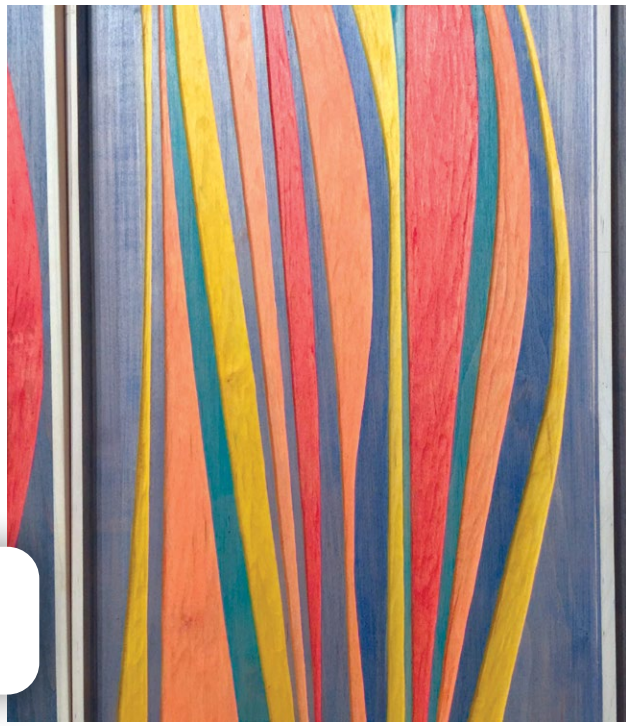
As Alaska's state humanities council, the Forum led the distribution and administration of Alaska's share of this federal funding through a new COVID-19 Emergency Relief Grant program. Working quickly to create a process that would get support out to organizations in need, the Forum opened applications in late April. Through these grants, a total of $425,750 has been awarded to 73 nonprofit and tribal organizations across the state to be used for rent and facility expenses, utilities, staffing, and other operational costs associated with maintaining organizations' solvency.

73
nonprofit and tribal organizations

"The Forum is honored to be able to play a role in supporting organizations dedicated to preserving and sharing Alaska's unique cultures and history and to engaging people in civic dialogue and meaningful conversation," reflected the Forum's President and CEO, Kameron Perez-Verdia. "Together, we form a powerful network of libraries, museums, theaters, historical associations, media outlets, councils, and educational and tribal organizations. Our archives and exhibitions, resources, and public programming support access, education, and connection among people in communities across Alaska."

Grantees expressed gratitude and relief for this funding. Some were able to piece together grants from a number of supporting agencies and sources; others found it difficult to find support available to arts and humanities organizations.

NEH Chairman Jon Parrish Peede reflected on the vitality of the funding in a statement in late March: "To the extent that healing is to come during and after this pandemic, it will be through humanities fields from philosophy to literature to history to religious studies—through the act of documenting, preserving, sharing, and reflecting—that our communities will move toward a greater sense of wholeness."



COVID-19 EMERGENCY RELIEF GRANTEES

49 Writers, Inc.
Affinityfilms, Inc.
Alaska Aviation Museum
Alaska Children's Institute for the Performing Arts
Alaska Geographic
Alaska Jewish Museum
Alaska Law Enforcement Museum
Alaska Native Heritage Center
Alaska Veterans Museum
Alaska Women Speak
Alutiiq Heritage Foundation
Anchorage Community Theatre
Anchorage Museum Association
Artchange, Inc.
Athabascan Fiddlers Association
Best Beginnings
Bethel Broadcasting, Inc. (KYUK)
Bethel Council on the Arts
Bristol Bay Historical Society
Bunnell Street Arts Center
Cape Decision Lighthouse Society
Capital Community Broadcasting (KTOO Public Media)
Center for Alaskan Coastal Studies
Chapter 100 of Veterans for Peace
Clausen Memorial Museum

PRATT MUSEUM
HOMER

Jennifer Gibbins, Executive Director of the Pratt Museum in Homer, wrote, "On behalf of the Pratt Museum, we are delighted and so very appreciative of the COVID-19 Emergency Relief grant. Like many museums, humanities and cultural organizations across the state, we are experiencing both serious challenges and new opportunities as a result of the pandemic. We are well positioned to succeed and your support is essential to helping us in these efforts." *Left: Detail from Aurora Borealis I, II, III by Ron Senungetuk, 2006.*

PURCHASE OF THE ARTWORK FOR THE PRATT MUSEUM PERMANENT COLLECTION WAS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF THE RASMUSON FOUNDATION.

KUAC
FAIRBANKS

KUAC in Fairbanks, a media outlet that creates thought-provoking, trustworthy and even life changing radio and television programming—"connecting Alaska to the world and the world to Alaska", wrote, "This generous funding will help KUAC continue its essential, valuable news coverage and insightful, original local FM programming. Thank you for believing in and supporting public broadcasting!" *Above: Robert Hannon, KUAC FM host, working at home.* PHOTO COURTESY KUAC

JUNEAU PUBLIC LIBRARIES
JUNEAU

Robert Barr, Director of the Juneau Public Libraries, wrote to us about the Amazing Bookstore that provides the primary source of the revenue for the Friends of the Library. This revenue stream has been eliminated with the bookstore being closed during the COVID-19 shutdown for the safety and protection of its customers and volunteers, many of whom are older or in vulnerable groups. The bookstore has had no income during the shutdown, but still has monthly rent payments due. ■ PHOTO COURTESY JUNEAU PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Cyrano's Theatre Company
Dena' Nena' Henash–Tanana Chiefs Conference
Denakkanaaga
Denali Arts Council
Fairbanks Children's Museum
First Alaskans Institute
Friends of the Homer Public Library
Friends of the Juneau Public Libraries
Haines Sheldon Museum
Hollis Public Library
Identity, Inc.
Igiugig Tribal Library
JAMM (Juneau Alaska Music Matters)
Jilkaat Kwaan Heritage Center
Juneau Arts and Humanities Council
Juneau-Douglas City Museum
Kake Tribal Heritage Foundation
Kawerak, Inc.
Ketchikan Area Arts and Humanities Council
Koahnic Broadcast Corporation
Kodiak Historical Society
Kodiak Maritime Museum
KUAC Friends Group
Morris Thompson Cultural and Visitors Center
Museum of Alaska Transportation and Industry
Museum of the Aleutians
Museums Alaska
Out North
Outer Coast
Perseverance Theatre, Inc.
Pioneer Air Museum
Pratt Museum
Sealaska Heritage Institute
See Stories
Sitka Historical Society, Inc.
Spirit of Youth
Story Works Alaska
Talkeetna Historical Society
Terminal Radio Inc (KCHU)
The Arete Project
University of Alaska Museum of the North
University of Alaska Press
Valdez Museum & Historical Archive
Wrangell Cooperative Association
Yukon River Drainage Fisheries Association
YWCA Alaska

From Acknowledgment to Action

How can Land Acknowledgment in Alaska meaningfully contribute to equality?

By Melissa Shaginoff

Ahtna Elder Wilson Justin once told me a Land Acknowledgment is when you present a "happy face" and cross onto another's land in a respectful way. Your "happy face" is putting on your beads and dentalium and introducing yourself in your language. You do this to offer respect to the stewards of that land, the Indigenous people, and to tell those stewards who you are and what you stand for.

Land Acknowledgment is a public statement recognizing the Indigenous people of a place. In Alaska we are on Indigenous land. Because of this truth, Land Acknowledgment has become a widely implemented practice across the state. It has largely become a performative signal of allyship and, from the outside, it leads us to believe we are doing the right thing. But what does Land Acknowledgment actually do for our communities within Alaska? What does it personally mean to hear, see, and say a Land Acknowledgment? Can Land Acknowledgment become action?

When I first heard a Land Acknowledgment I was attending a conference outside of the United States. I found myself within an institutionalized space where most of my peers were non-Native. This setting was not new to me. I listened as the chatter and networking around me quieted and the host approached the microphone. They welcomed all the attendees and thanked them for being there. With a pause they stated, "We are on Indigenous land." They then proceeded to thank those specific people for their past and present stewardship of that place and to remind us that all places have both an Indigenous memory and an Indigenous contemporary story. In hearing this I felt my eyes tear and my throat tie into knots. I tried to calm myself as the host started again. Looking into the faces of my peers I realized my reaction, like my Native-ness, was singular in that room. This moment took time to process. I found myself asking the questions, "Why was I so moved by these words?", and "Did other Indigenous people have a similar experience in hearing them?"

When I returned home I started researching the Land Acknowledgment movement and how it was communicated throughout the world. I found much Indigenous-authored content and criticism surrounding the movement, but none that seemed specific to Alaska or widely practiced by its institutions. I felt in many ways that Land Acknowledgment was already deeply rooted in Alaska Native ways of being, in our respect and public recognition of each other. Our relationship to the land and animals is sustainable and our ability to remember that we all stand upon the shoulders and work of our ancestors is a cultural imperative. But how can this knowledge be conveyed in words, in a few phrases, in a Land Acknowledgment? At this time in my work, I wanted to build something that created conversation about why we should or should not embrace Land Acknowledgment, while considering the

Melissa Shaginoff (**RIGHT**) painted signs regarding Land Acknowledgment for friends and family to display outside their homes, including Ruth Łchav'aya K'isen Miller (**OPPOSITE**); and Quinn Christopherson and Emma Sheffer (**FAR RIGHT**).

PHOTOS BY MELISSA SHAGINOFF

deeper Indigenous beliefs of public recognition and gratefulness. This created the Land Acknowledgment Workshop.

In the Land Acknowledgment Workshop we start with the truth. We are on Indigenous land. Through guided conversation we talk about what Land Acknowledgment is, what it is not, and what it can be. In many instances, Land Acknowledgment opens a space with gratefulness, allowing Indigenous individuals to feel seen within what are traditionally settler situations. But it can also reinforce the erasure of Alaska Native people in both their history and current experiences. Land Acknowledgment is a performative statement. When it is not supported with sincerity or personal investment, Land Acknowledgment can be used with colonizing intent—removing obligation and accountability from individual allyship, leaving the hollow shell of institutional rhetoric. To avoid this, allies must ask: "What can Land Acknowledgment be, and what does it actually do?"

Land Acknowledgment can be a chance to look inward. To evaluate personal power and privilege within colonial systems and strategize how to give both away. This way of thinking embodies Indigenous ideologies that value allegiance and the reciprocal work of knowing someone. As an Ahtna person, I grew up in a visiting culture that taught me how respect comes from telling someone who you are, where you come from, and what you stand for. When you enter a person's territory you put on your "happy face" and you introduce yourself in your language. This offering is a moment in which you give a little bit of yourself with the hope that the other person will do the same. In Dene leadership, power lies in the ability to understand one another.

Land Acknowledgment has largely become a performative signal of allyship and, from the outside, it leads us to believe we are doing the right thing. But what does Land Acknowledgment actually do for our communities within Alaska?

Land Acknowledgment is also a moment to reflect on ways to invest in actions of reconciliation. As citizens, visitors, and intruders it is our responsibility to know the sovereign tribal entities and Indigenous organizations within each place we move. We should do the work to understand their structures, their values, and their current work. It is our responsibility to invest in those entities' success through equitable means. This is how we can turn the words of Land Acknowledgment into action. Learning about the sovereign tribal entities and Indigenous organizations informs our Land Acknowledgments, and holds us accountable in supporting these important groups.

Acknowledgment becomes action when we do the personal work of evaluating our contributions to colonial institutions and considering how that work does or does not include Indigenous people, knowledge, or ways of being. It is important to ask: "What actions meaningfully contribute to equity and how can we substantiate this learning?" This personal work recognizes truth. In the case of Land Acknowledgment, truth counters the settler narratives of the "untouched wild" or the "last frontier" that remove Alaska Native people from history. The land, in what is now called Alaska, is an incredibly old and cared for place, and Alaska Native people are the only people to have sustainably lived here for thousands of years. Honoring that legacy by looking to Alaska Native Elders and youth for guidance is the only way forward. We must take action to be respectful guests, as we continue to be here alongside Alaska Native people.

In this time of pandemic, when we cannot gather, what does Land Acknowledgment become? How can we create visibility of Indigenous work without a platform to speak? Over the next few months, I will be working with various community groups to explore Land Acknowledgment in physical work. Through personal signage, public murals, and community conversation I will collaborate in developing new ways that Land Acknowledgment can take form as we navigate the current and multi-faceted situation of pandemic, protest, and subsequent isolation and division. There is an opportunity to innovatively reconstruct the formula of Land Acknowledgment into one that values in-depth personal work, honoring Indigenous ways of being, and actions of accountability.

We are on Indigenous land. ■

Melissa Shaginoff is part of the Udzisyu (caribou) and Cui Ui Ticutta (fish-eater) clans from Nay'dini'aa Na Kayax (Chickaloon Village). She is an artist and curator. Her Land Acknowledgment workshops are offered through her website at melissashaginoff.com

Indra Arriaga, President of Out North's Board of Directors, sets up for one of the *Togetherings* at the KONR-LP station.

Radio creates a place
to gather thoughts, together

By Simonetta Mignano

Togetherings

Who is allowed to express rage? Why is death a taboo? Can we plan for the unknown? How can we Indigenize innovation? What's one vision for the future that you feel especially hopeful about? Especially concerned about?

These are just some of the questions from the first two series of *Togetherings*, a new program launched by the Alaska Humanities Forum at the horizon of the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic that just happened to fit the new norms of social distancing. Hosted by the Forum on KONR-LP Anchorage and live broadcast on Out North Radio (outnorthradio.com), the *Togetherings* are conversations presented in a series of three episodes, each focusing on a different theme that is pivotal to the human experience.

At each *Togethering*, two guests kick off the dialogue on air and then radio listeners are invited to join the conversation by calling in. The Forum invites different organizations to work collaboratively to develop the thematic initiative for each series and to identify guests who will open the discussion and engage in conversation with the hosts, radio listeners, and callers. Over the course of an hour, guests unfold profound aspects of each theme, bringing historical and human perspectives into the conversations.

The first *Togetherings* series aired in March and explored "Taboos," with episodes on rage, death, and shame. This was followed by a series in May titled "Future Ready" that was held in partnership with the SEED Lab at the Anchorage Museum, with episodes on creative, sustainable, and Indigenous ways to plan for the future. The upcoming series in July will engage YWCA as a partner, followed by a series in September with the Pratt Museum in Homer.

Here we share excerpts from the conversations across the first two series. ■

The Togetherings are sponsored in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this show do not necessarily represent those of the National Endowment for the Humanities or the Alaska Humanities Forum.

RAGE

"WHEN WE TALK about societal perspective on okay ways of rage, I think that depending on who you are in society you're allowed to express rage in different ways. If we walk ourselves down the hierarchy of who's allowed to be mad, who's allowed to be the angry person in the room, **I think as you get more feminine, leading and browner, you're less allowed to be mad and show that rage** because that is pushing against the status quo of what is okay. We share rage, but who's allowed to express it? In what ways? And is it decided by us as individuals or is society telling us? That is the problem."

—LEAH MOSS
Taboos/Rage

"I AM CURIOUS about what could be some positive ways to look at rage. If rage is something we have, and we don't want it to fester and bottle up and become rage in action, if we need a valve, what are some good ways of coping with rage?"

—JESUS LANDIN-TORREZ III
Taboos/Rage

DEATH

"In our society, I think a lot of people have hidden themselves from death, through religion and through all sorts of ways. In a weird way, it's very comforting if we accept that we really will get sick, we really will get old, we really will die. **I think of death every day**, it's very comforting to accept that reality, and also to realize that it's an experience that all humans share."
—**STEPHEN CYSEWSKI**
Taboos/Death

"The conversation on how you want your death to be is very much like people do a birth plan, you could almost call it a death plan, planning the things that will support and comfort you in the process of dying. […] I think funerals are for the living, and coming together as a community to grieve together is an important part of moving through grief, so I think that having a conversation on what the funeral will be like is not unhealthy."
—**FRANCES VOSS**
Taboos/Death

LISTEN to recordings of past episodes of *Togetherings* at soundcloud.com/alaskahumanitiesforum

"... it is very thrilling to hear us talking about bigger ideas rather than only thinking about tomorrow in terms of Thursday."

FUTURE READY

"THE ABILITY TO THINK beyond five to ten years from now - it's always a rare and important skillset. To imagine 20 years in the future is really a difficult thing for people to do these days, we really don't have the language anymore to imagine beyond our moment. When we talk about the pandemic and people talk about this being a 24-month period, that sounds like a really long time, but in reality we need to develop the skillsets to talk about 20 years from now, 50 years from now, and kind of recalibrate what our ideas of the future are. […] How do we get people to think and respond instead of react to the moment? This pandemic and 2020 have really prompted big questions. For me in a way it is very thrilling to hear us talking about bigger ideas rather than only thinking about tomorrow in terms of Thursday."
—**JULIE DECKER**
Future Ready/Creating for the Future

"FOR CENTURIES INDIGENOUS knowledge has been largely ignored or relegated to the idea of uncivilized or not evolved, but as we continue to see traumatic global climate change, the fact that the knowledge that the people gained in these places goes back thousands of years and that it's based on very close observation of the surroundings, I think that this is one of the ideas that is starting to come forward. And to be revolutionary we need to stop doing what we've always done. We have to change this resource extraction model, where resources are taken out of Alaska and very little stays here, whether you're talking about the Russians with the sea otters, whether you're talking about gold, fish, oil, copper… We have to invest in ourselves."
—**AARON LEGGET**
Future Ready/Today is Tomorrow's Yesterday

"I THINK THAT THERE REALLY ISN'T an unknown. If you think about things more in the ten-thousand-years timeline, then **most of these things have happened and will continue to happen again**, it's just where do we put our consciousness and our efforts. […] My personal response to the unknown has a lot to do with time, and all these different life experiences, but I feel like the first response can be fear, but now I am starting to approach the unknown as an opportunity for growth. […] For instance with the pandemic and the unknown of this situation, I started to embrace less material things, and I started to embrace what really matters in my life, and that was a huge gift for me. […] Another way to prepare for the unknown is to think about what people did in the past, and it's partly how we're able to respond to this now, I am so impressed with the ability of our communities to come together. […] I go back to those aunties and I think: "Gosh, they were always doing something, they were always preparing." There wasn't a time they were not preparing— setting nets, picking berries…
—**MICHAEL FREDERICKS**
Future Ready/Place, Space and Trace

"I Always Knew I Wanted To Come Back"

Jason Metrokin in Togiak. PHOTO BY KALA GILLAN

Jason Metrokin, LA alumnus and CEO of Bristol Bay Native Corporation, reflects on education, diverse thinking, and his path to leadership

By Kevin Patnik

Four years ago, Jason Metrokin said something that has resonated like an echo. "Bristol Bay is one of the few intact ecosystems in the world. It's a sprawling watershed overflowing with salmon and abundant with berries, moose, and birds. The views from here are magical, vast, and transcendent. There are few things I love more than going out to the edge of town—to any village or town in Bristol Bay—and looking across the tundra, a river, or the forest. Here, I can stand back and reflect upon the beautiful region that supports our people, our culture, and our economy."

Metrokin was fresh out of college when he first visited Bristol Bay. He was working for the National Bank of Alaska and made a trek to Dillingham and Togiak. Jason's father had been raised in Naknek before his family moved to Kodiak Island. Still, "I knew I had roots, maybe not directly in these communities, but certainly I had roots in this region. I felt at home."

Metrokin's father was in the National Guard and had travelled to nearly every village in the state, numerous times. This was a bridge for Metrokin. "I was an urban, Native kid who grew up in Anchorage. Yet people in Dillingham and Togiak knew my name because of my father. And here I finally had this opportunity to explore rural Alaska, village by village, and even though I wasn't from there, I was accepted because people knew my family."

"One of the things I love most about Alaska—about rural Alaska—is that if you're open and honest and show that you are trustworthy, it doesn't matter where you're from. You become part of a family."

Taking Flight

Metrokin grew up in Midtown, a modest, low-income neighborhood in West Anchorage, before his family moved to the south end of the city. One of the things he appreciates most about his hometown

is its diversity. "Most people don't realize how diverse Anchorage is. We have well over a hundred, maybe 150, languages spoken in our school system. I went to school with kids who were Alaska Native, African American, Asian American, Pacific Islander."

The diversity shaped his world view. From the time he was a teenager, Metrokin knew he wanted to leave Alaska to experience a different way of being and seeing. Yet he always knew he'd return. "Alaska has a magnetism. There's something that draws people here. I think it's the same thing that brings people home after they've left. I believe it's important for young people to spread their wings, to experience something different. That's what I wanted to do. But I always knew that I wanted to come back."

Metrokin ventured to the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts—about as far as you can fly from Alaska in the Lower 48—where he studied business and marketing. He describes his experience as almost like being on an island. Only one other student was from west of the Mississippi, a friend from Irvine, California. "I got asked the same questions day in and day out for four years—*What are you doing here? Where is Alaska, even? Do you live in igloos? Do you accept the U.S. dollar there?*" Alaska was an enigma—a place so far away and out of touch it was mythology.

"When a young person leaves and doesn't return, we're losing an asset–family, history, talent, and continuity."

"I was out of my element, which is a total understatement, and it really gave me thick skin."

Metrokin was homesick. His college experience—and the distance—taught him to appreciate what makes his home state so special, while also seeing the distinct and defining qualities of faraway places. "There are so many things that make Alaska unique—the natural beauty, the Native cultures. But there are great things happening in the rest of the world, too. Let's not discount that. And let's not assume that what someone else might be doing in Western Massachusetts or Seattle or in London or Fort Worth can't be done here. Our young people need to spread their wings—to see and experience the world. And ideally, they'll bring what they see and what they learn back home."

Why is that so important? "When a young person leaves and doesn't return, we're losing an asset—family, history, talent, and continuity."

On Mentorship

After leaving the National Bank of Alaska, Metrokin entered the nonprofit sector and worked with a mentor,

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SAVE THE DATE

TUES., AUGUST 25, 6 P.M.

Celebrating Leadership in Alaska

Join us for this annual celebration to connect with leaders from across our community in recognizing the vital role of leadership in Alaska.

- Presentation of the 2020 LA Alumni Award to Jason Metrokin (LA2), President & CEO, Bristol Bay Native Corporation
- Remarks by Mayor Ethan Berkowitz, Senator Lisa Murkowski, and other community leaders
- Celebration of the graduating cohort of LA23

Join us from your home; the event will be streamed live across multiple platforms. More details soon at akhf.org/leadership-anchorage

Byron Malott, a family friend, an Alaska Native leader, and a former lieutenant governor—someone Metrokin credits with shaping him, in part because of Malott's vision and courage.

The two had become friends years before, when Metrokin was asked to find a mentor as part of his participation in the Leadership Anchorage Program—an initiative of the Alaska Humanities Forum. "I didn't know him at the time. And I cold-called him. I asked him to join the program, to be my mentor. And he didn't hesitate."

"Let's take our place at the table and shape our state's vision and policy. Let's shape our future."

"One of the things Byron taught me was that, yes, Alaska Natives have experienced injustices for decades. We've been discriminated against and cast aside. But we have a seat at the table now. We're here. And we're not going anywhere. Let's take our place at the table and shape our state's vision and policy. Let's shape our future.

"And he told people what he thought. He was kind, family-oriented, but didn't have much of a filter, in the best way. And everyone knew him. He was an absolute legend in the Alaska Native community, and he invited me everywhere."

Leadership Counts

Find the right boss. This was another piece of advice Metrokin picked up along the way, from one of his leaders at the National Bank of Alaska. "Especially for young people—you're definitely going to have more than one job throughout your career. So, maybe don't worry so much about the job itself. But definitely think about finding the right person to lead you. The person who will appreciate you, who will treat you fairly. The person who will give you challenges and help move you along to the next great thing.

"As a leader, I learn new things every day, whether I like it or not. Leadership to me is about being fair, clear, transparent, honest, accountable, and trustworthy. I think, sadly, that in today's society some of these things have gone to the wayside. It's sad to see a lack of positive leaders and role models and mentors."

Stand Out

Eleven years ago, Jason Metrokin became CEO of Bristol Bay Native Corporation (BBNC). During his tenure, BBNC has grown from an Alaska Native Corporation that was willingly flying under the radar, a company that in the late 90s had but one subsidiary, to a $1.9 billion enterprise with subsidiaries and companies operating in every U.S. state, as well as in eleven foreign countries. Today, BBNC has five business lines, 4,500 employees, and 11,000 shareholders who receive reliable and growing dividends year upon year. The company's brand is defined by standing out in front, leading the way, and, at times, taking a stand.

Metrokin credits BBNC's success with diversification—both in terms of business lines, yet also in terms of its employees and welcoming varying points of view. "You need people that bring different perspectives. Yes, they're committed to our plan. And yes, they're committed to our strategy and to their teams. But we need people to bring different perspectives to the table. We're diverse in our thinking. We're not afraid to approach things differently or to stand out from the pack."

Another thing that defines the culture and character of BBNC is the company's roots in salmon fishing. Metrokin describes the legacy of thinking in the commercial fishing industry this way—if it's broken, you can fix it. If you don't have it, you can build it or invent it. If you're off the grid, you learn to survive on your own. "I think that entrepreneurial, hardworking spirit has helped define us as a company.

"Nowhere in the world is there a fishing culture akin to Bristol Bay. Living off the land, living off of this resource—fish—is what makes Bristol Bay unique. And it makes BBNC stand apart."

Here For Each Other

Bristol Bay, like much of Alaska, is a melting pot. Yup'ik, Alutiiq, and Dena'ina people are indigenous to the region. Yet commercial fishing, which dates back almost 150 years, brought Asian, Filipino, Scandinavian, Italian, and other wanderers to Bristol Bay, seeking a fortune in fishing. The traditions, histories, and stories of these newcomers melded with the indigenous ways—millenia old—of Alaska Natives to create a rich and diverse culture in this remote corner of the world.

"As a leader, I learn new things every day, whether I like it or not."

Diversity and inclusion are a thread in Metrokin's career and worldview. "Growing up where I did, growing up how I did, it all helped open my eyes to cultures, traditions, and beliefs that helped me embrace diversity, very early on in life. I wish everyone had the opportunity to open their eyes and their hearts and understand that we're all here for each other.

"If more of that was happening now, we might not be facing some of the challenges we're facing today." ■

Kevin Patnik is a writer and the Vice President of Brand Strategy at Strategies 360. Throughout his career, he's committed himself to helping individuals and organizations uncover and articulate the stories that define them.

Sarah James, who is helping coordinate the legal fight on behalf of her tribe to protect the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge from development, sits atop a four wheeler outside her cabin in Arctic Village in June 2019. Photo by Brian Adams.

ALASKA WATER WARS is a multimedia project led by journalist Daysha Eaton and funded in part by a grant from the Alaska Humanities Forum. The project shares the stories of Alaska Native people as they navigate the benefits and risks posed by new natural resource development projects coming to their regions. While the exploration and development brings much-needed jobs and money to rural Alaska, Native communities have growing concerns about the impacts to drinking water, fish, wildlife, and their traditional ways of life. Eaton travelled to remote locations with photographer Brian Adams, spending an extended time within communities to gain an understanding of this complex issue and, ultimately, to report about a little-understood dimension—the spiritual and religious aspects of the Gwich'in Nation's struggle to protect from development their historical homelands on the coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska.

"The fact that two female indigenous leaders' voices essentially tell this story from their perspective in their own words sets this project apart from most reporting on the topic," reflected Eaton. "It is an example of the type of challenging journalism that I set out to do, journalism which strives to raise peoples' consciousness and influence how leaders and citizens understand complex issues at the intersection of the environment, indigenous rights and American culture. This was not intended as an attack on Big Oil, but rather as an exploration of the Gwich'in's spiritual practices in relation to the caribou."

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