

BACCALAUREATE INTERFAITH GATHERING

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University of Alaska Fairbanks

TWO WHO MADE A DIFFERENCE

By Dr. Arthur S. Buswell

It is a moving experience for me to have a part in this Baccalaureate program some 36 years after I joined the University of Alaska faculty and 16 years after I left the University of Alaska. It is a moving experience for each of us to take part in this first interfaith gathering to be held on this campus and still a novel idea nationwide. Why has it taken us so long to get together?

The important thing is that we are here. We are here in a service of thanks and praise, honoring the 1987 graduates of the University of Alaska Fairbanks. It is a pleasure to congratulate you who are graduating on your scholastic accomplishments and to wish you well, whatever road you take from here.

I also salute you, the families of the graduates, for your support is essential to the student. Your encouragement and your patience need to be recognized at this time of culmination and commencement. And let us not forget the faculty whom you have challenged and whom I hope have challenged you. We are fortunate in Alaska to have been able to recruit and retain a top-notch faculty. As a University administrator for almost 30 years I must also salute all those persons with whom the student seldom has direct contact but who are essential to the institution. I refer to administrative and support staff. I have always maintained that a fairly competent administrator could be an outstanding executive, with the right secretary.

Let us take a moment to recognize that this Mothers' Day. It is entirely fitting that the University Commencement be held on Mothers' Day. What better way to honor one's mother than by the successful attainment of an academic milestone, and important milestone along life's way?

You who are graduating today leave a fine campus. You take with you many memories most of which I hope are pleasant. I have many memories of this campus and I want to share a few of them with you. In doing so I will share with you the lives of two people who have been special to me and to this institution. Then I shall take a moment to analyze the characteristics that I think made them the special people that they were.

I remember well our arrival in Fairbanks on September 9, 1951. It was a rainy Sunday afternoon. Frances, our 19-month-old daughter Marjorie, and I had driven from Connecticut to Seattle, back to Idaho and north to Fairbanks. A fine way to get acquainted with the vastness and beauty of our great nation and part of our neighbor, Canada.

We filled the tank with gas at a station on Cushman Street where the National Bank of Alaska now stands, crossed the old steel Cushman street bridge and drove out the newly paved College road for our first sight of the University of Alaska campus. We found it all right. A cluster of mostly gray wooden buildings on a hill at the end of the pavement. The campus streets were made of tailings from the gold fields of Ester. The lawn was a brome grass hay field. Street lights and sidewalks were non-existent. A sharp contrast to the New England halls of ivy from which we had come.

But we also found a cluster of warm and caring people! We found challenges and opportunities unlimited. We found a small but solid institution of higher learning, and we found a supportive community in Fairbanks.

The warmth of our reception helped us to meet any feelings of loneliness from having left our families so far behind. Living and work adjustments kept us busy and the time went fast. I don't know when we came to the realization that we had forgotten our original intention-that of spending only two years in Alaska. After all, we had come for the adventure, not for the rest of our lives!

Adventure. Yes. Well, we found it. Of course there was the adventure of the trip over the Alcan Highway. The adventure of meeting new people; of learning to cope in a basement room we called home the first six months; of building the first greenhouse on campus in the summer of 1953 as a teaching tool for my courses in horticulture' and on and on.

Over the years new adventures presented themselves through new programs and expanded administrative roles. The positive challenge of administration led me to reorient my goals and to better prepare myself I took a leave of absence to pursue graduate work in administration. I completed the Ph.D. program at the University of Wisconsin and returned to the campus in 1959.

I have been so fortunate. To have the varied experiences that I had in my twenty years with the University of Alaska most people would have had to move to other institutions at least three times. Neither life nor work were ever dull in the last days of the Territory of Alaska nor in the fledgling days of the new State of Alaska. New programs, more areas of the state to serve, more people wanting and needing services. We each wore many hats and that in itself was part of the interesting challenge of those years.

My first office on this campus was in a gray wooden building named Unit 5. It was adequate but deserved no better designation. The building also served as the headquarters of the finest persons I have ever met or worked with. Lydia Fohn-Hansen.

Lydia came to Alaska in 1925 as Lydia Jacobsen with a Masters Degree in Home Economics from Iowa State College. She came at the invitation of President Charles Bunnell to serve as Head of the Home Economics Department of the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines. Being young, attractive and talented it is not surprising that two years later she married Hans Fohn-Hansen, a gold miner. She left the College

for the gold fields but returned in 1930 when President Bunnell appointed her Assistant Director for Home Economics in the newly formed Cooperative Extension Service. Except for four years following the death of her husband, Lydia was in charge of home economics programs, and often 4-H programs as well, until her retirement in 1959. In her last two years she served as Associate Director of Extension. The University of Alaska recognized her work by bestowing on her an Honorary Doctor of Humanities degree.

On July 1, 1930, the day Extension work officially began, Lydia already had two 4-H Sewing Clubs underway and early that month, with George Gasser as Assistant Director of Agriculture, and Mr. Lloyd from the USDA, she left on her first field trip. They traveled to Eklutna, Matanuska, Anchorage, Seward, Juneau, Sitka, Ketchikan and Wrangell. Nine 4-H Clubs and 12 Home Economics Clubs were formed on that trip. Club work was started at the industrial school at Eklutna and the Jessie Lee Home at Seward.

Extension work was not easy in the early 30's. On one trip Lydia was snow bound for four days in Broad Pass when the train was stuck in a snowdrift. In 1935 she had to go to Homer by boat from Seward. On her first trip the boat had to anchor out in the channel so the crew took her in a dory. But the dory could not get all the way to shore wither so the first mate carried her ashore. Then he carried her luggage, which included a loom, yarn, pressure canner and cans and sealers, duffel bag and personal baggage for a three-week's stay.

When the colonists came to the Matanuska Valley in the 1930's Lydia was there to help them preserve food and adjust to a whole new life. The Heartland of November 23, 1986, said of Lydia, "She traveled throughout the territory by dogsled, plane, boat and train, organizing 4-H clubs and homemaker clubs and teaching a myriad of homemaker skills." Lydia also wrote hundreds of extension publications and 4-h handbooks-many of which are still prized and used today. We remember also how she organized berry-picking safaris in the Fairbanks area. Quoting again from the Heartland, "Lydia Fohn-Hansen's entire life was characterized by her interest in helping and teaching people." She died last year at the age of 95.

It was my good fortune to work with the Cooperative Extension Service from 1954 to 1971, first as Associate Director and then as Director. My appointment as Director coincided with my appointment as Dean of Statewide Services for the University. In this position my responsibilities extended to all areas of University outreach including community college and academic credit programs and courses at the associate, baccalaureate and masters degree levels. Working with John Hilpert we established the Engineering Management Masters degree program in Anchorage, an evening program for practicing engineers who could then complete the degree in three years while continuing their employment. Later the position of Dean was changed to Vice President for Public Service.

It was a Dean and Vice President with academic responsibilities, including the on campus summer session that I met and worked with Laura Jones.

Laura Jones served this institution as Registrar and Director of Admissions for fifteen years, retiring in 1971.

Laura Buchan was born in Benton, Wisconsin. She attended Platteville Teachers' College in Wisconsin and earned her Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Denver. Laura began her professional career as a teacher in the Denver area but when World War II broke out she felt a need to join in "the battle of Production." She moved to Seattle and went to work in an airplane factory. When asked how they met he said he said, "I met her in Nuts and Bolts, proposed to her in Rivet and she accepted me in Final Assembly."

At the close of the war they selected a trip to Alaska for a belated honeymoon. They came for a brief adventure but the Great Land took hold of them and Alaska was their home forever after. It was during a three-day visit in Juneau that they decided to look for work in Alaska. They found it at the Alaska Native Service Office in Juneau. Their assignment was to the day school of the Aleutian Chain. Laura was the teacher and Eliot the maintenance man and radio operator. They stayed in Bristol Village for six years. Their daughter and only child was born there. Laura wrote of their experiences in a wonderful book, "Hearth in the Snow." It was published in 1952. It is a heartwarming book full of the love of people, and excellent picture of village life with its beauty and tragedy, and a rare insight into the role of the only non-native family in a small, remote, community in the late 40's and early 50's.

From Bristol Village, Laura, Eliot and Jeanie moved to Mt. Edgecomb, the boarding school at Sitka, but not for long. Soon Laura was selected by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to be an Education Supervisor. From Juneau she traveled to the native village schools along the coast and to the islands all the way to Barrow. Travel was on the North Star through some of the roughest of ocean waters. She supervised the young teachers such as Charles and Doris Ray, who were in Savoonga at that time. It was in 1956 that Laura Jones came to the University of Alaska. Laura was the Registrar and Director of Admissions but she was so much more. She quickly became that person on campus that anyone could go to with a problem or concern. Always ready with a smile she was referred to in the December 18, 1970, Nanook News as "the University's twinkling and determined registrar."

She was available to all and she seemed to know their special problems. Foreign students found in her a friend who would go an extra mile if the student were making a sincere effort. From her work in the villages she had a special affinity for the native students. She was their parent away from home. Laura Jones and Charles Ray started THEATA, the first native student club on this campus. Native parents had confidence in the University because Laura Jones was here.

There was another group of students who had special needs. They were the men in the armed forces. We had an extensive outreach program to the military and civilian personnel as far away as Adak, Kodiak and Kenai. Our largest number of enrollees were working for degrees were stationed at Fort Wainwright, Eielson Air Force Base, Fort Richardson and Elmendorf Air Force Base. These people had taken courses at foreign bases from the University of Maryland and from numerous institutions of higher education. How to judge these in relation to our courses and our degree requirements? How to help the student to get in the required courses in order to obtain their bachelors degree while still on duty in Alaska? I assure you Laura quickly became an expert on institutions offering courses to those in our armed services and she worked diligently with the academic departments and the students to smooth the way to the degree. The University of Alaska and its degrees were too dear to her to want to water them down in anyway. Hers was always a positive approach which the student and faculty appreciated. In 1970 she had this to say, "We have always had a remarkably good faculty, and the staff has been absolutely tremendous to work with. I have never had a cross word or an unpleasant experience with any staff member in 15 years."

Those post World War II servicemen were eager for their degrees. They worked all day and went to school at night or adjusted their work schedule to attend a day class on the campus or in Anchorage. Many had families and it was not easy for them. When they completed their degree requirements in the early and mid 1960's they had to come to this campus to get the degree, or have it mailed to them. There was no University of Alaska Commencements at other locations in the state until very late in the 1960's.

The Military graduates were so enthusiastic, and I think appreciative, that very seldom did any miss commencement. They bought class rings and did the whole bit. Families came from Elmendorf and Fort Richardson for the weekend. Laura of course was here to greet them and more. She threw a party for them. Some others here may remember how she took over the Malemute Saloon and some of us were pressed into being can can girls or playing other parts in The Shooting of Dan McGrew. Of course she was always Lou. One year the party was on the river boat Discovery. As a part of that evening Laura, appropriately robed as Queen Neptune, gave each of the degree candidates their final, final examination. Howard Cutler and I sat with her at this time of judgement, he as a Rear Admiral, I as a For Admiral. Laura always had a way of making people and events special.

On May 9, 1971, the University of Alaska, Anchorage and Anchorage Community College, held their first joint Commencement. Laura Jones was honored at the Commencement for giving unstintingly of her time and energies during a period of rapid expansion, both at College and at other campuses throughout the state. It was said of hr, "Her enthusiasm, charm, and good judgement have gained for her the love and respect both of students and the professional staff." Laura lived out her last years at the Pioneer Home in Anchorage.

We are inadequate to measure the achievements of these two women, Lydia Fohn-Hansen and Laura Jones, whose influence has been such a vital part of this institution, but

we do know that their accomplishments record a valuable chapter in the history of the University of Alaska. They made a difference.

Lydia and Laura were very different people and they went about their tasks in different ways. What then has caused me to speak of them together here today? It is because they exhibited certain characteristics that made them successful in their work and which I believe you graduates should take a close look at as you move on from the University.

Both were well-qualified professionals. Both were people oriented. They cared deeply about people. They worked to fill a need, not to put in so many hours a day. They did not judge their fellow human. I never heard either of them criticize anyone. They were completely unselfish. Lydia stayed as an Associate Director an extra year before retirement so I could be on leave to complete my doctorate. They each had a sense of humor and were delightful people to know and work with. They were beautiful people.

So I set them before you as examples of successful people for you to emulate. If you do, at the tie of your retirement you, and those dear to you, will know that regardless of your field of endeavor, or the size of the house you live in, you have been a success, for you will have made this world a better place for having been here. You too will have made a difference. Congratulations!