

AURORA



**Advocating for
community and self:
Brianna Gray '11, '12**

By Theresa Bakker

Brianna Gray visits UAF's Troth Yeddha' Campus in March 2023. UAF photo by Eric Engman. Other photos courtesy of Brianna Gray.

Brianna “Bri” Gray thinks deeply about her identity. She is Black and Alaska Native.

“We call ourselves Aleut or Indigenous peoples, but those are terms created by Western society. I call myself Unangax,” she said. “I always say if you are an Indigenous person, you get to choose how you want to be identified.”

Gray was selected for the 2023 Distinguished Alumnus Award by the UAF Alumni Association. The award recognizes meritorious service on behalf of UAF, distinguished accomplishments in business and professional life or distinguished human service in community affairs.

Gray received her bachelor's degree in rural development and an associate degree in applied business from UAF. She is working toward a doctorate. Throughout her educational endeavors, she has been committed to serving her people and ensuring their future in Alaska.

She grew up in King Cove, a community located in the Aleutian Islands near Sand Point and Cold Bay. From her grandmother, she learned berry picking and how to fish. She learned how to connect to the land. When she moved to Fairbanks in the seventh grade, it was devastating.

"My diet changed. My whole way of life changed," she said. "I wasn't with my grandmother. I felt out of place. High school was difficult. And then my grandmother passed away."

It wasn't until she started classes at UAF that Gray began to reconnect, first with herself and then her identity through the rural development program. "I always knew I was going to go there," she said. "I was comfortable there. It was a second home."



Brianna Gray and her friend Jessika Shumate participate in a variety of activities while attending UAF.

Initially, she decided to enroll in business classes because that's what everyone did. When it wasn't something she enjoyed, she thought maybe college wasn't for her.

Her mentor, **Bernice Joseph '88, '98**, told her she was just in the wrong program. "She kept me in school," Gray said. "She was honest and genuine. She said it wasn't either-or. She told me I could do both."

Joseph was a champion of Native education. When she died of cancer in 2014, Joseph was the vice chancellor for rural, community and Native education at UAF. She was called the architect of that program by Alaska Native leaders.

Supporting community groups

Gray knew she wanted to work with Indigenous communities, so she focused on learning how to support community organizations. As a consultant under her own businesses, Wellness Worthy and MoonLit Sis, she provided community planning, economic development, grant writing and wellness services for Indigenous organizations.

“One of the things I worked on was creating responsible community plans that can be used to develop an inventory of resources and programs,” Gray said. “Communities need to know what they have and what they need.”

Currently, Gray is the executive director of the Student Support Services department in the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District. Her team’s main goal is to ensure that students have a positive experience in the school setting. Without that, they won’t be likely to stay in school,

which means it will be harder for them to achieve success.



Gray poses with her team after receiving the 2022 Bernice M. Joseph Education Advocate of the Year Award from the Greater Fairbanks Chamber of Commerce. As referenced in her nomination, "Brianna Gray leads in a way that is not only honest, authentic and through an Indigenous lens but [also] has a way of bringing the community together through their ability to remain genuine." The late Bernice Joseph, for whom the award is named, was Gray's mentor.

Ashley Powe, the wellness and prevention director for Tanana Chiefs Conference, said Gray spends much of her time dedicating herself to the Fairbanks community. "Brianna focuses her efforts on Indigenous and minority organizations, where she advocates fiercely and shows up as her authentic self," Powe said.

Necessary balance

In fact, that's something Gray doesn't take lightly. Her commitments mean balancing the work with

her job and family, but she knows there is no way to truly give 100 percent to everything.

"Sometimes I am not going to be able to perform," she said. "I take mental health days at work. I am open with my team. We ask how we can help each other.

"I am a single mother. We work as a team. They know how to cook and clean. I think about what I can do to support my kids. And that means choosing priorities. We consistently shift and learn how to be OK with that."



Gray poses with her family along the Chena River in Fairbanks.

Jessika Shumate '11 has known Gray for the past 19 years. "I have had the pleasure of watching Brianna have the ambition to grow professionally, personally and spiritually," Shumate said. "She is a passionate individual who has a strong connection with her culture and is willing to find ways to support hers and others. She has overcome any challenges she has faced."

Gray has epilepsy. After she was diagnosed, she wasn't sure she was going to graduate. She worked hard to become seizure free for five years,

which came down to knowing her triggers. “I know when I need to calm down, get rest and what foods I shouldn't be eating,” she said.

It was a boyfriend who helped discover the condition. “I did not know I was having seizures,” she said. “We just remembered that I fell off everything. We just thought that’s who I was.”

Gray is most proud of being herself, something that’s not always popular. “I am multicultural. I am a mother. I am considered disabled. I am Black. It can be threatening,” she said.

“Wherever I go, I am acting in a way that impacts how others see people like me. But when you are finally able to be who you are, there’s no way I am going to let my kids see me switching up based on who I am talking to.”

How to broaden ‘education’

Gray thinks deeply about the intersection of education and success. She is focused on an awareness that learning doesn’t just happen in a classroom. She wants to elevate student voices and wonders about the pathways we are creating and how to expand those to include a wider definition of learning.

“It can be welding, other skills,” she said. “We need to be creative in our approach. We need to release control of what we think education should look like.

“Even for my son, who is a strong reader and loves learning, being in a confined space of a classroom wasn’t working for him, so how can we provide learning in ways that work for students?” she asked.

In 2019, the National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development presented Gray with its Native American 40 Under 40 award. Currently, she is working on her Ph.D. in Indigenous studies at UAF. She’s looking at interprofessional skills required in competency frameworks, the hard and soft skills, along with the cultural skills, Indigenous leaders need to be successful.

Gray is inspired by all the aunties, as she said, who have come before.

“UAF is where I connected with my community,” she said. In addition to Joseph, Gray credited **Charlene Stern ’18**, who is the current vice chancellor, and other faculty members such as **Tia Tidwell ’15, ’17, Jessica Black ’01** and the late **Jenny Bell Jones ’04, ’07, ’10**.



Gray gets a hug from her mentor, Bernice Joseph, during the 2012 UAF commencement ceremony.

"Once I learned that there weren't many Indigenous researchers or individuals who are considered experts because they don't have a Ph.D., I realized that there is bias in education," she said. "We work through a lens of our surroundings."

"That's why I want to graduate and get my Ph.D.," she said. "I just wish Bernice were here to see it."

Brianna Gray will be presented with the 2023 Distinguished Alumnus Award from the UAF Alumni Association at a ceremony during the [Nanook Rendezvous alumni reunion](#) on July 13, 2023.



Writer Theresa Bakker is director of UAF Alumni Relations and executive director of the UAF Alumni Association.



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