

## Helping rural students belong, across two generations

By Maggie King



*Sue McHenry, left, and Gabby Russell pose for a photograph in the Brooks Building on the Troth Yeddha' Campus at UAF in December 2022. Russell was honored with the 2021-22 McHenry/Martin Staff Advisor Award, named partly after McHenry. UAF photos by Eric Engman.*

**From the outside,  
the Brooks  
Building looks like  
other 1950s-era  
structures on the  
Troth Yeddha'  
Campus, but walk  
in the door and  
that changes. You  
are welcomed into  
a space filled with  
friendly faces,**

# **Alaska Native art, comfortable chairs and a seemingly endless amount of homemade food.**

That's in part thanks to UAF Rural Student Services, which has lived in several locations through the years, including the Gruening Building and Constitution Hall. Whether RSS occupied a basement classroom with only a coffee pot and a friendly face or its current home on the second floor of Brooks, its advisors, students and support staff have created a space that embodies the UAF slogan "you belong here."

In the late 1960s, students lobbied the Alaska State Legislature for a program to assist Alaska Native students attending UAF. The 1969 Legislature passed House Concurrent Resolution No. 56, which asked the UA Board of Regents to provide services to Alaska Native students seeking a college education. That year, RSS (then called Student Orientation Services) was born.

Since then, RSS has supported the ever-changing needs of rural students. RSS provides a vital link between rural communities and UAF. It takes a comprehensive approach to bolstering students' efforts to develop and maintain academic and personal balance. Their success and presence contributes to the cultural richness of UAF and places beyond.



*Gabby Russell, right, poses with Sue McHenry after Russell was honored with the 2021-22 McHenry/Martin Staff Advisor Award during a ceremony on UAF's Troth Yeddha' Campus Nov. 29, 2022.*

In November 2022, **Gabrielle Russell '94, '08** received the McHenry-Martin Staff Advisor Award for outstanding student support. Russell is the Indigenous student services manager and lead advisor at RSS. The award, in part named after retired RSS advisor **Sue McHenry '70, '76**, recognizes outstanding undergraduate-level advising at UAF. At the award ceremony, Russell and McHenry stood at the podium and shared their intergenerational perspectives on advising, employee appreciation and student belonging.

Following the ceremony, they sat down for an interview with Maggie King, who was then the public information officer for the UAF College of Rural and Community Development. They talked about their commitment to RSS, student advising at UAF, and what “you belong here” means to them.



*Sue McHenry, right, and Gabby Russell, left, are interviewed by Maggie King, center, in December 2022.*

## **Interviewer: Can you describe RSS to someone who might not know what you do here in the Brooks Building? How does RSS help students?**

**Gabby:** I think RSS usually gets described by students, and previous UAF and RSS alumni, as a home away from home. It's our whole mission to have students feel comfortable, feel that supported family atmosphere, and to have all the

things one would hope you get when you're at home.

Other than that, I'd say on the advising side of things we offer whole wraparound services for students. So not only getting students registered for classes and figuring out schedules and full time versus part time, but also the funding and the different opportunities students have for getting their school costs covered. We also support students in getting involved with the campus community by supporting student clubs and organizations that have been around for quite some time now.

**Sue:** Students come from a lot of different communities, and they bring with them quite a variety of different experiences. But most have the strength and advantage of ties to a close-knit community and interwoven relationships. Then they plunk down in an urban university, which may not be huge by other university comparisons, but it feels big and unfamiliar and not tightly woven when folks first get here. So we help to recreate those relationships and simulate that interwoven connectedness. This seems to be an important key in helping people have the energy to keep plugging forward.

**Interviewer: Can you talk about how you got started with RSS?**

**And then what was RSS like  
when you first started at UAF?**





*Sue McHenry.*

**Sue:** When I was working on my bachelor's degree in the late 60s, there were very, very few Alaska Native people going to school here. It was a group of Native students who approached the university and asked for some services to assist them in their adjustment to the challenges at this university. I don't think most other departments that exist on campus were started by student lobbying. That's an important root of this organization and has been a guiding mandate that we should be paying attention to the shifting student needs over time and listen to students' voices. So RSS advisors do a conscientious job of trying to collect feedback, formally and informally,

each year in order to adjust as students indicate need for changes.

When the program started, it was one counselor, Bob Egan, and a half-time admin, a coffee pot in a small space for people to gather and start that little nugget of building community. Very early on, they developed some academic classes in writing and study skills and math that got woven in under the umbrella of what was then called Student Orientation Services. Those later split off to their own departments, but the business of picking classes and helping people formulate a reasonably challenging but not ridiculously overwhelming package of classes each semester was obviously really necessary. In addition, academic advisors worked to stay tuned-in to progress through the semester so there's time to intervene, join a study group or whatever strategy might be needed to increase the chances of success.

The academic component was really obviously necessary, and, over time, the advising function ended up being the primary specialty of what turned into Rural Student Services. These advising services continue to be very comprehensive advising, like Gabby rattled off — everything from the big puzzle of financial aid and squaring away money and then producing grades and transcripts to hopefully having those sources

of funds continue the following semester and all of that. It's a complex puzzle.

**Gabby:** I originally knew about Rural Student Services because, when I was a new student, some of the first people I met on campus were from Fort Yukon and Chefnak. I had to figure out my classes and they were like, "Oh, just come with us, I have an advisor with the Rural Student Services." Meanwhile, I didn't even know what an advisor was. So I just sat on the couch up in Gruening, and they got their classes, and they got their schedules situated, and I was like, "How do you know what you're supposed to do and where you're supposed to go?" They just knew way more than I knew. So I just learned the information and followed them around.

So there was that initial knowledge of Rural Student Services. Then I graduated a long time later and was working for Admissions. And whenever I met with new students, especially if they were Alaska Native or rural students, I would bring them over to touch base with Rural Students Services. I'd let them know to get in with these guys because I remembered way back when how much they had helped my friends.

Then several years later an advisor position at RSS opened up, and Sue told me I should consider it. So I applied and became an advisor in 2005. There were two advisor positions at the time. Deb

Mekiana and I started at the same time, but she had tons of history at RSS because she had been an RSS student and she'd been a peer mentor. So I started here in 2005, and now I have been with RSS for 18 years, but that is not even half the time Sue served as an advisor with RSS!

There have been a lot of changes since I started, but that community feeling has been consistent throughout the years. I always think back to when I first started, and I was just amazed because they did such a good job of making students realize that this is their place. They're not coming as visitors, they belong here, and this was their place before there ever was an RSS or concrete buildings on this hill. This is a place for students. So we try to remind students of that, too, when we get campus visitors or high school groups that come and visit. Even when we're out on the road, we let students know they will have a place where people understand them and support them and help them work their way through the path of school.

**Interviewer: And what are you most excited about in the future? What are you looking forward to for RSS?**

**Gabby:** I've always been a "do what you can with what you got right now" kind of person. So I've

never been a future planner. But I think RSS itself will always continue to serve current and future students . I'm really excited about the Troth Yeddha' Indigenous Studies Center. I think that's going to finally be a message that "Yes, this is your place, and here is what you've created." I think that's exciting.

Thinking in terms of students' role here and how that's evolved over the years from when I first started compared to now, I'd say there's been a cultural shift. I think that students can feel more like they belong. I don't think there's as much discrimination as there was. I mean, it still exists in all the horrible forms that exist, but there has been a cultural shift at least since I've been here. So I think with having the future Troth Yeddha' Indigenous Studies Center and having student involvement and having RSS there, I just think it's exciting because it will say "You've had a place all along, and here's what you created."

**Sue:** I want to believe the recent focus on cultural awareness and appreciation is genuine, that appreciation for cultural diversity will become natural and embedded. In acknowledgment of all the foreign students who also go to school here, it makes sense that multiculturalism be met with appreciation and celebration. I hope it becomes the water we swim in instead of one little department off to the side that Native students can go to. I would hope that all across campus, all students can feel genuinely comfortable. There are certainly awesome, wonderful, interested and

supportive faculty and staff sprinkled in every corner of the campus.

Hopefully, faculty and staff know they're appreciated and can feel the reward that comes from a genuine connection to students and seeing people blossom and change and get excited about the kinds of fields that those faculty are excited about. The overall number of Native students and their posture, how people seem to carry themselves moving around campus, seems to be encouraging.

**Interviewer: What does belonging mean to you? How do you support students and make sure they know that they belong here? For someone who isn't here every day, what does belonging look like in action?**

**Sue:** When students get launched and feel like they've got some momentum, and then you hear them reaching out and encouraging other people from home to go to college, or you see a sophomore, junior, shepherding some freshmen, newly arrived, or you see somebody who's in calculus, helping somebody in developmental algebra. When people are up and planning enough

to be able to give energy to somebody else, that's a good clue that they feel like they belong, and they've got enough energy to give away to help somebody else get launched. That they feel like they belong here. Contributing to the community, and giving energy in a voluntary kind of way, is typical of small communities. So it's good, I think it's a healthy indicator when you see those patterns recreated here.

**Gabby:** We hear that a lot. Students want to be more involved, or they were an RSS student and then apply to be advisors. You know, I think they felt like they belonged when they were going to school, and they want to be part of that after they graduate.

**Sue:** Building those connections is kind of like braiding or weaving. Strength grows as it gets reinforced. Lots of times you'll hear alumni encouraging their relatives or people at their high school to take on the challenge of college and to try UAF.

**Interviewer: What makes RSS special? What are the things that you do that make students want to get more involved in building that community?**



*Gabrielle Russell.*

**Gabby:** I think there is a little bit of what Sue mentioned. We get a lot of students that come to us, not just by our outreach and saying “We have this program. You should call us for advising.” But their relatives, or somebody from their community or somebody that they know came to school here and had a good experience. It’s those experiences that they had or that feeling of belonging here that they feel more connected to RSS than maybe they do in other ways with the university experience. Even students who don’t necessarily stay and graduate, students who are here on their way to other things, they even have



good things to say about their experiences specifically with RSS.

**Sue:** I think so, and I think from the long view, I was really uncomfortable early on that faculty or anybody thought we were making things easier or smooth or hand-holding. That's not what this is about. I've always thought it was high expectations coupled with strong support. Any student should be embarrassed not to be trying hard if they walk into Gabby's office and see her multitasking and still there at 7:30 at night. You better be working hard! This is a worthwhile endeavor. It's not going to be easy, and you better work hard at it on a consistent basis.

**Gabby:** I think, too, about a lot of the advisors over the years and the dedication they have. It makes RSS unique. My daughter says I have like a hundred children but only one biological child. Students know if they are in a bind that I am here.

**Sue:** I always say I ended up with a whole lot of family members – only one tax deduction but a whole lot of other people living in front of my refrigerator and acting like family.

**Gabby:** I think that may be the piece. From the students and from the staff, it's that community and that family.

## **Interviewer: What about your work are you most proud of? And can you give examples?**

**Gabby:** I am most proud when students come back and say, "You know what, I couldn't have done it without you." Even though it's not true at all, it does make me feel proud that at least I was enough of a support to be here and encourage them through their journey. I am most proud and happy for students when they graduate. Going to graduation is always the highlight of the year.

**Sue:** Exactly! When you talked about working in admissions and encouraging students to come here then not knowing if they showed up later, I was thinking, "Why would you not go to graduation?" You witness the awkward duckling stage when people really didn't have a clue what was going on, and now they're graduating! Surely you need to go soak that in. I mean I always go, and I've been retired for how many years? But there are still people I know graduating, or their kids. That and, when people say, "Oh I couldn't have done it without you," I say, "I never did any lab reports. I never took differential equations. I don't remember thermodynamics. You did that." I was there on the sidelines believing you could do it, but I sure didn't want to do any of that. I know I worked hard. I know when they're successful, it's because they worked hard consistently. So I'm proud of that.

**Interviewer: You were both recently honored for the work you do. Sue, you had an award named after you. Gabby, you recently received that award. You mentioned there are people all over campus who are doing good work, but not everyone is always recognized or always gets to see the outcomes of their good work. So what would you want to share with people to recognize the good work that's happening at the university?**

**Sue:** I think it makes sense to thank people every day when you finish any kind of encounter. Someone at the Bursar's Office untangles a mess that lets a student move forward, make sure at the moment they know they're appreciated. I was listening to a TED Talk about gratitude last night, and it talked about "don't wait for a designated day." I just think you should be trying to support people all the time, maybe even out of the blue.

Dennis Demmert Awards are a good example because the staff gets one selection, but it's student-driven, identifying faculty or staff who were particularly meaningful in their positivity towards students.

**Gabby:** I mean that's a time for formal recognition for faculty and staff, and it comes from students. It's nice to be recognized and have the honor, but for me, it all comes down to students. So if you're getting recognition from students, hopefully, that's what drives most of the employees here in some way, whether it's direct or indirect support. Hopefully, that's why everyone is here doing what they're doing.

## **Interviewer: Is there anything else you want to add?**

**Gabby:** I think if students see you're committed to what you're doing and you're dedicated to it, it helps them. I'll use Sue's phrase, "Paddle a little harder." Anything trail-related or paddling is all in my brain from Sue!

**Sue:** "You have to work hard" gets transmitted a lot more effectively by doing what you do in that style than by telling a freshman they need to work hard. Gabby does that very effectively.



*Gabby Russell works with Jasmine, right, and Alyssa Jemewouk in her office at Rural Student Services in the Brooks Building on UAF's Troth Yeddha' Campus Feb. 3, 2023.*



*Writer Maggie King is assistant to the chancellor and former public information officer for the College of Rural and Community Development at UAF.*



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