Students

‘Inupiat House’ Helps Alaska Students Who Feel the Pull of 2 Worlds

A residential complex for Native Alaskans aims to ease the transition to university life

BY PETER SCHMIDT

FAIRBANKS, ALASKA

CARL E. DEMIENTIEFF likes to lose himself in the rhythms of his childhood, the thump-thumping of shaved hickory branches against drums made of stretched caribou hide. As the sound propels him through long-remembered Eskimo dances, he wears gloves, as is the custom, to keep his hands from flinging his spirit away.

He can feel the blood of his Alaskan ancestors—Inupiat Eskimos and Athabaskan Indians—deep in his veins. The cold autumn air makes him long to be home, hunting moose.

He wonders, sometimes, if going to college was a mistake.

Like many other Native Alaskan students, Mr. Demientieff feels the pull of two worlds. One is academic, where, as a sophomore majoring in broadcasting at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, he is learning to master the tools of the Information Age.

The other, for him, is Nunana, a town of about 600 located an hour’s drive south, toward the Alaska Range. There he grew up steeped in Native Alaskan culture, the traditions of peoples who have subsisted for thousands of years on hunting and fishing, and who pass their knowledge down through the generations by word of mouth.

“College is a lot different,” he says. He and other Native Alaskan students from small towns and villages say adjusting to life on campus can be tough. They can understand why many of their peers drop out.

LOW RETENTION RATES

To help such students feel more comfortable, the Fairbanks campus this year opened a residential complex for them, called “Inupiat House.”

Financed with a donation from a corporation run by Native Alaskans, the housing facility is reserved for students from Alaska’s indigenous populations: Inupiat Eskimos, mainly from above the Arctic Circle; Yupik Eskimos, from an area near the western coast; Athabaskan Indians, from inside; and Aleuts, mainly from the Aleutian Islands.

Although those ethnic groups collectively make up 13 per cent of the state’s population, they account for just 15 per cent of the University of Alaska System’s enrollment, partly because many of their people live in remote areas, and because disproportionate numbers drop out of high school.

On this campus, where officials see serving the state’s indigenous populations as a key part of their mission, such students account for 15 per cent of full-time freshmen. But they are more likely to drop out than other students. Just 4.6 per cent of those who enrolled full time in 1991 graduated from the Fairbanks campus within five years, compared with 19 per cent of all students in their entering class.

“Everybody feels it keenly when we lose students,” says Ralph Gabrielli, executive dean of the College of Rural Alaska, a division of the University of Alaska at Fairbanks that maintains six branch campuses, serving about 110 villages.

Inupiat House is part of the university’s efforts to offer these students “understanding and support, and encouragement to do their best and hang on,” he says. With accommodations for as many as 25 students, the housing is intended mainly for freshmen and for transfer students from rural extension campuses, who also are adjusting to life away from home.

Eric A. Jozwiak, the campus director of student housing services, says living in their own small community “will help the students not to get lost.”

“They used to be in a community where they knew everybody, and now they are in a community where they don’t know anybody,” he says. “It’s a shock.”

‘A FACE AND A NAME’

Some of the other dormitories here house more residents than there are in many of the villages where the University of Alaska is located. Continued on Following Page
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Alaskan students were raised. Even coming from Nome, with a population of about 3,500, Allison M. Kellner found it hard last year to be used to life in Bartlett Hall, which holds 315 students. As a sophomore, she says she has moved into Inupiat House, where she is "more comfortable with everyone." "At Bartlett Hall, you are basically a number," she says. "Here, you are a face and a name."

"It is a lot easier to communicate with people who grew up with the same customs and taboos that you did," Mr. Demientief says. Fellow Eskimo students share his strong sense of community, along with an understanding that there are some things, like bragging, that "you don't do, because they'll bring you bad luck."

THE FEEL OF A VILLAGE

The $1.8-million Inupiat House was financed by the Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, one of 12 Native Alaskan-owned corporations established and given land by Congress under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971.

Based in Barrow, Arctic Slope has fared better than most of the others, because it owns oil-rich land. Leslie Kaleak, director of operations, says the company decided to build Inupiat House, and set up a $1-million endowment to maintain it, after some Inupiat Eskimo students from that region had been unable to find housing on the Fairbanks campus.

Inupiat House was designed to have the feel of a village, with three buildings—two dormitories and a commons—linked by walkways. Each of the two residential buildings has six double-occupancy rooms and living quarters for a resident assistant. One also holds two apartments for families.

The commons has a large meeting room to accommodate the students' potlatches and other social gatherings, including their dances, which elsewhere have drawn complaints about the drumming. The kitchen has an exceptionally large freezer, for whale blubber, caribou meat, salmon, and other foods from home.

The commons also has a spare bedroom for visiting family members, and an apartment set aside for the hall director, Mabel Kudralook Smith. A well-known member of Barrow's Inupiat Eskimo community, Ms. Smith, 45, describes herself as the "practicing elder," there to give the students guidance and moral support.

Eva M. Kasak, a freshman who lives in the complex, says she likes joining her friends in the kitchen for a late-night snack of whale blubber soup. "I'm not homesick at all," says Ms. Kasak, who is Inupiat Eskimo and comes from Nuugut, a village of about 350 near the state's Arctic coast.

JoAnn K. Ducharme, the university's director of rural-student services, predicts that word of the new facility will travel through rural Alaska quickly, and that "a lot of potential students will ask to reside here." Inupiat Eskimos from the Arctic Slope region are to be given priority if the residence cannot accommodate all those who apply.

Because Inupiat House is privately financed and its residents have chosen to live there, university officials add that they need not deal with the legal concerns that might arise if an existing dormitories were to become racially exclusive.

Nevertheless, a few residents say some students elsewhere on the campus seem resentful enough of the special housing that they stereotype the residents of Inupiat House as big partiers who drink lots of alcohol.

And by large, however, the house has been well received on the campus, and its residents hope it will be viewed as a center of Native Alaskan culture for all of the students at the university.

NO WALLFLOWERS

At one of the Eskimo students' recent dances, wallflowers seemed as scarce as trees in the tundra; everyone was either drumming, singing, or out on the floor. Newcomers picked up the moves from those students, such as Mr. Demientief, who knew the traditional dances. They stomped left and then right, their faces exuberant, their arms flowing through gestures that resembled hula combined with tai chi.

Between swigs of Dr. Pepper, one young woman called out a Yupik Eskimo song about the importance of their culture and community. Called "Cayagya Naugge," or "My Drum, Where Is It?" its lyrics warn that the loss of a drum can cause a song, and, ultimately, family and ancestors, too, to be lost "to nothingness."

"My people who are right here!" She sang out in Yupik, "My song, it makes me happy, it makes me whole.

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