Lars, an Inupiaq Eskimo, was born in March 1921 in northwestern Alaska. Drafted into the US Army near the end of the Second World War, he left his village for training. He did not speak English. Things did not go well in training. He was labelled “incompetent” and sent to a government psychiatric asylum, where he remained for 20 years. “I remember going to sleep in 1945 and waking up and it was 1955,” Lars said. “I lost 10 years.” During his last 10 years at the asylum, he worked as a groundskeeper. He was given a ticket home in the early 1960s. He worked for the village utilities, retiring in 1986. At age 65, he became a licensed electrician. He was an avid reader. Lars built a home for his mother, and the two lived there together.

In 2000, he was sent to an Anchorage nursing home and placed in the dementia unit as a roommate for his brother, who had been diagnosed with dementia. Lars had not been diagnosed with dementia, but he suffered from a number of chronic diseases and was in a wheelchair. His brother died, but Lars was not able to go to the funeral. He remained in the windowless room.

Without a family, he was assigned to the overburdened State Guardian’s office. Eventually, someone realized that Lars was entitled to a state pension and a veteran’s pension. He was assigned a private guardian. Lars told her he wanted to go home to his village. Nursing home officials said he would never walk, physical therapy was useless, and he could never go home.

The guardian and an assistant took him on outings. They took him to the museum, where the guardian found an oral history Lars’s mother had recorded. Lars cried when he heard it. They took him to see his brother’s grave, which brought him closure. He asked to sit in the lobby of the nursing home so he could feel the breeze when someone opened the door. The guardian contacted a Feldenkrais practitioner to work with Lars, to help him open his hands and move his legs. Lars felt if he could walk then he could go home to have “a cup of coffee.” He wanted that cup of coffee more than anything.

I heard about Lars from Shari, the Feldenkrais practitioner. After securing permission from the guardian and Lars, I went to visit him. After hearing his story, I couldn’t understand how he could have any hope left, yet he was a warm and gracious man. He posed for photos and thanked me for coming to see him. He wanted to sign his full name on the photo release form. Two weeks earlier, he had only been able to sign with an X. No one knew he could now write his name. Shari had worked with him to show him how to open his hands. He worked very hard at his exercises, and he had gained movement in his arms and legs.

We began to seek resources to help him get home. Now 84 years old, Lars had a number of chronic conditions. He was nearing the end of his life. As word spread, people and agencies began to inform us about available resources. Everyone wanted to help Lars get home for his cup of coffee. A plan slowly took shape.

Lars became ill and was taken to the Alaska Native Medical Center for emergency surgery. The procedure went well. Lars said, “I feel more well than when I was well.” The guardian and the assistant had become very close to Lars, and they spent time with him at the hospital. Other people who were originally from his village visited when they heard he was in the hospital.

Christine DeCourtney’s e-mail to Lars’s surgeons: “If it is at all feasible to honour Lars’s wish to go home before he dies, please let me know, and we’ll get a team together with your help and suggestions.”

E-mail response from surgeon number 1: “At this point it would be difficult for him to leave. He is in the ICU and just had surgery Friday. He has an open wound and is getting fairly complex wound care that is also painful. His doctor can better assess when he is able to get out of ICU and can be cared [for] by people at home. So the plan would be for him to return home instead of the nursing home.”

E-mail response from surgeon number 2: “It may be possible for him to go home...but first he must survive a disease with a 50% surgical mortality. It will be awhile before we know which way he will go.”
I contacted a young Alaska Native physician, Dr. Nagaruk, from his village. She was in Anchorage recovering from cancer treatment. She remembered seeing Lars in church with his mother when she was little. She thought Lars had died. She went to visit him.

**E-mail from Dr. Nagaruk to Christine DeCourtney:** “I saw Lars this weekend. He definitely does not have dementia. He remembered who I was, or at least my mom and grandparents. He said it was good to see people from home. I want to be part of his team to get him home. I called my father in the village to see if he can help.”

Lars’s eighty-fifth birthday was coming up. We contacted the grocery store in the village to get a sweatshirt for him with the village name on it. When it arrived, I took it to him. Inside the package was a card from people in the village. In the short time they had, 25 people had written messages to him on the card and sent it by airplane to Anchorage. I saw that Lars was not doing well. He was still polite, and he remembered the people as I read his birthday wishes to him. He gave a weak smile when I showed him the sweatshirt.

I was on my way to work two days later when Lars’s guardian called me to say she was at the hospital and Lars was nearing the end. The informal network located a minister who had known Lars when he came to preach in the village, and he came to the hospital.

Later, my phone rang again. It was Dr. Nagaruk. She said, “My dad called me and told me he heard that Lars wasn’t doing well. The health aides in the village had a meeting to figure out how to take care of him. Everyone wants him to come home.” I told her the sad news: I had reached Lars’s room at the hospital just after he died.

Lars didn’t get to go home to his village before he died. But neither did he die alone in the nursing home, forgotten. He died at the Alaska Native Medical Center in a room with sunlight streaming through the window. He was surrounded by people who loved and respected him for enduring such a hard and unfair life while remaining polite and thankful.

When the airplane brought Lars home, the whole village turned out to meet it. The men of the village dug his final resting place. Lars was finally home.

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