

# A TRADITION OF LEARNING

## INNOVATION AND TRADITION IN THE YUKON KUSKOKWIM DELTA

*What the federal and state governments can do is offer mutual respect and assistance. They must be willing to give control of local issues back to Alaska Natives. They must step aside in many areas so the Alaska Natives can attempt to reconstruct honorable and dignified lives for themselves.*

*-Alaska Natives Commission Report, 1994*

**T**his story focuses on reviving and strengthening traditional assets and incorporating them into the service delivery system to make villages healthier. The storyteller is Joan Hamilton, a native of Chevak and Director of the Yupiit Piciryarit Museum in Bethel.

In the 1990s Joan Hamilton directed an alcohol and drug abuse demonstration project, Chemical Misuse Treatment and Rehabilitation Services (CMTRS), funded by the federal government's Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Three villages in the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta participated in the project along with Bethel as the regional office. The objective was for villagers to come up with ways to reduce barriers to alcohol treatment. The local counselors had to find alternative ways to approach treatment.

### YUP'IK AND CUP'IK APPROACHES TO A BETTER SYSTEM OF CARE

#### **"Nordstrom's in the Bush"**

"Normally there is just one staff person in a village. It is hard working alone in a village and being supervised from Bethel or beyond. And it can be really hard on the counselor. So one of the first things we did was to provide some local support.

"It took me a long time to convince the State and the Feds that you absolutely need a Policy Steering Committee in the villages themselves. The response was, 'They don't know how to make policy.' Well, how did 'they' survive as a culture for over ten thousand years if, in fact, they don't know how to make policy!

"I modeled our approach to service delivery after Nordstrom's. People crack up when I say that. Why Nordstrom's? I love their customer service that allows the salespeople on the floor to make decisions right then and there. They don't have to call some office to ask, 'Can I do this? Can I do that?' Nordstrom's knows how to delegate and encourage professional growth.

"I think it is important to have independent, strong counselors. They need to think for themselves, have their own ideas and be able to solve problems. You need creative problem solvers and thinkers for services. I wanted the counselors working out in the village—sometimes an hour or more from Bethel by airplane—to be trained well enough to be able to make decisions themselves.

"I'm from one of the villages, so I know what it is like. Each village has so many political factions, a microcosm of the U.S. So in order for the Policy Steering Committee to succeed, I insisted that the counselors identify how many political units there were in their villages. One guy identified six groups. And I said, 'Okay. You are going to get a representative from each one of those six groups.' 'But they won't talk to each other.' 'I don't care if they don't talk to each other. They are going to get together.'

“And everyone who was asked joined the Policy Steering Committee. They worked cooperatively. There was balance because of their different backgrounds, but they did it respectfully for the ultimate good.

“The counselors then had somebody to fall back on for support, especially the elders, who made a regular habit of just walking into the counselor’s office saying, ‘How are you doing? How are things going?’ You know, just to let him know, ‘We’re here for you.’ And that was successful.”

### **Access to the World**

“At that time, the telephones were restricted. The village counselors could only call from the village to the central office in Bethel. They couldn’t call each other. And I insisted on unrestricted access. Unrestricted access provided them the opportunity to give and seek support from each other. And it allowed them the opportunity to consult with other professionals.

“The counselors went out to workshops. Many of them didn’t have a formal background in the substance abuse field. They were encouraged to increase the network of people they could consult with, and they developed ties not only with professional agencies in Bethel, but also with Anchorage, Juneau, Albuquerque, and Washington D.C. It was very important to them in their professional growth. We broke the envelope on the restrictions.

“When they learned something at a workshop, they had to go back to the village and go visit an elder and talk to them about what they learned. This was critical. They were teaching the elder about what they learned outside. And it turned out there are many parallels to our traditional ways of doing things. This reinforced the learning of new skills.”

### **Two World Views**

“I felt it necessary to have a non-Native social worker to help us write the therapeutic values to the Yup’ik and Cup’ik treatment modalities and to evaluate the clinical process. On this project we’re all Native, and sometimes if you are all of one worldview, you can miss key components.

To be successful we needed a social worker with years of experience. Practical experience is important.

“Fortunately we found the right person. She had worked with children. As an example of her most successful counseling sessions she said, ‘The best place to counsel children is in the park because they are having fun and you can talk to them while they are playing.’

“She was wonderful. We analyzed each of our traditional treatment modalities and learned to identify their therapeutic components. As a non-Native counselor, she could easily identify what people were saying, and she spelled it out for us.

“The elders also understood and used the therapeutic components in each activity. You know, you are creating a bond between people. You are teaching new skills, and you are teaching them about environment, about the behavior of the environment, so that they connect. These activities create that bond that is necessary for a sober, healthy person to connect with people around them and with the land.

“And the land is important to us. That connection with the land is basically a connection to our ancestors. Because we believe their essence stays there with us. These things are much easier to teach in the context of a traditional activity, rather than in an office setting.”

### **Training and Credentialing**

“Initially there was a lot of resistance on the part of the counselors to any kind of training in Anglo-European ways of therapy. But I explained that they were going to enhance their knowledge and that we absolutely need to talk to the people in Washington D.C. and speak their jargon. That made sense to them.

“The first two years were heavy training. We talked to each of the counselors. ‘We need to show that you are credible. In this world you need to be certified.’ We had all of them certified—legitimately. In addition, the counselors were not only bilingual but enmeshed in traditional activities. They ranged from the late twenties to early 60s. Their patterns of life

had been established even though they did not have any formal training. It is much easier to educate someone to be a counselor when his or her life is in order.

“One of the counselors in Level 1 training felt ostracized by the group. Before she had gone to training, I talked to the teacher and explained, ‘She’s very intelligent, but she may have problems with some foreign concepts in English words. So if you will explain the words to her, I think she’ll do very well.’ The teacher later told me that the college graduates in the class came to him complaining that she could barely speak English and they were insulted to be in the same class with this ‘dummy.’

“Well, exam time came and she was at the top of the class of 25 people. When the teacher announced that she scored the highest in the class, some of the students walked out of the room. Isn’t that fun! Absolutely fun! She was 63. She’s not a babe in the woods—in the tundra!

“We would like to have elders credentialed because of their knowledge base. Oftentimes, people who are interpreting for them do not have the fluency that the elders have in their language. For instance, while reviewing raw video footage, I had my eyes closed and was listening to the interpretation. At one point, I heard a translation and I said, ‘Did the elder shift in his chair?’ The elder shifted in his chair. Even though he didn’t speak English well, he knew the interpretation was wrong.

“The interpreter translated, ‘I feel really *bum* about how people are *bum* to one another.’ He had actually talked eloquently about his concern that people no longer shared compassion for one another. This was one big difference between today and the time of his youth. The elders have a vocabulary that is the envy of all of us. Compared to them, we are just at the kindergarten level in the Yup’ik language.

“So we’d like some kind of credentialing for these men and women, but it is something that we still need to work on. We’re aware that licensing is a way to keep people out. It’s building territories, job security, and all of that.

“The act of learning, of acquiring knowledge, is very Native. But the Anglo-European way of regurgitating it back to the professors is very non-Native. The Yup’ik and Cup’ik way is to teach the child to look at things critically from day one, while in the Anglo-European formal education system, you are not supposed to think critically until you are in graduate school.

“I think in order for anything to survive, it cannot remain static. It is the same with culture. In this world you have to think carefully about what you choose. Until 30 or 40 years ago, things could be incorporated at a reasonable rate. When iron was introduced, we adopted it for our ulus. But suddenly the world began to change in leaps and bounds, and changes just were dumped on us. I think for us it was in the ‘70s with oil.

“These changes forced us to question and examine things a few years ago. We liked the way of the villages: trusting one another, taking someone at

*“One time I was making a presentation to a community about the therapeutic value of traditional dance, and my mind went totally blank.*

*An elder raised his hand and said, “If you don’t mind, I’ll tell you what I understand you use dance for. Then he listed the therapeutic components of dance that we had written down with the help of a social worker—and he added a few more.”*

face value. We like how we treat our elders. In Bethel, gray hair is a great plus for getting a job. Deference is given to age. In some cases it is not, and we need to correct that. I think these basic Yup'ik and Cup'ik values need to be retained.

“It is possible to maintain our culture and still incorporate other ways. You have to learn in order to survive in this changing world. It is extremely important to survival. But I get nervous when people say ‘traditional ways’ are the only way to go. It is learning that is traditional, not just what you learn. And it is the knowledge base creates a sense of security that people who are into alcoholism have lost touch with. Knowledge is necessary for a healthy community.

“There is a Yup'ik saying: ‘If you do not learn, you will die.’”

### **Tradition as Treatment**

“In the Yup'ik and Cup'ik region we tend to think of our problems holistically, rather than just as alcohol abuse, wife abuse, child abuse, etc.. We see it as intermingled. When we sought innovative ways of providing treatment in villages, we came up with traditional cultural activities. I think the theme in the back of it all is chaos versus order and discipline. Substance abuse—especially alcoholism—is a form of chaos. An alcoholic family is in chaos. Discipline and order are out the window. You never know when someone is going to get drunk and mean. The children don't know when or where their next meal is coming from.

“But the traditional ways of life teach demanding skills. They create order and demand discipline in place of chaos.”

### **Suicide and Dance**

“When I began as director for the CMTRS project, I thought I firmly believed in trusting the judgment of the villagers, until one time one of the lead counselors called me up and said that there was a suicide pact among a group of ninth grade girls. They had all decided they were going to commit suicide.

“When the counselor got wind of the suicide pact, she asked who the prime movers were. And she went after those folks. They didn't want to talk at all. The parents were scared out of their wits. The village counselor told me that she wanted the girls and their parents to become involved in Eskimo dancing as the main treatment.

“So my first reaction was *liability*. As a director, you are always thinking liability every time you turn around. And so I asked if they had called Mental Health for advice—YKHC has licensed professionals who provided incredible support to the counselors in the villages 24 hours a day. Yes, they had consulted with Mental Health.

“And I talked to their Mental Health supervisors as soon as I could. I said that I really had doubts. But the psychologist and I sat down, and he explained that it had to do with the sound of the drum. ‘If you have a person come into dance, especially this young girl and her parents, you are creating a setting that is fun. It shows that life is fun. The girl is learning a new skill. She's exercising vigorously, and she's also among her peers, who are also into Eskimo dance, and they all just love it.’ They do love life, you know.

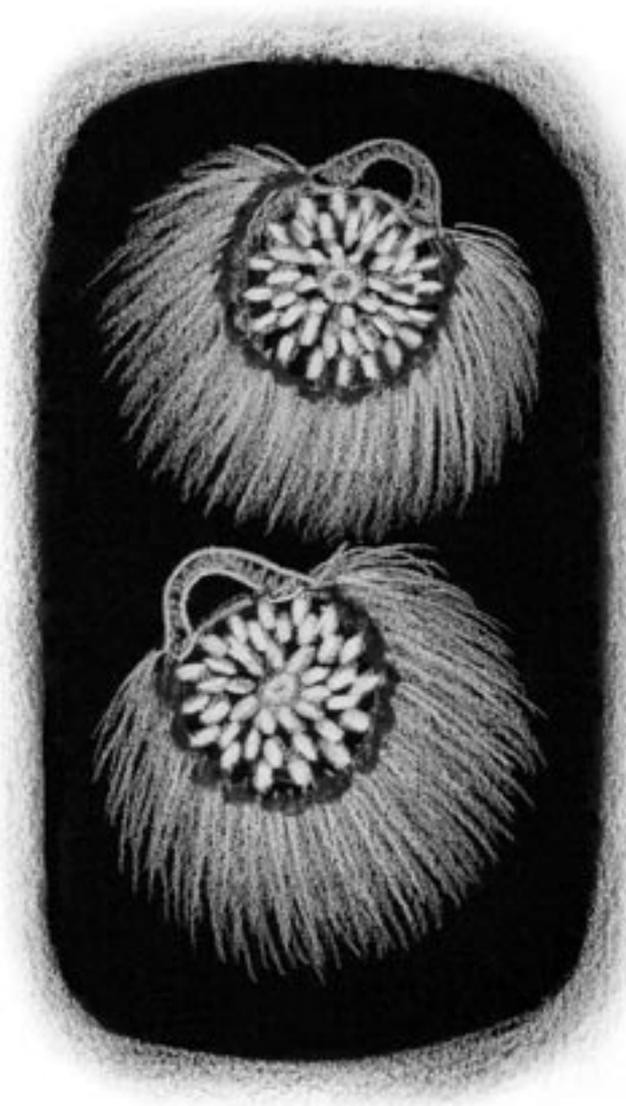
“They are learning traditional stories as they are learning the Eskimo dance, because story is a part of Eskimo dance. And when you make a mistake in Eskimo dance, there is never, ‘No, No, No! You shouldn't do it that way!’ When you make a mistake, no matter whether you're young or old, everybody bursts out laughing, including yourself.

“So you learn that everybody makes mistakes and even mistakes can be fun sometimes. But then rather than just leave you alone, they will say, ‘You were doing this. But I think if you try this, you will find it will work better.’ Then you make the corrections. And the corrections are made in the spirit of love, cooperation, and fun.

“When you talk about story telling and dance, you are talking about appropriate behavior at the appropriate time. If someone has hurt your feelings, we can usually make fun of that person in dance. Everybody knows what is going on

and is enjoying it. At the same time, you are getting your feelings heard, getting your feelings out.

“So, that girl is still involved in dance to this day, almost ten years later. None of them committed suicide. And it was a lesson to me to realize that I wasn’t really trusting what the villagers were bringing fourth. So after that, even though I continued to question it, I came to trust it. But I still asked them, ‘Did you consult the Mental Health people?’”



## Children

“Another problem that the counselors addressed was treatment of children. So they went to the home of the kids they were concerned about and spent as much time as possible to mentor and model the role of the parent. This seemed to work, but we knew that, as counselors, they were going to have many people talk to them after hours, and we didn’t want to burn them out. They were told to adjust their schedules so that there could be a supervisor available to call on.

“They came up with schedules that allowed them to go to these homes on certain days as part of their work. It got to the point that DFYS consulted with them freely, and they enjoyed working with the counselors and relied on their assessments for immediate feedback.”

## The Steam Bath

“One of the most successful traditional treatment modalities is the steam bath. They still use it here in Bethel. When you steam, you don’t do it by yourself. You do it with other people. You can’t be drunk. They’d boot you out. In the steam bath you are creating a bond between people. You have a core group of regulars. Everyone talks to each other. For people who are having troubles, it’s important. They ask how you are doing, and you are creating support. They tell stories, laugh, and have a merry old time.

“In Bethel there was a young man—you couldn’t get him to say boo. He was teased a lot. You could say, ‘Go jump in the lake,’ and he’d say, ‘Okay.’ One day in the steam he started talking. He said, ‘I don’t like you teasing me.’ He actually told them he didn’t like the rudeness. They were congratulating him all over the place. Things happen in that context. It really removes barriers.”

## Hunting and Fishing

“It is normal for clients to give excuses to avoid therapy. ‘My family needs me.’ ‘I have to go hunting for them.’ One counselor wanted to see this guy, and he said, ‘You need to come to treatment. Otherwise, I’ll have to report you.’ He said, ‘I really, really want to, but I need to go fish for my family.’ So the counselor said, ‘Great! Let’s go fish for your family.’ And while they were fishing for the family, they did the counseling.

“There was a couple that had been in treatment many times with no success. So the counselor took the man hunting. When you are out hunting, sometimes you sit down and relax because you are tired or hungry. And when they sat down for lunch, the counselor started talking with him about what was going on in his life. And after they were all done, the guy just laid back and he said, ‘Oh, this is wonderful. This is just like treatment, except I want to be here.’”

## Seeing the Positive and the Negative

“Our way is to see the negative, but also to see what is being done right. We build on strengths, but never ignore weaknesses. Correcting the problem is your ultimate goal in the background.

“Whenever a client in counseling fails, you focus on the positive. ‘You might want to try this next time.’ ‘See how this works.’ Instead of saying, ‘You have to stay sober. You have to!’ No. You don’t have to stay sober. Nobody can make you not take a drink, but are you willing to pay the price, go ahead. Most of them fortunately, say, ‘I don’t want to pay the price.’”

“We had one who wanted to pay the price. We even sent him out to aversion therapy. No avail to this day. So, you know, we haven’t been successful with everybody.”

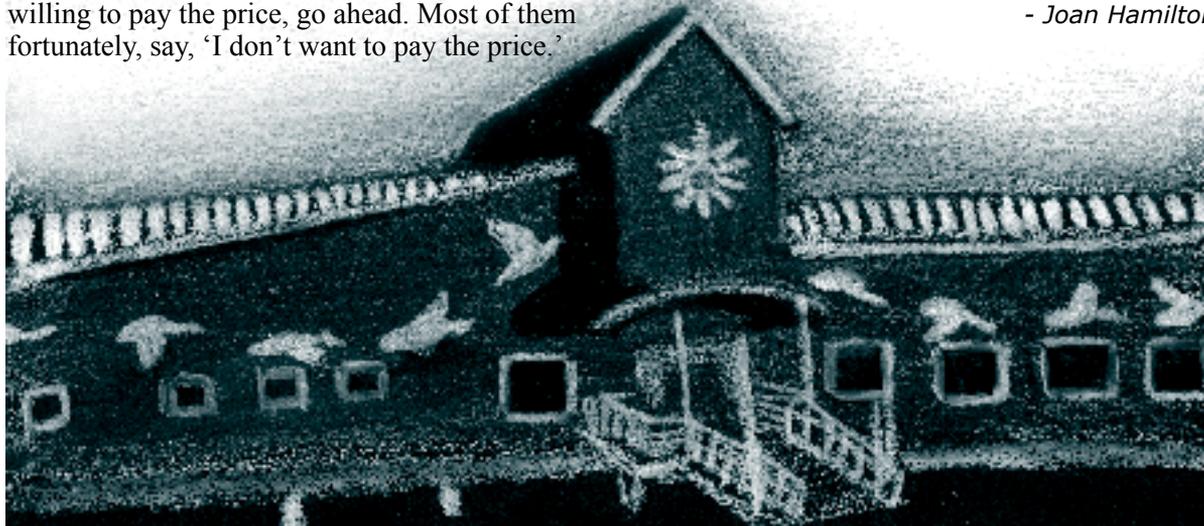
## The Yupiit Piciryarit Museum

“These experiences led me to a better appreciation and understanding of traditional strengths and to take my current job as Museum Director. I thought, ‘Just the perfect opportunity for a prevention program!’ I mean prevention in the sense of helping people, especially young students, by teaching them their history and how their ancestors were able to maximize use of everything in a seemingly very harsh environment—and did really well.

“I teach them their history and the importance of traditional things like dance and working in the community. I talk about traditional technology and the kind of knowledge needed to invent and use it ... physics, math, biology and even human kinesiology, for lack of a better word. I talk a lot about how different artifacts were made and about how the availability of materials influences everything, including the evolution of things over time. I also teach them to incorporate what they see and hear to maximize their own life.

“I’ve found that the kids become very impressed with themselves, because they realize that they have the same genes, the same ‘blood’ and the same capacities. So, if they are not doing well, it is, in essence, not because they are not capable. They just haven’t taken the opportunity.”

- Joan Hamilton



## WHAT NUMBERS CAN TELL US

The Institute for Circumpolar Health Studies at the University of Alaska evaluated Chemical Misuse Treatment and Rehabilitation Services (CMTRS). Their report is available through their web site at [www.ichs.uaa.alaska.edu](http://www.ichs.uaa.alaska.edu) and through the University of Alaska Consortium Library.

The evaluation compared CMTRS communities and communities of similar size that used typical Western methods for substance abuse treatment and prevention, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) groups. Individuals and groups were interviewed in each community. People in all villages agreed that substance abuse was a major problem, and that eroding traditional values and decreased reliance on the elders contributed to drug and alcohol use. CMTRS was credited with reducing alcohol problems in the villages. Local control of programs, training residents as counselors, and use of traditional activities in treatment were identified as strengths of CMTRS.

Evaluators measured the number of clients, the sex, age, income, marital status, employment, and legal status of clients in treatment. Communities with CMTRS served more female clients, more clients with full-time jobs, and more clients with behavioral and social problems.

Public safety data, such as alcohol-related crimes and arrests, did not show a significant reduction in crime or incarceration rates in CMTRS villages. There was no clear impact on hospitalizations or placements in child protective services, but CMTRS villages had lower and declining rates of placements in youth correction services, suggesting perhaps that they were on the path to improvement.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

Today's Alaska Native villages and towns are very different from the communities of 150 years ago. Today's communities are year round, permanent and usually include schools, clinics, churches, stores, jobs, a cash economy, modern transportation, and modern communication facilities.

A long succession of traumas accompanied the changes of the past 150 years for Alaska Natives: epidemic diseases, famine, forced settlement and resettlement, prohibitions on religion, language, and other cultural practices, the removal of children and the sick from the community and the increasing commercialization of subsistence resources. Restoring a balance to today's communities does not mean a re-creation of pre-contact times. Rather it means restoring and strengthening those traditions, values, institutions, and techniques that create a healthy community today.

When people think of "infrastructure," they tend to think of physical things like buildings, vehicles, telephones, computers, and furniture. When people think of social services, they tend to think of something that happens away from normal life in a hospital, clinic or office. But infrastructure and treatment also include knowledge, skills, information, shared values, activities and the various ways communities or groups organize to accomplish what they want to achieve. The

*Neighborhoods of Alaska's cities, and other communities along the roads, railbelt and the coast, have grown and changed greatly in recent decades as have many Alaskan Native villages. They have absorbed immigrants from other parts of Alaska, other states and nations. They have grown as economic and military activities have changed. Maintaining a balance is especially important in these communities.*

CMTRS project demonstrates how important traditional knowledge and activities are in building and sustaining a healthy community.

The following are some questions and ideas you might want to consider when you think about creating or improving programs in your community.

**What role does your village, community, neighborhood or organization play in designing, managing and controlling its human service programs?**

**What can community organizations do to establish and maintain a healthier community or neighborhood?**

Small communities or neighborhoods with strong cultural traditions and programs, in general, should look around at the knowledge base and organizations within the community.

CMTRS identified the exclusion of elders from an active role in the human service delivery system as one of the more important barriers to building a better system. By excluding or marginalizing elders from the human service delivery system, the system had squandered this important resource that could help build healthy communities.

For some communities, important partners include religious organizations, secular organizations, or businesses. These organizations have a stake in the long-term well being of the community. Collaboration can take the form of shared use of facilities, co-sponsorship of events or joint planning activities of mutual benefit.

**What traditional activities in your community might help build a healthier community?**

Religious and secular holidays, arts and music festivals, whaling celebrations, potlucks, potlatches, athletic activities, folk dancing and other activities provide opportunities to promote alternatives to alcohol and drugs, encourage healthy life styles and help develop a stronger sense of community. Probably the most valuable piece of infrastructure for all Alaskan communities is opportunity for exercise, quiet, fresh air, and appreciation of nature.

*"One village focused on the individual and took a client to client approach, another was more communal. The response to a suicide was to have a community potluck where people shared their feelings and thoughts. And there was community healing. You don't go into a village and say you're Yup'ik. This is the way you have to approach things."*

*-Joan Hamilton*

## TO FIND OUT MORE

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Division of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse  
Department of Health & Social Services  
[www.hss.state.ak.us/dada/](http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dada/)  
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P.O. Box 110607  
Juneau, AK 99811-0607  
1 (800) 478-2072  
(907) 465-2071

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration  
[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

## REFERENCE CHAPTERS IN HEALTHY ALASKANS 2010, VOLUME I

Chapter 4. Mental Health  
Chapter 5. Substance Abuse  
Chapter 7. Health Communication  
Chapter 9. Violence and Abuse  
Chapter 26. Public Health Infrastructure

## NOTES