Between Worlds - Solving Problems

Solving Problems
Alcoholism, suicide, infant mortality -- corporations have had a minor role in solving problems that plague Native communities.

By LORI THOMSON
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Alcohol killed two of Barbara Boskofski's children. A son who had been drinking shot himself in 1988; four years later, another son froze to death, also while intoxicated.

Becki Soulak speaks with Dr. Jerry Nasenbeny, a pediatrician at the Anchorage Primary Care Center during her son Jakobe's checkup. The center is run by Cook Inlet Region Inc.'s federally funded nonprofit health agency.

PHOTO BY BRIAN WALLACE

Last spring Boskofski worried about her daughter. The 23-year-old sat at her mother's kitchen table on a sunny May day, eyes swollen from crying.

The young woman had been on a waiting list to get into a drug and alcohol treatment center since February. It would be September before she finally received help.

Boskofski, who lives in the village of Ouzinkie near Kodiak Island, wonders why her regional Native corporation doesn't help people like her daughter.

\"It's so important because there's so much drug and alcohol abuse,\" said Boskofski, herself a recovering alcoholic. \"People are put on a waiting list and 90 percent of them will give up because of lack of money.\"

Others ask the same questions.

As corporate entities, Native corporations' primary objectives are to make money, but some shareholders also expect them to help solve social problems that have troubled many Native communities for years. In fact, a section of the act says the \"real economic and social needs\" of Natives should be considered as the settlement is being carried out.

More than a quarter century after ANCSA's passage, some things are better. The percentage of Alaska Natives over age 25 who had finished high school in 1990 was almost three times what it was in 1970.

The infant mortality rate, while still higher than for whites, is about a third what it was in 1970, and overall death rates for Alaska Natives have dropped about 20 percent.

Influenza and pneumonia, leading causes of death for Natives in the 1960s, are much less likely to be fatal now and overall life expectancy for Natives increased from 61.7 years in 1970 to 68.8 in 1990.

Three new graves lie in a Stony River cemetery, where three young men died, with alcohol a major contributing factor. Two of the deaths were suicides.

PHOTO BY BRIAN WALLACE

But other problems have worsened. Suicide rates among Alaska Natives are almost double the 1970 rate. In 1996, the most recent year for which state statistics are available, 41 Alaska Natives took their lives, a rate more than three times that of the white Alaska population.

How much the settlement act had to do with any of those changes- for good or bad- may be impossible to quantify, social scientists and health professionals agree. Jana Harcharek, liaison officer for the North Slope Borough Commission on Inupiat Language and Culture, believes the distress some young people feel comes from being caught between two worlds and finding they don't succeed in either. \"Anytime you get rapid change, you're going to have social problems,\" said Harcharek, who has been involved in suicide prevention efforts on the North

Slope. \"If you think about ANCSA as being part of that change, then I guess you could say yes, it has contributed.\"

Money, rather than traditional values, began steering her community after the Native settlement act passed, said Karen Stickman, a Nondalton resident who has a degree in cultural anthropology.

\"With the corporations and the different organizations I've worked for, it has pulled people apart,\" she said.

Television, with images of wealth contrasting sharply with village life, further undermined the foundations of the culture. When those foundations crack, a hole is left, which some Natives fill with drugs and alcohol, Stickman said. That leads to other problems.

Kathy Tebbits watches over the ballot box while waiting for people to cast ballots in Kotzebue during a special election to determine whether Kotzebue should remain \"damp,\" allowing personal-use alcohol, or go \"dry,\" which would make all alcohol illegal in the town. The town remained damp.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PENN

A 1994 report by the congressionally appointed Alaska Natives Commission found the rate of fetal alcohol syndrome among Alaska Natives during the 1980s was estimated to be two and a half times that of the North American population as a whole. Fetal alcohol syndrome is brain damage infants can suffer when pregnant women drink.

The commission also estimated that 80 percent of all crimes in rural Alaska are alcohol or drug-related.

Although they're only 16 percent of the overall population, Natives make up a third of the prison population. And more than half of the children in the state's foster care system are Native.

\"People are so snockered for such long periods of time, their values are out

the window,\" said Susan Jones, coordinator of family crisis for Maniilaq, a nonprofit social service agency in Kotzebue.

In some villages, few lives are left untouched.

Mike Williams, an Akiak sled-dog racer who races in the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race as a \"musher for sobriety,\" lost six brothers to snowmachine or boating accidents that happened after they had been drinking.

Martha Ramoth, a Selawik health educator, said alcohol was such a part of life in that Northwest Alaska village, she had trouble finding sober people to date when she was single.

\"There's no real social structure for a healthy lifestyle in your 20s and 30s,\" she said.

While the Native settlement act may have contributed to the current social and health problems in the Native community, its role was probably minor, said Mike Irwin, who was director of the Alaska Natives Commission.

\"I think the problems would have been there anyway,\" said Irwin, now commissioner of the state Department of Community and Regional Affairs and a board member for the Native corporation, Doyon Ltd.

The same sort of problems emerge elsewhere in the world when indigenous cultures collide with the modern world, Irwin said. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act \"probably makes an already complex environment even more complex.\"

Harold Napoleon, who has worked on an Alaska Federation of Natives program to combat social problems, also sees plenty of culprits besides the settlement act. He spent time in prison after killing his son in an alcoholic blackout 14 years ago. Today's problems, he said, are the legacy of more than two centuries of Western contact.

Bobbie Harris, a recovering alcoholic and NANA shareholder, is working hard to stay sober so his children can lead a better life.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PENN

During that time, some Natives were enslaved; Native children were forced to attend Western schools where they were taught to abandon their culture and language; and many Natives died of diseases they had no immunity to, leaving children without parents and communities without elders.

\"An orphan doesn't know how to be a mother,\" said Napoleon, whose mother was an orphan. \"If all you've known is suffering and abuse, how do you climb out of that?\"

The pain is passed down through generations, he said, and is exacerbated by present-day problems like unemployment. In Hooper Bay, where two people committed suicide within a week's time last summer, more than half the adult residents don't have jobs, he said.

\"There's a great deal of depression in villages,\" he said

. The social ills might be even worse without ANCSA, however.

In Southeast Alaska, Hoonah Mayor Albert Dick has seen major improvements in Hoonah's suicide and domestic violence rates in his village, which were once among the highest in the state.

Before the Native settlement act, he said, \"Hoonah was a total disaster. We had no self esteem, no respect for ourselves.

\"ANCSA has pretty much opened the doors,\" he said. \"Now we're an economic force.\"

Native corporations may have played an indirect role in the health gains that have occurred, said Chris Mandregan, director of the Alaska Area Native Health Service, which provides free health services to Natives.

Studies from inner cities suggest the presence of hope and economic opportunity makes a difference in choices young people make, he said. They're more likely to avoid teen-age pregnancy, drug abuse and other risky behavior that might hurt or kill them. He believes that concept holds true for rural Alaska as well.

\"An economically vibrant community is often a healthier community,\" Mandregan said.

Probably far more important than ANCSA, though, were changes in federal legislation in the 1970s that authorized the Indian Health Service to build water and sanitation systems and clinics in rural Alaska, train medical workers, especially Natives, and set up preventive health programs.

Later legislation allowed tribal organizations to operate federal health programs themselves and design them to meet the needs of their communities.

There are some indications that indigenous people throughout the Arctic are faring better in places where land claims settlements have been made, said Jack Kruse, a consultant with the Institute of Social and Economic Research at University of Alaska Anchorage.

Researchers speculate this may be because settlements draw attention to the Native community's problems, which could result in stepped-up efforts to address them. Also, the organizations created by such settlements may give Natives political power and a forum for addressing needs. The settlements can also help by providing more economic opportunities and by validating people's heritage. Anthropologist and Sealaska Corp. board member Rosita Worl saw that happen in Juneau. Prior to the settlement, there wasn't much pride in being Native because of the discrimination Natives experienced.

\"Before Sealaska we were like dogs on the street in terms of the way people treated us,\" she said.

The corporation was an immediate source of pride, and the cultural and educational programs it has sponsored have built on that, she said.

Whether Native corporations should even be expected to make a difference in social and health problems is a subject of debate.

Emil Notti, a leader in the land claims movement who has served on the boards of two Native corporations, wants corporations to use their political muscle to make sure shareholders get the help they need, but says they can't be expected to be service providers.

Selawik residents drink homemade booze from a gallon jug.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL PENN

That's a role for nonprofit Native organizations that receive money from government and other sources to operate social service programs, he said. \"There's no way the corporations can match money spent by the federal government on health,\" he said. \"They'd be broke in one year.\"

Others think corporations, some of which generate millions in profits each year, should play a larger role in shareholders' sometimes desperate lives.

State Rep. Ramona Barnes, an Anchorage Republican, wanted corporations to do more to help Western Alaska villages that received state aid after being declared an economic disaster area last summer due to poor fishing runs.

\"It seems to me like these corporations should have stepped up to the plate,\" Barnes said.

Some corporations are trying to lend a hand with the more troubling problems affecting their shareholders.

CIRI, for example, helped finance a nearly $10 million building that houses mental health, family medicine, a pharmacy and women's health programs near the new Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage.

Koniag, the regional corporation Barbara Boskofski holds shares in, is exploring whether to help build a drug and alcohol treatment center on Kodiak Island.

Glennallen-based Ahtna Inc. has in past years picked up the bill for a sobriety camp operated by Copper River Native Association.

Others, like NANA Regional Corp. in Kotzebue, have helped restore the health of their communities through elders councils, dance groups and a children's camp that teaches young people pride in traditional Native ways.

\"We've worked really hard getting back to feeling good,\" said Susan Jones of the Maniilaq non-profit. She's spent the past six years working with people in the NANA region whose lives have been broken by alcohol, drugs, sexual abuse and family violence.

\"The little sparkle on the water is that it's getting better,\" she said. \"The more people are learning about their culture, the more they're getting out of violence. I think that's what's going to save people from violence.\"

Corporations invest heavily in higher education for shareholders

A college education was a rare commodity among the Native leaders who fought for land claims in the late 1960s.

\"I could count on one hand those that were involved who had a degree,\" said Emil Notti, a leader in the land-claims movement.

In fact, only a third of Natives had finished eighth grade in 1967, according to a federal report from that era.

The picture has changed dramatically in the decades since. Sixty-two percent of Alaska Natives over age 25 had finished high school in 1990, compared to just 21 percent in 1970. The percentage with some education beyond high school had also tripled, according to the U.S. Census.

A court case in the late 1970s that prompted the state to build high schools in villages played the most significant role in the improvements, said Judith Kleinfeld, a psychology professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Before that, rural Native children had to leave home and attend schools sometimes hundreds of miles away to get a high school education.

But Native corporations also played a role in the educational improvements by contributing millions of dollars to scholarship programs for shareholders and their children.

Vikki Mata received one of the 2,000 scholarships Sealaska Corp. has given out. Although her mother had but a third-grade education, Mata has a bachelor's degree and has worked her way up to vice president of corporate communications and shareholder affairs at Sealaska.V \"The Native corporations have realized right from the get-go the main thing we've gotta do is get our kids educated,\" said Ron Berntsen Sr., who is on the board of Old Harbor Native Corp., a village corporation. \"There's a lot of education programs out there. Even if the scholarship funds are expended, I've seen corporations make exceptions.\"

Arctic Slope Regional Corp. built an entire dormitory for Alaska Natives at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and spends $600,000-$800,000 a year on scholarships, said Sandra Sturmer, assistant vice president of finance.

\"We've sent 'em to Harvard, we've sent 'em to Stanford, Wellesley, to Japan,\" said Oliver Leavitt, first vice-president at Arctic Slope.

The corporations also provide a motive for young Natives to pursue an education because they can offer jobs at the end of the line, and they prefer to hire shareholders, said UAF&Mac185;s Kls Kleinfeld.

While Native students' scores on standardized achievement tests still lag behind

the overall population, those scores have also improved since the early 1970s, she said. Education is a new cultural norm, said Mike Irwin, a board member for Doyon Ltd., and commissioner of the state Department of Community and Regional Affairs.

\"It just boggles my mind how many kids we have in college,\" Irwin said.

-- CATHY BROWN