

## Between Worlds - The New Elite

The New Elite

A new breed of Native leader has emerged from the corporate fold, but a chasm has grown between corporate bigwigs and villagers.

By CATHY BROWN  
THE JUNEAU EMPIRE

Rosita Worl's mother taught her proper Tlingit behavior- how to sit, how to hold her head, how to speak loud enough to be heard over a waterfall.

She also taught her to work for the Tlingit people in organizations like Alaska Native Sisterhood and Alaska Native Brotherhood.

When her mother died, the ANS/ ANB banner, or kooginaa, was officially passed to Worl, a symbol that she was to take her mother's place.

"I was trained right from early childhood to work for our people," Worl said. Years later, Worl still holds that banner. She also holds a leadership position in a Native organization that didn't exist when her mother died- Sealaska Corp., the Juneau-based regional Native corporation created by the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

Clarence Alexander, chairman of the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments, said the Native corporations were created and are run by "so-called new Natives" who lost sight of the traditional way of life. "I call 'em Athabascan Mafia," he said.

PHOTO BY BRIAN WALLACE

She and other leaders of Native corporations say they try to use Native corporations to do the same thing their ancestral leaders did- serve their people. They hope to provide jobs, dividends, scholarships and other help.

But corporate leaders differ from the leaders of earlier times in an important way- the amount of money they make, a difference that has created divisions in some regions of the state.

"They're the only ones getting any money out of it, the directors and the staff," said Ike Cropley, a Sealaska shareholder who has been active in past efforts to recall the board of directors.

At Sealaska, directors like Worl make \$2,000 a month, and the chief executive officer makes \$164,000 a year.

The contrast between corporate salaries and many shareholders' standard of living is what bothers dissidents, said Emil Notti, a former Cook Inlet Region Inc. board member who is a critic of high corporate salaries.

During the last U.S. Census, almost one quarter of Alaska Natives had incomes below the federal poverty level, while most heads of Native corporations earned six-figure incomes.

The salaries vary widely. The 13th Regional Corp.'s CEO Norman Ream makes the least- he works for free. Cook Inlet Region Inc. CEO Carl Marrs makes the most- \$457,923 plus bonuses and other benefits.

CIRI is also a region that has experienced more shareholder dissent than most, but complaints can be heard in most regions.

"The big complaint is they're not getting their share because some officers are making \$300,000 and up in salaries and bonuses," Notti said.

Clarence Alexander, chairman of the Council of Athabascan Tribal Governments in Interior Alaska, said the corporations were created and are run by "so-called new Natives," who lost sight of the traditional way of life.

"I call 'em Athabascan Mafia," Alexander said. "We can check my bank account vs. theirs, theirs vs. all the tribal leaders of the day. We'll see zero on one side and six numbers on the other."

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But Native corporation salaries may not be out of line in comparison to other businesses of the same size.

In fact, the pay is probably low compared with similarly sized enterprises, said John Shively, a former NANA Regional Corp. executive who is now commissioner of the Alaska Department of Natural Resources.

Doyon Ltd., the regional Native corporation for Interior Alaska, has a policy of paying below the market, CEO Morris Thompson said.

In addition, Native corporation leaders aren't allowed the stock options CEOs of other corporations would have.

The financial success the corporations brought some Natives is a change from earlier years, but Shively doesn't see that as a bad thing.

"I think very few Natives had great opportunities in the '60s," he said. "I would say (ANCSA) has allowed a number of people to pull themselves out of an economically difficult situation and improve their lives. Has it done that for everybody? No, it's not."

Vikki Mata, who at 32 is vice president of corporate communications and shareholder affairs at Sealaska, said she followed a path that is open to any shareholder.

She applied for and received a Sealaska scholarship to college, and got her foot in the door to the corporation through an internship program.

"I have done exactly what has been asked of me- that is, to get a good education and work for the benefit of Alaska Natives," Mata said. "The Native corporations have to, and should, provide competitive salaries and benefits to qualified, competent employees."

Some of the corporate leaders would have made it even without ANCSA, said E.M. "Mo" Benson Jr., a former vice-chairman of the board for Atlantic Richfield Co., the parent company of Arco Alaska.

In the 1970s and 1980s he worked with Native corporate leaders like Doyon's Thompson, former Sealaska head Byron Mallott and former NANA president Willie Hensley. They are people of such talent they could clearly be making more money elsewhere, he said.

"They chose to limit their ultimate (financial) potential by staying at home," Benson said.

Shively agrees they would have succeeded without the settlement act. "I don't think, on the other hand, they could have brought as many people with them in terms of other jobs and other opportunities as they have by growing the Native corporations," he said.

Native corporate leaders had to learn new skills to keep up with changing times over the last few decades, Thompson said, but that doesn't necessarily mean they are different from traditional Native leaders.

"There is this popular notion that if you become a corporation leader, you somehow overnight lose your Native-ness," Thompson said.

"I believe (they) are doing their level best to represent the people who are themselves going through explosive change and growth."