PEOPLE AWAKENING
STORIES OF HOPE AND COURAGE
IN SOBRIETY AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

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Certain events stand out in a person’s life as vivid memories. Stuffed together in an auditorium at a university for three days listening to the latest research on alcohol abuse among American Indians was such a memory. Listening to one talk after another led to one idea fading into another and to a certain excitement. There seem to be opportunities for so much research critical to the health and well-being of Alaska Native families. Then on a break an Alaska Native woman told me that after the second day she felt like going out and having a drink. It scared her because she had been sober for over a decade. The stories that she heard from the researchers communicated that she and other Native people were destined by biology and environment to alcoholism. When she and others had complained about the tone and focus of the research she was lectured by a leading researcher that the protest was anti-science, that people should listen and submit their ideas to peer review so that those with the expertise of science could assess the truth or falsity of the claims. She and others felt silenced. Nowhere in the meeting was there room for a new way of looking at the alcohol abuse; nowhere were stories of hope heard. I too felt shocked that the field was so insensitive to the perspectives of tribal people who had suffered so much from alcohol use. I realized that my reaction to the presentations lacked the visceral sense that data was personal and that judgments had implications for people, that they stigmatize.

At that moment I decided to ask people if they were interested in research that addresses their concern, i.e. research that highlighted the resilience of Alaska Natives in the face of alcohol abuse. They no longer wanted to hear only of their lives as in peril but lives of hope and success. A couple of months following this meeting I and my colleague Kelly Hazel invited a group of Alaska Natives, most had been at this meeting, to discuss developing a research project that would examine the lives of those who never abused alcohol or who recovered after abusing alcohol for a significant amount of time. We came together, sat in a conference room at the University of Alaska Fairbanks periodically over a year and a half and discussed what questions they wanted to ask. They wanted to know how people maintained sobriety. They knew that there were those who could drink and not abuse alcohol, and who never touched alcohol. The guiding question was how Native people negotiated and lived sober and “clean” lives. Each person said that if we knew more about the natural course of sobriety then we could begin to plan treatment or prevention to maximize those things that actually worked for Alaska Natives in living a healthy life.

A long process of working together to formulate a research project that would answer these questions began and has continued. The faces of the people who guided the project have changed but the motivation has remained the same. When we finally received funding from the National Institutes of Health/
Sven Haakenson

Chase has this to say about the interview: “I have known Sven, known as ‘Fisherman,’ or now ‘Dr. Fish’ since he was a student at UAF in the late 1980s. I have always been impressed by his clarity, thoughtfulness and kindness. Over the years I have seen him when he visited Fairbanks, and more recently, at professional conferences. After he completed his Ph.D. at Harvard, he became director of the Alutiiq Heritage Museum.” Sven was 34 at the time of the interview and grew up in Old Harbor.

“I think for me, when I was ten years old... My family has had alcoholism, which was really hard at first. But then when I was 11 years old my mother quit drinking. And she was the first in the village to not drink. And she hasn’t drunk since. She’s led a clean, sober life and that was before AA and all of that.

I was ten years old and I went out to pick berries, I really enjoyed that because I got to get away from everybody and I got to do something that, you know, I felt I was being productive. And I just remember picking berries and deciding at the age of ten that I’m not going to drink. I don’t want to live that life, I don’t want to have the same issues that I grew up with for my own children. I just didn’t want that life. And I can remember vividly picking the berries, going home and just putting the berries down. I mean, I can remember that day like it was yesterday. And I have no idea why at such a young age I decided that. I just decided that and since then, it’s been hard.

When I was younger, especially in high school, because everybody else thought I was trying to act better than them, and I wasn’t better, it was because I didn’t want to drink. And it took my friends a long time to accept me. Especially when I’d go home and that’s all they do is drink. They don’t know how to do anything else seems as much fun. I’ve talked to the younger generation here and I’ve heard rumors about me, especially because I don’t drink, they think I’m acting better, and that’s even today. And that kind of hurts, but I made my choice. And those are the low points.

The high points are I never really lose control of who I am and I’m able to live a clean life where I do go out and have fun. I go out to parties, I dance. I enjoy talking to people. I don’t worry about drinking or worrying about what other people are going to say.

I did mention that my father has had an alcohol problem. And it’s like, I think most Natives growing up have had to deal with that. But the nice thing is I’ve had a wonderful role model in my father when he wasn’t drinking. He’s done a lot for Kodiak, especially the Natives in the villages, in terms of housing and promotion of who we are. And so I’ve had a great role model with him. And becoming somebody who, I think, wants to be more social in terms of, not for the name recognition, but for the feeling of, ‘Okay, yes, this is going to benefit people forever.’ They can take this to their kids and it’s not, and I could care less whether I get credit or not or who gets credit. But the important thing is building pride back into who we are. Letting people in Kodiak discover we have 7,000 years of history. When I was growing up I never knew that.”

— Sven Haakenson was interviewed by Chase Hensel on February 8, 2001.
“I was born actually in Sand Point, Alaska and my parents decided to live in Chignik and they died over there and I married my husband out of Kodiak, out of high school and moved to his village. So I actually moved to his village and lived there. And when I was drinking and all of that stuff, I didn’t have any roots. I felt like I was rootless. I moved to the mission in Kodiak and grew up there for nine years, in a good environment, and a good home. And I really feel that if I hadn’t moved when I did I probably would have died, I probably would be dead by now. I honestly believe that. I probably would have found some way to end my life or done something because it was so traumatic.

Then I graduated in high school and married my husband and went back to the village and I still never drank. I didn’t hardly ever drink until I was about twenty-five I think. It was right about then that, I couldn’t be with my husband because he was really drinking. I couldn’t beat him so I decided I was going to join him. And of course I couldn’t drink normally. I didn’t know how to drink to begin with so, I tried anything and I didn’t like anything except for wine, so I drank wine. And I liked the taste of the wine so I’d drink more and more. And I became an alcoholic within seven years.

And I hit my bottom one night when I woke up and my home had a fire in it and it was a night that I chose to be home and not go partying that night. I think that was God’s way of saying okay here I give you another choice. You either sober up or the other possibility is that I’m going to take you and your family. And he could have taken us that night if I had been drinking. So I sobered up.

And I chose to sober up because this is something I wanted for like three years before that. I really wanted it. And I wanted my husband to do it with me, but he wouldn’t do it with me and I finally just said, I’m not going to wait for him anymore. It’s something that I want to do. And then I found Al-Anon in-between that. I always tell myself if I had found Al-Anon before I started drinking I probably would never have drank. That’s my life history. And I sobered up on my own. I did a lot of self-healing. I went to the clinic and I got the twelve steps from the clinic. I sat down and I watched that on the TV. And then I went and found a sponsor. I went and found my own sponsor, and I went to AA meetings. And I still do that today.”

— Judy Simeonoff was interviewed by Chase Hensel on April 2, 2001.

Chase shared this about the interview: “Judy lives in Akhiok and serves her community as a rural health service provider. What most impressed me about the interview was her quiet determination and gutsiness. She decided how she wanted to change her life and set out doing it, step by step. And she did have help from a sponsor, but she took that major first step on her own. Her story is one I come back to over and over, both in my mind, and when I’m teaching or discussing how people can change their lives. I appreciate her honesty and willingness to share so that others might find a path for themselves.” Judy was 47 at the time of the interview.

People Awakening: Stories of Hope and Courage in Sobriety and Substance Abuse
Makrena Peterson

Makrena was 59 at the time of the interview. She grew up in the village of Kaguyak before there was a school available for children in the village. Her story is deeply rooted in culture and family life.

“While growing up, I helped my elders a lot; chop wood for them, carry wood, carry water, cook for them you know when I got older, maybe when I was about 11, 12 years old. Always staying home and trying to help my elders there, my family, my parents. It was pretty good little place.

I didn’t know much drinking then. There were a lot of them drink there all the time, my parents and other people. But we don’t bother to be around them. We go out and play; we didn’t know that alcohol stuff. We just didn’t know what was going on when they’d get drunk and stuff. We thought that’s the life they were living, that’s how to live. So when we got, when I got older I started trying that drinking business. I drank for about forty years.

When I was 18 I got married. Then I didn’t really care to drink. Only time I started drinking after 1964 earthquake, that’s when I really started to being a real heavy alcoholic. I lost my first husband on the tidal wave. And my kids were just small. My oldest one was about three, three or four years old. My other one was about two and the youngest one was ten months old when I lost my husband in the tidal wave. So that was pretty hard. And after we moved to Akhiok village and that’s when I… I guess just trying to cover up my hurt and something taking that alcohol. But I learned that didn’t help, it got worse, where I was getting where I couldn’t even take care of my kids hardly. And then I kept on, kept on. I guess when I got tired of it, I go to church, and I’m Russian Orthodox, and I go to church and I pray to Jesus, and Virgin Mary and all the Saints, please help me quit drinking. And I even cry in front of the icons. I said I want your help to help me quit drinking. Well about few months after I just quit.

I didn’t have no culture when I was drinking. Now it is stronger. There is nothing that you can find that’s good when you’re drinking. You get into trouble, you get mad at your friends, your kids and you’re hurting them. That’s a sinful living. Especially kids, you know they hurt. They don’t say it. They keep it. So they, as they grow up they think I’ll do it too, my mom and dad did it. So we’re the role models and we’re the teachers for our kids.

When I sobered up a year I started looking around. I see so many different places, so pretty what I used to never see when I was drinking. Like God opened my eyes to see what he build on this earth. When I was drinking I didn’t see anything. When I fly in the plane I looked out; so beautiful, but I didn’t know. And I said where was this? It made me feel so great inside. And my grandchildren never did see me be drunk. They don’t know what drunk is, they never seen me drinking.”

— Makrena Peterson was interviewed by Dante Foster on March 29, 2002.
Chase shared this about the interview: “Julie had powerful story to tell, and told it, not stopped by my being a stranger, or the roofers nailing down new shingles above us or anything. She had obviously thought about her life and in particular why given the alcoholism around her, she had never drunk very much.” Julie was 39 at the time of the interview and she is from Port Lions. She has experienced much in her life and story is one of strength and perseverance through adversity.

“When we lived in Old Harbor, my mom and my second step-dad drank a lot, but he was really good to us. I mean he provided us a strong male, but he was never abusive. He never yelled at us. We knew what to expect, which my brother and I talked about has made the biggest difference in our lives, because we knew what our parameters were, and if we chose to go over those parameters we knew – he wasn’t really going to be mad at us. We just knew that he was going to be disappointed in us. And that made the biggest difference on the choices we made then, because somebody cared enough about us to be disappointed.

After I had my daughter, I started not caring. I went through a phase where okay, this is going to be my life. And I tried drinking and every type of drink I had – I’d drink like three or four drinks and get violently ill. And then once I did that I could never even smell the stuff. I would get sick. And I’m still that way. If I have more than a couple drinks of anything I will get really sick with it and I can’t even go near it any more.

I often think [to] myself and wonder what is in me that has caused me to make the choices that I have? I often wonder if it’s because it scared me so bad when I was growing up. But I think of other kids have gone through the same thing and they have made opposite choices to what I have made. I knew when I was young that I never wanted to live like that all my life. And I like the way my grandma took care of me when I was small. Her house was always clean, everything smelled good. It was always a safe place to go to. And I have realized after I got my own place and became an adult, that my home, to other people, was always a safe place to go to. So when we were in Old Harbor when they weren’t drinking, our house was safe. I mean we had a lot of people that would come over just to visit and hang out and be friendly. That’s the kind of house I wanted and that’s the kind of home I wanted.”

Julie Kaiser (center) with daughter Cassey and husband Jay.

— Julie Kaiser was interviewed by Chase Hensel on February 7, 2001.
Iver Malutin

Iver was 69 at the time of his interview with the People Awakening Project and living in Kodiak. Iver is a lifetime abstainer and comes from a very strong family of mixed heritage and culture. His mother was Aleut, Russian and Finnish, and his father was Russian. He shared this with us about his experiences growing up and how he came to the decision not to drink.

“And looking at them and the way that they brought us up, I think is what really led me to where I'm at today. And my mother, for sure, was a saint. And she's a saint right now. And she lived the life of a saint. She was just a good person. If you needed a place to stay, she would give you a place to stay. If you needed something to eat, she would give you something to eat. That's the kind of person she was. And she never offended anybody.

Our family was with the church, the Russian Orthodox Church, since day one. In fact, my mother and my dad were both born at Afognak and my dad went to Russian school, and that's the only education that he really had. As my brothers and sisters, the older brothers and sisters, were growing up, Russian was their only language.

We had a very good early life that I could remember. And when I'm talking about good, I'm not talking about money, because we didn't have any money. And money was not an object in those days, as long as we had food and clothing and a good warm place to stay. And the church was right there. I remember my mother saying she would never move to any little place that didn't have a church. So that was a big part of our life. And I attribute a lot of my life as I've lived it to the Russian Orthodox Church.

I never did drink. I didn't have to drink and I wouldn't drink. And I really don't know the reason. I mean I can't really pinpoint the reason why I was so strong in not drinking, other than maybe the faith that I had; and the respect I think, for my mother and dad. Even if he did drink, I still had a lot of respect for him. And I think he was really a good person, but he could have did better.

But let me tell you this, I had so much respect for my mother and dad, I would not do things that were wrong, including drinking and smoking, because I didn't want to really hurt them, or upset them. So that's another big reason that I didn't drink and smoke, and do things that were wrong, was because I respected my parents. And I think that's one of the things that's lacking today, is respect for parents and elders. If people had more respect for the parents and elders, I think it would be a much, much different place to live.”

— Iver Malutin was interviewed by Chase Hensel on February 6, 2001.
“We grew up in Old Kodiak compared to now and people would come for tea with my mom and they’d bring their kids and they’d stay three to four hours, not just for a quick cup of tea and leave, or they might stay all day if they came from out of town, like Ouzinkie or if they came from Chiniak or way out at Mo-nashka. We all grew up with five or six different families that we were close with and that you saw, so we had an extended family. If you were out doing something there was always people who knew what you were up to. So if you chose to do something wrong then you knew darn well that your mom and dad were going to know about it when you got home.

We grew up in a household with strong parents and they did drink alcohol socially. And they raised three girls very self confident and very opinionated. So I think that was a big help. And when I was eight years old we had neighbors who lived across the street who were alcoholics who drank and when they started they couldn’t stop. And at one time they had an argument and the wife walked almost a block and a half away. And the husband went after her and drug her back by her hair. And that made a very big impact on me. I chose that I would never do anything where I was out of control and somebody could take advantage of me. So between my parents and that incident I would say, is what had always kept me from drinking alcohol.

I’d go to get-togethers and parties and people would be drinking and I wouldn’t necessarily stay because of that. I might stay for an hour and then go home. But people really had a rough time with that at first until they were absolutely sure that I wasn’t going to have any, then it was understood, oh she doesn’t drink, so then it was real clear and nobody gave me any trouble at that. But a few different times people were like well why don’t you want to try any and I’d say no thanks it’s not for me.”

— Helen Wandersee was interviewed by Chase Hensel on February 9, 2001.
Cindy Weber

Cindy was 36 at the time of the interview. She grew up in Kodiak with her twin sister Helen. Cindy told her story openly and honestly and emphasized the strengths in her life that allowed her to be the successful and healthy person that she is today.

“Growing up in Kodiak was really good because it was a nice small community and a lot more freedom. Obviously bad things were happening that we didn’t know about, but we felt really secure and safe.

Our mom and dad didn’t drink, that much. But I do remember our mom drinking more than our dad drinking because he was always working and mom was always home with us. And I just remember her being cranky the next day, having a hangover. But our parents always loved us and told us that we could do anything that we wanted to do. And believed in us… So we’re definitely not lacking in self-esteem and being full of ourselves so, I think that carries over to our children too. (…) But our mom was a great mom. She cooked, she was at home all the time. She was there when we went to school. She was there when we got home.

Growing up in Kodiak there weren’t very many twins so people always knew who you were. So it’s not like you could do stuff, without everybody knowing and your parents finding out. So I guess we were just good kids anyway. We knew better. Guess we were just taught to have enough respect and enough fear of our parents to not want to do anything to get in trouble. But then I did get pregnant at 14 and married at 15 with my son, who’s now 21. Yeah, Mom and Dad were very disappointed.

I always figure things happen for a reason. And that was the only grandchild that my mom knew. But I remember my mom thinking that, you’ve ruined your life, you’re not going to get to do all the things that you want to do. And I used to just tell her, “You know what Mom? Instead of going down a life that’s straight from one end to the other I’m going to have a lot of curves and turns and up hills and down hills and it makes the road a little more interesting that’s all. I haven’t ruined my life. And here I am the only one in my family that has gone to college, and have now gotten an AA, a BA, and now a MA.

I’m not a control freak but I don’t like the fact that when you drink alcohol or you take drugs your whole brain gets shifted and dulled and you can’t be in control or in charge. And if I’m going to do something, I want to be aware of what I’m doing and why I’m doing it and be able to say hey I knew I was doing it when I did it, so that’s why I did it.

It’s just sad that people drink and use alcohol. In my opinion I think they’re drinking to numb the pain of something that they don’t want to face. And you have to walk through the pain and feel it and suffer through it and then get over it to survive. You just can’t keep trying to shovel it underneath the carpet or cover it up with some alcohol. It’s not going to go away.”

— Cindy Weber was interviewed by Dante Foster on August 24, 2001 in Anchorage.
Russ Osterhaus

Russ grew up in Dillingham and Bethel and Anchorage, and is of Aleut heritage. His story is one of spiritual recovery and personal healing. Russ is an active member of AA and draws support from his family, culture and his community. Russ was 51 at the time of his interview with the People Awakening Project in Anchorage.

“When I lived there in Bethel there were no liquor stores or bars. My dad, he used to make homebrew. He played the accordion and so he would invite his guitar playing friends over. I remember that house where I grew up. I could smell homebrew and see how the adults got kind of crazy on this alcohol.

My friend and I decided to try some of this homebrew. So we both tried a little bit; I drank maybe a half a cup and started feeling it. I must have been about seven or eight years old. I think right then and there I was an alcoholic because I liked that feeling. So it started my alcoholism.

Then in 1987, I had an alcoholic seizure. That was my spiritual awakening, somebody was saying, “Russ, you keep on drinking and this is going to kill you.” Because like I said, I was a person that didn’t know to drink. I couldn’t sit down and have a few drinks with you guys and say, “That’s it for Russ” and then go home. Once I had one drink, I was there to get drunk. I didn’t realize I was slowly committing suicide by drinking for 22 years.

My alcoholic seizure was in 1987. Like I said, that was my spiritual awakening. I was at a corporation meeting with my sisters. We were sitting up there, and I started drinking hot coffee, then switched to cold water. Slowly, I started shaking. I thought “Maybe I needed a drink,” so we went downstairs. I could barely walk. We found a place where my sister bought me a beer.

I’ll never forget this. I’m trying to drink from a big, long Budweiser bottle. I had both my hands around the bottle, and I was shaking. I put it up to my mouth and some of it was getting in my mouth but most of it was getting on my clothes. It was so humiliating to have my family see how bad off I was. I finally told my sisters, my older sister and my younger sister, “You’ll never see your brother touch another drop of alcohol again.” And it’s been almost 14 years.

Today I go to a lot of AA meetings. I keep myself humble by saying, “I’m Russ, and I’m an alcoholic. I’m powerless over alcohol, I’m powerless over drugs, and I’m powerless over tobacco,” I believe in my Creator, my Higher Power. I believe Creator made the mountains out there, the trees, the flowers, and you and I. Today I also go to pow-wows. I dance for sobriety. I have a sobriety stick I dance with. When the drums get real loud, I raise my sobriety stick for alcohol and drug-free. When a little kid sees my stick and wonders what it is, I tell them don’t do drugs, alcohol, or tobacco. I say I’m alcohol and drug free.

All I want to say is, “if I could stay sober for this many years, well you can do it also. One day at a time. Amen.”

— Russ Osterhaus was interviewed by Mary Stachelrodt on March 29, 2001.
Sam Demientieff
Kenneth Frank
Goodwin Semeken, Sr.
Athabascan Shane Derendorff
Anonymous
Tracy Snow
Veronica Solomon
Sam Demienteiff, born and raised in Holy Cross, was one of the people who initially conceived of the People Awakening Project, and has remained very active in it, including serving on the Coordinating Council and being involved in other aspects of the research. He has also been very active in the statewide Alaska Native sobriety movement. Sam story carries a message of recovery and those things that have been most important for his sobriety. Sam was 62 at the time of the interview.

“...So I go in there and go to my bed, got down on my knees and now I can really pray good at this moment because here I am in this protective covering. I have absolutely good feelings. The experience is totally overwhelming and I just said, “God, I want to stop.” Because it’s obvious to me that I don’t want to die and all these other things I have experienced. And I’m old enough. I’m adult enough to make up my mind. So how am I going to do it now? I got up and walked around to the mirror. I looked right in the mirror and I just shook my head and I said this is unbelievable. I’ve never talked to myself before. I could see the muscles in my face jerking and I was scared. This is amazing. How can I be scared of myself, nervous of myself? So I did just like he said. I looked right into my eyes and I just slowed down and said okay, make up your mind, make your decision. And “Okay, from this point on in my life I’m never going to drink alcohol again. It’s not going to be part of my life. Every time I see anything that relates to alcohol, it’s going to go right over my head. I don’t want to comprehend it or think about it or anything. That’s what I want. Do you understand?” And I said, “Yes, I understand.” Okay. And that’s it, that’s it. Okay, from this point on never more -- never again in your life, never again in my life. And so I kind of relaxed. This tension kind of left me you know and I’m done, that’s it. Life starts now.

We lived a fantastic life. I never realized it, but the life that we lived on those rivers every year up and down and meeting so many people and going through so many experiences and seeing so much of the Alaska river country. (...) It was 1992 I think. I went down to Holy Cross and I was there and I remember telling my dad. What I did is I just told him I loved him. And, but later on I told him, “Dad, you know our lives when we grew up on the boats and everything? That was the best life that you could provide for anybody and I thank you for it.” I just told him that and he just -- he was kind of shaking you know, but when I told him I loved him the first time he visibly shook; he was in shock I think. I was leaving Holy Cross and I was getting ready to get on the plane and I went over and shook hands. And he just shakes hands, so I shook hands but I just pulled him towards me and I put my hands around him and I just hugged him and said, “Dad, I love you.” And he just kind of shook. He didn’t know what to do. What do you do? I just let him go and I just smiled and just went over and hugged mom and told her the same thing and I left. But I made sure I thanked him for that, because it was a fantastic life.

Life can be so great. There’s so much beauty in the world... The whole world has beauty like that and if we were there and seen it, I think I’d like to see those things and appreciate them. And besides that there are so many people that have had the same experience I had, only different and I’d like to hear their stories. How did it happen to them? What’s going on? Do they have the same questions as we do about life? Do they have the desires? Do they have this understanding of development? Did they know about the high language? Do they know how to talk to the spirit? So I think it’s like coming above the surface. (...) It’s not a new life. This is the way life is supposed to be.”

— Sam Demienteiff was interviewed by Gerald Mohatt on November 11, 2001.
People Awakening: Stories of Hope and Courage in Sobriety and Substance Abuse

Gerald had this to say about the interview: “We sat for two interviews that were marked by an excitement to hear how a young man had grown into his own culture. He is Gwich’in and he shared his language with me by anchoring his narrative through the names of his ancestors in his own language. Throughout the interview Kenneth spoke with a wisdom that comes from survival and commitment. He analyzed his life and abstracted principles that others could use to recover from alcoholism. Like the others who I interviewed he had an amazing story of courage, a love of family, and a steadfast optimism about the future.” Kenneth was raised in Venetie and was 47 at the time of the interview.

“I talked a little bit about the alcoholic, that era there, but there’s more beyond it, when I was growing up. When I was growing up, in our community, there is hardly any education on alcoholism. Our parents and our peers and our role models were all, they were using; they were alcohol users. But what they were doing in those days, it was a hard time and then when they drank they look at it as just having fun, type of model for them. They didn’t know that they were bringing harm to their kids.

Sometimes people like me, I fell through the ice. I sobered up under the ice. (...) And it kind of make you wonder, how come the Creator is so -- keep you alive. And then all these little things will kind of add up. And then that wanting to quit. And then they kind of combine to each other, and kind of help each other make you make a decision in your life.

Even though I quit for 21 years, I still don’t trust myself. When I think about it, it seems like yesterday, in 21 years. For some people 21 years is a long time, but you know for my way of seeing it, it seems like yesterday. So I still don’t trust it. I don’t want to say that, I’m over it. I’m part of it still. So I see it as a kind of enemy, like whenever people talk about alcohol, I just go a 180 degrees, because if it’s had to do with alcohol, I just see it as my enemy, a killer, you know. It killed a lot of people that I know in between that 21 years.

Culture is a healer. It’s a real, because our ancestors, that’s what they had, in order to be a strong people. You learn more about yourself and you get stronger in who you are, and how you talk to people. Like, for instance, if people ask you any kind of question about who you are, then when you talk about your family tree, you say this is my grandfather. My grandfather come from here; and this is my great-great-great-grandmother. And that’s a strong knowledge. Before I learn about my culture, I don’t have no knowledge about myself. (...) When you learn about yourself, you get stronger.

When you first start doing it, everything start falling in place in life. That’s why when I first started, I said I cry out to God and I pray. I wanted to quit. I asked God, the Creator because you know, the more I’m learning about English words. But I don’t pray in English either. The only way I pray is in our language. And the only way I see things is my language. And then the Creator is the one that’s helping me with all the things. And all I accomplish are part of it. And I start praying and all that; and the things that help us would fall in the trail that I was taking. A lot of people call it Red Road, where my ancestral had a trail up into where they left it. The trail is for me to continue that trail. So the trail is there for me. All I got to do is walk it.”

— Kenneth Frank was interviewed by Gerald Mohatt on April 11, 2001.
When I was growing up, I think we had the biggest house, where seven of my brothers and three of my sisters grew up in one open room. We just had curtains for different places, you know. But that don’t keep the sound out from if one of my brothers is drinking, or two of my brothers are drinking. And coming in and disturb the rest of the family that’s in the house. And that’s where I learned quite a bit about drinking, is that —— that disturbing other people; disturbing your family, disturbing your parents. All those things that came to my mind. I thought to myself later on that there’s no sense in that. And then you get to buy a bottle and then that bottle of whiskey is taking care of you, when you supposed to take care of that bottle. You’re supposed to take a little bit out of it and so forth. Like I remember this from my dad when he was out trapping, that he would mix it up with water and then go to bed. And that’s where I learned it from.

We used to live off the country at that time, so my dad, in the evening, he would take a little bit out of that whiskey before we go to bed, with tea or coffee. And boy, that loosened, loosened him up and he’d go to sleep. And rest until the next morning. He’s back about the same time in the morning and then going out again. And that’s the healthiest life that I have ever known, was you were out in the woods and you get your full hours sleep; you get your full hours rest overnight. Next morning you’re ready to go again, because you had a good rest overnight, you know. (…) I knew he had it there all the time, but I still don’t want to go find out how it tastes. I just kind of keep my mind away from it. I want to have a healthy family. I want to have healthy dogs, like I say, what was helping us to make a living.

I mean the liquor was just like water in town. People used to drink, drink and never quit. Sometimes the stores used to refuse them to buy some, because they were overdoing it and getting, drinking all the fur that they catch. Drink it all away and never think about the summer food supply. So they kind of slowed them down, if they can. So, and I thought of all those things, as well as my parents. My mom was really against alcohol. We didn’t know nothing about no drunk - there was no drunk at that time. Well all those things I had to gather up and put it away for my family. And I thought and I’d say, either say to my wife or say to myself. I’d say if I start to have a family, I’m not going to disturb them. I want to have a family and happy family, healthy family. And a family that they grow up and then they love me. That’s just the way I thought about my family.

So I listened to my mom. That’s why I always say my mom and my dad was my best teacher, when I was growing up, you know. And I listened to them. And up to now, I’m happy I was. I listened to my mom and dad. My mom would say to me, even before I got married – and I was a teenager then already-- they said, when I go in the house and they tell me, “You, I should call you only my son,” he tells me, you know. “You listen to me, you don’t drink, you don’t smoke.” And then he said, “When I die, I’m going to have peaceful sleep. I don’t have to worry about you.” In his own tongue; he said that in his own language. He said “I’m going to have peaceful sleep, I don’t have to worry about you. But when I get to the next world I probably will pray for you, my son,” he said.

So anyway, like I say, I wanted to have a healthy family. And so was my wife, was the same way, you know, so both of us put the whole heart into our whole family there. So if you do things like that, you’re getting along well when you have family. Then you’ll have a healthy family growing up.”

— Goodwin Semaken, Sr. was interviewed by Gerald Mohatt and Jim Allen on February 10, 2001.
Gerald shared this about the interview: “Shane was raised in the village, and went to the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Shane led the interviews without much probing and the flow marked a sense of his confidence and trust that he was giving a story that could help those in the future. The message was that he felt an obligation to his people to model a responsible life and that he felt optimistic about the future.” Shane is Koyukon Athabascan, and was 25 at the time of his interview.

“My parents, from as far back as even both of us can remember, I have always been an adult to them. I have always talked to them. Even like when I was ten years old, I talked to them like I was an adult, meaning I listened to them, I didn’t talk about silly things. But we were able to converse, and so they treated me like an adult. And so when I made a mistake they told me, but they didn’t overly punish me, or they didn’t, you know – I didn’t even know what grounding is. Of course I got my spankings back when I was a young kid, but I think that helped. That gave me the choice to do what I wanted and also to make the decision not to drink.

I wasn’t protected, you know, if people – if somebody had something to say about me and they told my parents, they’d tell me. And I’d feel bad, but then I’d feel it; they wouldn’t keep it from me and stick up for me. There’s been instances in my life I made mistakes, but the one thing that my mom has always done is make me stand up for those mistakes.

The next one after me is my brother. He’s about seven years younger than me. So it was quite a span there. I was able to get a little older, you know, when they came along. And helped out, did that kind of stuff. But I was, for them especially, I was a big brother, always taking care of them. I distinctly remember spending a lot of time with them, taking care of them.

As I got back to Fairbanks, I started drinking, just having more often. (…) But it’s one of those things, as soon as I thought that I was building some kind of bad habit, you know, I started doing three beers a night or something, then I just – it’s just like something went off, and I said, you know, this is not what I want. And it wasn’t like I was getting really high or anything; it’s just that I didn’t want to get into any kind of rhythm. And so I just pretty much quit for a couple weeks or so and it’s really nice that whatever addiction is there is not really there yet.

Like I said, I really value people’s opinion. And it’s not to the point where I change everything the way I do, but I really want to be a good person in my personal life. So if there’s something that doesn’t agree with my lifestyle or the way I want to portray myself, I’ll just quit. I don’t know why it’s so simple. Like for cigarettes is a good example. I smoked for all those years and I had no intention of quitting, you know. I was told more times than not that I should quit, and I tried a couple times. But it wasn’t until my son was about to be born that my girlfriend said “I really don’t want you to smoke around him.” And I thought, well, that’s a good idea. And so I quit and that was it.”

— Shane Derendoff was interviewed by Gerald Mohatt on March 3, 2001.
This story presents an honest and forthcoming look at the road to sobriety and healthy everyday living. Anonymous’ mother is Alaska Native and his father’s family is from down in the States. Anonymous was raised in a village and was 37 at the time of the interview.

“My parents raised all of us out on the homestead, out of the village. Home-schooled us; nine boys, five girls. Worked hard. Smart people, hard workers. Sober life out camp, in town periodically drinking. They’re both alcoholics. My mom is more your traditional alcoholic. I think my dad is a maintenance drinker. But they worked hard. They were good parents. Did some wrong things caused by alcohol, you know they abandoned us out there for a while that’s the big issue, the big family battle sometime back. But they’re good parents. When I look back at my age, thirty-seven, I hope I don’t make the same mistakes. I’m not as bitter as I used to be, they’re just human. Anyway, alcoholic family; the alcohol got worse as the years progressed. I guess times just got harder for them. They drank more. They made homebrew out camp. At one point we all got drunk, kids and all after they passed out we got into the booze, so we had one big family party out there, eight years old and all the way up. But I was raised good otherwise.

When I was 13 I first drank, I got drunk with my buddy. 14 I think I got drunk twice or maybe once, a regular party with the boys from the surrounding village and we had a good old party and me and my brother and some other friends, we were all kids but we thought we were grown up. By the time I was 16 I was drinking regularly.

But drinking was always a problem it just got worse, and alcohol can make a person do as crazy a thing as the other drugs, that’s me anyway, that’s my experience. (…) Then when I was almost 30 I quit drinking. I drank a couple of beers. My wife found out and she told me to get out, you know, I had to go, and I had everything back that I had previously lost including my job but I was ready to loose everything again.

She kicked me out and I got in my car and I left. And I went to an AA meeting and I forget, I must have talked, I don’t remember. I got an AA book. I got in my car and I had this tent and I put it up at this place where we used to camp and I read this AA book and big book and went to work the next day. And I just felt that I didn’t have any desire to drink. I knew I was sober, that I would never have to drink again. And I remember driving my younger brother around and I said, I was just all fired up, I said like God removed my desire to drink from me like he did the drugs and marijuana. And I was so happy… Anyway it was like the clouds that cleared away in front of me. It just made so much sense the AA book, I read it. You know I prayed, but I read the AA book and all the stories made so much sense, the stories that were in there and I just saw myself in there. I went to ninety meetings, ninety days. I got a sponsor did the steps, got to step nine. But I did almost all the steps and anyway I haven’t had a drink since then, the summer of 1993, I think it was. I used to say then that God took the desire for that drug from me and now I’ve been sober longer, I still believe it, I still believe it, that I am a little more logical now, I still believe in God because they were just gone, these desires. Being a Christian, I have these conflicting feelings about using another resource for sobriety.

You know I’m working hard. Not really trying to do a sobriety movement or anything like that. I’m not trying to help people too much, I’m not trying to be a guru or go up there and tell somebody how to sober up or something because well when I first sobered up I was kind of in that mood because I really don’t have it all figured out. I really don’t know what works for me. I think the reason I’m sober now is two reasons; one is God, and two is I’ve always been kind of a worrywart and always a hard worker. Someone who can live in a tent out in the winter means that person takes care of little details and doesn’t like to let things lie.”

— Anonymous was interviewed by Dolly Scoville on May 31, 2001.
Tracy is Athabascan and was raised in Nenana. Tracy’s story is one of personal success and perseverance. Tracy’s spirit is strong and is fostered through the nurturance of her family. The choices she has made in her life reflect the support she has received throughout her life. Tracy was 26 at the time of the interview.

“There was always alcohol in our home but alcohol wasn’t a big deal to me. When I was little I could taste my dad’s glass of beer and it wasn’t a big deal. On my mom’s side, my grandfather was a recovering alcoholic but I really don’t remember him drinking. My grandmother, who is still alive, drinks quite a bit. On my father’s side, both of his parents drank quite a bit when I was growing up. By the time I was older neither of them drank very much. So, growing up there was always alcohol in our family.

With my dad, alcohol never got in the way of our relationship. I believe his drinking put added strain on my mom. But, my mom was just the kind of woman that got married for life. She had kids, so I feel like she focused on us instead of my dad’s drinking. I was never scared that my dad wasn’t going to take care of me or didn’t have my best interest at heart, even when he was drinking. Maybe that was because I had my mom to balance everything out. I always knew that she was going to take care of us, no matter what.

There were times I drank but I don’t think that I ever even got drunk in high school. When I finished high school and went to college in Anchorage I partied a little more. But for the most part I was just as content being the designated driver as I was drinking. I do remember a few times when I actually got extremely buzzed. I like to be in control of things and I did not like the feeling of not being in total control of myself. So I never liked getting drunk.

I think that the main reason alcohol hasn’t become a problem in my life is because I had a family base to support me growing up. My mom and I had a very open relationship. I always felt I could go to her and I could talk to her about things. There was also always a level of mutual trust there. I feel that having somebody like my mother always loving me and caring for me made a difference. I see that difference when I look at where I am now and where so many of my friends from Nenana are. Having a strong family network, like uncles and a Grandma that cared about where I was going and what I was doing and who I was doing it with, made all of the difference. I know a lot of my friends and my foster brother and sister didn’t have that. Nobody cared if they got up in the morning and went to school. If they were in school it was because they chose to go, not because anybody asked them to. They definitely didn’t have anyone to cook them breakfast or make sure that they had clean clothes to wear. I feel that I owe my healthy lifestyle to my family that has loved and supported me.”

— Tracy Snow was interviewed by Dante Foster on October 10, 2001.
Veronica is Athabascan and was raised in the village. Her story is one of profound loss and sorrow that is overcome by her ability to love, the strength of her faith and her unabated devotion. Veronica was 42 at the time of the interview.

“I was thirteen years old when I started drinking. I was a middle child and I had two younger brothers and a younger sister that I baby-sat a lot for. I think that I kind of helped raise them. We were Native people so how they believed at that time was that, there was jobs for the males and the females. And as far as I was concerned that meant that the guys got the good jobs, the easy jobs, the kind that you can get done with fast and they get to run out and play. But one of the female’s jobs is to baby-sit, take care of the brothers and sisters. So I was left with my brothers and sister a lot, doing all the household stuff. But (...) my mother taught us really good. She taught us to obey and not talk back and all this other stuff that was really good and it’s still today, to this day I’m really thankful for that.

So my main thing ever since I was a kid was thinking about becoming a Christian, even though I went through fifteen years of alcohol abuse. And from the time I started drinking I think I was an alcoholic. I smoked cigarettes more than I drank I think and I was a heavy drinker. I was partying like three to five days a week and when I drank I’d smoke about when I was delivered I was up to about two and a half packs a day when I’d drink and three-fourths to a pack of cigarettes when I wasn’t drinking. But I knew that I needed to quit. I knew that I if I didn’t quit then sooner or later I was going to finish that thing of committing suicide because I couldn’t deal with the pain that I was feeling because I had all of these griefs and sorrows inside of myself because of the things that happened to me that I wasn’t resolved with that wasn’t resolved within myself. I never had any healing from it.

So, I got on my knees and I asked Jesus to come in my heart and I asked him to take out all the alcohol and all of the bondage that I had with alcohol and cigarettes. (...) What I needed to do is I needed to not be drinking. I knew that God would help me but I needed to have a way to do it. So how I did was, for now I’m not going to drink, for today, I’m not going to drink, as far as I know I’m not going to drink. I couldn’t say, today I’m not going to drink, who knows maybe I might not but as far as I know I’m not going to drink because I put it in God’s hands and I asked him to help me. I asked him to take it away. The deliverance, what the deliverance was, was God took away the desire for alcohol.

As soon as I wake up I put on, and I pray and I put on the full armor of God. That way my mind is not so easily affected, my heart is not so easily affected and I don’t fall for a lot of things that I used to. (...) I think a lot of Native people have the ability to hear God’s voice speaking to them. Sometimes there is a spirit that copies God and tries to make people think that it’s God but it’s not. And sometimes that steers people around. But if we listen to God speaking to us it really makes a difference in your life, no matter what problems are going on.

I think that the deliverance from the alcohol and the cigarettes was just the beginning of a whole new lifestyle for me. I think that the deliverance from the alcohol and cigarettes is just the beginning of healing. It’s like it just unlocked the door. Being delivered from that stuff just unlocked the door to a total healing and transformation in my life.”

— Veronica Solomon was interviewed by Dolly Scoville on March 18, 2001.
Arnold Brower
Elayne Ingram
Evelyn Day
Logan Hebel
Suzanne Evans
Wilfred Anowlic
Eva Menadalook
Mary shared this about that interview: “I interviewed Arnold in Barrow in the dead of winter. He was courteous and kind, and his interview was very surprising. As he told his story it was enlightening and touched me tremendously, because I had a close connection to what he was talking about. He is very active in his community as a Native leader and family man. He’s very well respected in the whole borough, and has done a lot of important work in his job. I see him as a very special person who was touched in a very special way, who changed his life, to become more of who he should be, and how he should live his life, to become a whole person.” Arnold was 53 at the time of the interview and was born and raised in Barrow.

“I was mentally and spiritually, and in my mind and my body, I mean it was like I had a Vietnam war within my own body during that time.

And I was so frustrated, so angry, I wanted to do something to somebody… So I was just restless and finally under the table lamp I saw that Bible. And you know my mom and everybody, my family always taught me about the Bible, and we grew up in the Presbyterian church, going through this.

And somehow this thought came to me, Jesus, if you’re really real, what’s wrong with you? You can’t even help me. And if that wasn’t enough; like I didn’t talk to him right, or talk to that Bible. So I got more intense and really forceful at it and I gave it the problem I was facing, was not in anger towards the Bible, I spoke to it like Jesus or God was right there in my face. Why can’t you help me? And I’d say damn it or something and the third time that I said that, the third time I said that just like helplessness and there is no such thing as God.

And I sat down, closed my eyes, kind of at the edge of the bed, so that I didn’t wake my wife up; so I was kind of laying down real carefully. Then, the lights turned on. So wow, who turned the lights on. So I went over there and turned the light off, but the switches are down in the off position. And then wow, when I flipped it back up, the light that I turned on was even dimmer than the light that was in there.

So in my mind it was going like this and then it kind of locked into a wheel, like a wheel got locked in a brake. And that happened. And there I was, my mind had locked into “I am the light of the world” from the Bible when I was trying to figure out how this light could be.

But ever since then, I have never been the same, to desire to drink or smoke cigarettes or dope anymore, it just seems to have completely left me. I realized that when I called for help it was then that the Lord was trying to tell me something—He loved me very much. Today I read up in the Bible and help with Jesus’ ministry to tell the world that each and everyone in the world is loved by our heavenly God (Father). HE is waiting to hear from you, “Help me too God, Jesus, Holy Ghost.” He will truly help you if he can help a drunkard like me. Today I am active to help our community for a better community and interceding for my friends and relatives who do not know about God’s indescribable assistance that is just longing for their call even at this moment.”

— Arnold Brower was interviewed by Mary Stachelrodt on March 21, 2001.
Elayne is Inupiaq and was raised in Dillingham. Dante had this to share about the interview: “Elayne and I spoke in the living room of her home in Dillingham, Alaska. Elayne is a natural teacher whose calm demeanor and purposeful way of speaking are riveting. I will not soon (or ever) forget the time we shared.” Elayne's story is one of hope, recovery and acceptance. She was 55 at the time of the interview.

“I grew up in an alcoholic home. At first only my dad drank. My mom didn’t drink along with him in the very beginning. (…) And then later on in life she started drinking along with him and they’d have fights and at first, there were five of us siblings, and at first we’d get up and scream and jump up and down and try to make them stop fighting when they were drunk. And after a while, after seeing that was useless, my sisters and I would, I think all of us, we’d lay there and not move and barely breathing knowing that it was useless to get up and try to stop it because we couldn’t stop it. And there was a term later on that I learned while I was in the counseling field about children of alcoholics of having frozen tears. I can remember laying there and tears would just trickle down the sides of my face. And it wasn’t like I was crying; my inner feelings were mostly shut down and then pretty soon those tears dried up. And it was during that time that I would tell myself I was never, ever going to drink. I would never do anything like that to my kids.

I used to lie to myself that my kids didn’t see me drinking or drunk you know because I’d leave sober and I’d come home after they were in bed. But they knew what I was doing and you can’t hide that kind of a drinking problem from the kids. We got into the house I walked in and I can remember going down the hall way and bouncing off the walls and my kids all saw me. And my husband bless his heart, at the time, he confronted me the next morning. (…) And I thought; my God I am becoming, I have become what my parents were. (…) And I think to me that was my spiritual awakening, where I could see just as clear as a bell where I was going.

When I went up to Barrow that’s when I started developing this spiritual part of myself. It was up in Barrow too where I found a lump in my breast and I went to the doctor and I found out that I had breast cancer. (…) I went to Anchorage and had a mastectomy and was given a choice of doing six weeks of radiation in Anchorage or else six months of one time a month, about twice a month of chemotherapy and that I could do that in Barrow so I elected to do the chemotherapy in Barrow. And lived cancer free for seven, eight years, and then it came back and now it’s in my bones and in my lung and in my lymph nodes. The breast cancer spread all over. But I’ve been under treatment for a year and a half, two years. That was a springboard that helped me develop my faith more. Something positive came out of something very negative.

And I’ve come close to relapse. I cannot even remember what exactly I was dealing with, but it was something that I thought was stressful. And I had to go back and plug my computer back in and someone had hidden a vodka bottle behind my computer in my sober home. One of my kids that had been staying here and they had taken it away from someone and hidden it here or something, but I set that vodka bottle on that shelf for like several days and I was really considering drinking. And finally I talked to a friend of mine and when she was here I dumped it. But that was the closest I ever came to ever relapsing. And I think that just talking to that friend and pouring my heart out to her and she didn’t say don’t drink, or, she just listened to me. Which is exactly what I needed. And then there was another woman who said, one of her favorite sayings was “When the student is ready a teacher appears.” God sends a teacher. And I think that really is true too. When we are in our most dire time of need some how, some way, somebody comes and helps us and supports us you know, gives us encouragement. And the same way with people who are drinking I think, when it comes down to the wire, when it’s time to quit, they’ll find the teacher that they need.”

— Elayne Ingram was interviewed by Dante Foster on November 16, 2001. Elayne passed from us in January of 2004, but her words are her spirit and through these she will forever remain a teacher to those in need.
Evelyn Day was born and raised in Kotzebue. Her mother’s family is from Point Hope, her father’s family is from Kotzebue. Dante had this to say about the interview: “More than anything, I was struck by the interviewee’s relaxed air and the sense that she is at peace with her life and choices.” Evelyn was 51 at the time of the interview.

“We were brought up by my mother to be strong. She would say things like, “Just because a man wears the pants in the family doesn’t mean that he’s the boss.” She would say those kind of things but then she would tell us, like, “If you get married you’re going to have to serve your husband.” And I couldn’t understand how could she say those two things at the same time, because they don’t make sense to me. But I understand what she was saying, now. But at that time I was stuck. I wanted to be equal so I didn’t know how to do that and I have tried all my life to become equal, that I didn’t know that it was inside. I thought that I had to show outside that I was equal to anybody or just as good as. So that’s what she taught me. And she taught me about the value of your heart, what it meant to be a human being.

I became sober in (1987) so I was, I was pretty angry during those years. As a child, I was a tomboy, because of an issue with my father. My father was not a communicator. He was not a talker. He was a typical Native man. He would just provide and give money to my mother, but not talk to us children. And I wanted him to tell me that he loved me. And I wanted him to acknowledge that I existed. And he never did. And I looked for him in places.

I hated him as a child because I wanted a father that could talk to me. And I hated him for beating my mother. I hated him for divorcing her. I hated his second family. I hated my sisters and my brothers from that family and I said I don’t want to hate them. I want to understand who I am, I said, because it’s not about them. It’s about me. And I wanted to understand that. And I said that I’m sorry, but these are real feelings that I had and I want you to know this is what I thought. And I want you to know that this is who I was because I want to be free. And I said: “All my life, all my life I wanted you to love me. And I didn’t know that I wanted me to love me. But I look for you. And now today what I know is that it’s not necessary that you love me, it’s a nice bonus, but it’s not necessary. And I said that’s what I want you to know is that! That I love you and you have no control over that. So this is why I’m writing to you is so I can let this go because I’m here now and I’m awake. And whatever happens, happens.”

And it went to my dad. And I didn’t call my dad for like two months and then his birthday came a couple months later. So I called the house and he picked up the phone and I was so surprised. And he said, “Hello?” And I was in shock. And I put on my fake voice, the fake voice that I always had in my whole life, the one that I could fool people with. And I said, “Hi dad, how are you? I’m just calling to say Happy Birthday. How are you today?” And at the same time my heart is beating really, really fast and I’m thinking he’s got the letter and he’s not going to talk to me. He’s going to disown me, he’s going to hang up. He’s going to do all these things. And he said, “Evie?” And I said, “Yeah dad how are you? Happy Birthday! How are you doing?” And he said, “Evie?” And I said, “Yeah, dad, yeah it’s me.” And he said, “Don’t you ever wait this long to call me. Don’t you know that I love you?” And I started crying. I was crying really from my heart. It’s the first time he ever said that. And my husband is sitting there and he knows because I told him every process that I went through and he’s looking at me and he’s going, “Are you okay? Is everything okay? Are you okay?” And I’m crying from my heart, sobbing really hard. And he’s, “Are you okay?” And I said, “My Daddy loves me!” Thirty-eight years old and I was bowing like a baby. But it was so freeing. And that’s the time that my dad and I became very close. And he died maybe five years later. (…) And my father was my first death and I ever experienced wholly as a human being, you know, as a sober person. Before that I was asleep.”

— Evelyn Day was interviewed by Dante Foster and Sharon Lindley on March 6, 2002 in Bethel.
Logan Hebel

Logan’s mother is Inupiaq and from Nome. His father is first generation German. Logan grew up in a rural community in Alaska, and was 22 at the time of the interview. Logan currently lives in Nome and is a happy family man, working in an outdoor gear store, doing outdoor activities and creating wood handled knives.

“I grew up in [the village]. I mean, there is a lot of alcohol there. It’s a very wet town. I remember the guy who ran the store, it was a liquor store also. And he was saying that they go through like 20,000 cases of beer a year. And it’s only 180 people in that town, so -- that gives you an idea of how much they drank. I remember hearing gunshots and stuff like that when I was growing up. People shooting at things in the river, just lots of drinking. People dying in snowmachine accidents and falling through the ice. Every couple years there’s something happening. It’s usually alcohol related.

Growing up in [that village] though, I didn’t grow up around any uncles or aunts or grandparents or anything. It was just my immediate family and friends. And I guess my parents drank, but they never, you know, they weren’t alcoholics. They’d drink a beer every once in a while. Like on my dad’s birthday, he’d have a party. Then he wouldn’t drink, you know. I grew up right with that. And I don’t drink at all now. I mean, I’ve tasted – I’ve tasted beer; never had more than a sip though.

Maybe one thing also that’s helped me out, is goals. Set lots of goals for myself. I just thought about that. I think actually they’re pretty important too. Some of them might be a little bit more dreamy, dreams, than goals, for me. Like owning that Cobra and a house with a garage just to put it in even, but I also do want to get into gunsmithing, that’s one thing I want to do. Run my own business. I don’t like working for other people. I enjoy my job now, but I don’t like working for other people. I want to get into gunsmithing and do that. I like owning cars and I want to learn how to fix them. I’m not a mechanic by any means. I’m definitely learning some stuff keeping them running. I keep dreaming about different things, what I want to do to my cars and what kind of guns I want to get, or just things I want to do, like paddling down the rivers.

As far as alcohol is concerned, I’ve never really had a problem. I’ve never even – I don’t know how to say it. I’ve never even considered drinking. I never considered even having a problem dealing with it. My whole life, even when I was a little kid, I always seemed to have a good feeling of what was right and wrong for me. And that always was wrong, same as smoking. I don’t smoke either. And that’s – I’ve never had the temptation. I don’t know how else to put it. I’ve always been a very confident and strong-willed individual, I believe, anyway.”

— Logan Hebel was interviewed by Chase Hensel on March 8, 2001.
People Awakening: Stories of Hope and Courage in Sobriety and Substance Abuse

Suzanne Evans

Suzanne was raised in Kotezebue and is half Inupiaq and half Athabascan. Suzanne's story is a powerful example of living through adversity and still being able to see all the beauty there is in the world.

“I don’t drink very much, because I don’t want people to take advantage of me. I have had to learn things the hard way, having to grow up too fast and not really have a normal childhood or a regular teenage life. And I was like say 14 when I had my first drink of alcohol. I wanted to see what it was like, so I had a can, you know. Just one can. I woke up, I felt real good, real dizzy. I was real skinny back then when I was only a teenager and I got drunk too fast. And the next day I had like a real big headache and I had to make myself say that I’m not going to drink, because my body couldn’t handle being dehydrated. And waking up with a hangover wasn’t so funny.

And I drank a little, but then I didn’t drink very much because I was too scared of someone taking advantage of me. And I figured right now I will just keep my mind focused on making money just to buy clothes that I need, and have my own little personal needs met, like for personal hygiene items, clothes, glasses, paying for braces and having my hair done. I wanted to do things like that. (...) Like if I drink, I don’t want a guy to think that I’m so intoxicated that I can’t take care of myself and they can take advantage of me. When I get drunk, I know my limits and I back off and only have like one or two and then call it quits.

The important influences in my life and supports were my parents, they were important for support. And grandma was like a great influence in my life. And I loved them. I don’t blame my parents for my mischief behavior.

And it took me a while to overcome all of the bad situations that happened in my life, to overcome getting molested as a toddler. But that also made me realize as I got older that there were people like that, all over. And that happens all over. Because I know in villages that there is other families that suffer that same kind of situation, but they’re just keeping it all in, and not wanting to come out. And that also made me realize that I got to watch myself and look after myself when I’m alone, because no one else will. One of the best things that I have ever done for myself was accepting Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior. Most of all pursuing my education at UAF in Fairbanks, Alaska!

So the important people in my life are my grandma and my mom, my dad and my grandpa and my brother and sister and some of the people that I met, like pastors and counselors. They’re the important people that I have as role models in my life. And although I grew up too fast, I can tell you that I lived a subsistence life and it was beautiful.”

— Suzanne Evans was interviewed by Mary Stachelrodt on May 8, 2001.
Wilfred Anowlie

Wilfred was raised on King Island and in Nome and is Inupiaq. Wilfred’s story carries the message that culture, faith and traditional living can provide safe havens from alcohol and drug abuse, but only when one is ready to come to that awareness. Wilfred was 53 at the time of the interview.

“My grandparents raised me who were Eskimo leaders. My grandfather was the last chief of King Island and the first president who was elected probably by the government people that saw him as a strong native man. And he was the chief for a long time up until he died, he was the last chief. Growing up with my grandparents was, he passed his Native like heritage to me. So after us King Island people made a big move back in 1958 to Nome, to relocate in Nome when government BIA closed down the school, and there was no more priests available, and we made a big move in 1958 to live here in Nome.

And there were some changes in life going on like alcohol, many became involved with alcohol, like my parents, especially for my father who served in World War II. I didn’t know he was drinking alcohol. Like alcohol was nothing, like no problem until we started living here and I start seeing alcohol being used in our family with my parents.

It was really tough life during 1960’s here in Nome. I think it wasn’t only me, there was other families that were happening too. I was scared because I was just too young, I didn’t know how to report those kind of stuff back then.

And when I started drinking it was alcohol to kill my pain and to feel good and to feel unafraid, to have a good time. I was an alcoholic to be a talkative person. But once I got sober, I was pretty quiet.

Fourteen years ago God came for me, cleaned me out, He saved my life and then the only thing that really helped me was the Bible, the Holy Bible and learning to pray. Learning to meditate. (…) And so I’m living better life today. And I know how to take care of myself, to take care of somebody that I love now. And my kids still love, my children still love me, they still care for me and I let them know what happened in the past.

And I thank God today this program that really helped me, the Alcoholic Anonymous. And it can be done as long as a person wants to work the program just like for me. I put my life back together bit by piece, like a doctor, like a surgeon. I still have a scar, but it hasn’t opened up yet for last six years. And today I’m a stronger person. I still have problems to deal with. I used to think I was the only person who has all the problems in the world, and today I don’t have to run away from problems. I have to face them. I learned how to turn things over to God, let Him handle them for me, which He does.

I try to be good example to my Native people to hold on to the culture, hunting, Eskimo hunting. And going out picking game, and learn how to do Eskimo dancing. Eskimo dancing is the best thing that we can do to feel good about ourselves, to take out our frustration. Eskimo dancing, and singing, and drumming today it’s still being used. And again today this is my sobriety practice.

And if I was still drinking today I wouldn’t have nothing. I wouldn’t have my girlfriend here. I wouldn’t have a car. And I wouldn’t even have a coffee cup or I wouldn’t even have Eskimo drum. And I learned that when you learn to stay sober and do right and work your program you get everything back. So I’m working on my life, I’m still working on my life every day. And God isn’t done with me yet. He’s still working in my life and so when a person is involved in alcohol and drugs they have nothing. I still see it today, like I said if I was still a violent person drinking I have nothing. The only thing I’m happy to have is my life, you know, good life. It’s good to have material stuff and all, but the most important thing is to fix your life.”

— Wilfred Anowlie was interviewed by Dolly Scoville on June 22, 2001.
Eva is Inupiaq raised in the village. Eva’s story is an example of a returning, a returning to family, culture and herself. Eva was 43 at the time of the interview.

“My childhood was pretty rough. There was lots of alcoholism in our family, especially with my dad. He – after my brother drowned, he was real violent. He blamed my mother. So every holiday there would be lots of drinking. And my mother, she didn’t drink during those times. She was afraid that you know we would get hurt. So she stayed sober, and made sure that we were safe. And sometimes she would tell us sleep with our clothes on, and put our shoes by the bed, and our jackets underneath us for a pillow, in case we needed to run out. And for all those years, we did that, until I was thirteen. Then she decided that I was finally old enough to take care of the younger ones, and she started drinking then.

My father was a good father when he was sober you know. He was real – always hunting, made sure we had food on the table, roof over our heads. He was a beautiful man when he was sober. He sure loved us. But after losing two of his children, you know he kind of shied away. (...) So we were kind of abandoned at times. It was real hard to watch my brothers and sisters go through that, because they would cry for their parents. And being a kid still myself sometimes I didn’t know how to deal with it. I was such a child myself, I think. I didn’t know what to do.

There was lots of alcoholism in the village where I lived. And you know if I had wanted to, I would have drank every week. But I didn’t want to live that kind of lifestyle, because I was tired of being hung over, tired of being scared, tired of not liking myself, tired of thinking I was no good. I don’t want that anymore, so I kind of shopped around, and looked for other people that went to the treatment center before, and I found one person, and I asked him if he wanted to start an AA program, and he said, yeah. That really saved me. Him and I – we went to AA meetings every single day, from November to May.

I really believe there’s a Higher Power. When I was growing up, one of my uncles always talked about God – in the Inupiaq way. He always told stories of different families asking God, as they understand Him, to help them. Always told stories like that. You know and when I was young, I listened, but I didn’t pay – you know, didn’t grasp, what he was -- what it was supposed to mean to me. And today, you know, that really helped me with my spirituality. God as I understand today.

Finally, I have enough courage to start opening up. And once I started, there was no stopping! It was real painful – the most painful thing for me in my life; the most scariest thing in my life. I never felt humiliated in my whole life to hear myself, but it’s so good today because I can laugh. Laugh about the things I did in the past. And not be filled with so much regret, and shame, and remorse. I still carry them in my heart, but they’re not so painful anymore. They’re not so scary anymore. And that’s what I love about this whole program, about the treatment program. And for my sobriety that’s the best feeling I can ever have, to be able to laugh, laugh at myself. And no one understands that there’s other people out there just like me, you know. That’s the most beautiful part in my life, because I always thought I was alone. And I’m not.”

— Eva Mendalook was interviewed by Dolly Scoville on June 25, 2001.
Tlingit  
Haida  
Tsimshian  

Chuck Miller  
Roberta Kitka  
Jeff Nickerson  
Tommy Jimmie, Sr.  
Helen McNeil  
Cyrus Peck, Jr.  
Joe Hotch  
Ruth Kasko
Lisa shared this about the interview: “Chuck was relaxed, open, and proud to share his life story, as he knew it would be shared with other Alaska Native people to support and encourage sobriety, wellness and cultural knowledge and pride. Approximately one year prior to the interview, Chuck had been honored and chosen to live in the Clan House, a responsibility that he, his wife, and their children take very seriously. He and his wife are modeling sobriety and cultural tradition for their children and their community, as well as providing a place for other Tribal members to come when they need help, support, and a place to stay.” Chuck was 27 at the time of the interview.

“I was born and raised here in Sitka, Alaska in 1973. Raised traditionally as a Tlingit man. Actually, I live just down the street from my house, my mother’s house. My mother’s Tlingit and my father is Haida. I’m married and I have three children. My wife is Tlingit. I have three boys, Jay, Michael and Edward, eleven, ten, and five. I’ve been married for eight years and I’ve been clean and sober for about nine years.

I think my mother, she uses her rage now in recovery against using, against people who drink. She’s tired of seeing her family stagger and drunk all the time and doing bad things. (...) So by that time when I was thirteen or fourteen, I was deathly afraid of my mother. A healthy respect, know what I mean? I would never do that to her, to stagger home, I would be too afraid of the consequences. And she was very strict when I was growing up, but not over-strict. She was strict to the point of—you’ll get rewarded for good behavior, you’ll get punished for bad behavior, clear and crisp lines. And I knew it. So coming home and having alcohol on my breath, I know my mother would have sniffed it out. There was a couple times where I did that and came home, but I didn’t drink very much to where I was going to get drunk, no way.

Before I got married, I stopped using. We did the best we could for our children, we wanted to show them the same thing that my mother showed me; a good life without people using in front of them. One of the rules in our house was the same as in my mother’s; there will be no person that’s under the influence in our house. No alcohol will be allowed to be in our house, and no smoking in our house. That’s a rule! And everybody knows that, all of our family knows that. And they know that we will not hesitate on asking them to leave the house until they can be respectful enough to come in here while they’re not under the influence.

So that was a big part for me not using was my children and my culture, because knowing that going into my culture and wanting to know as much as I can about it and then realizing that—hey! Our people never used. Our people never drank. Our people never smoked marijuana. They never used drugs. Everything was real. How could you sing a song if you’re drinking? How can you show the old traditional values to someone if you’re under the influence? You can’t! There’s no way. You’re automatically disrespecting your whole body, your mind, everything. And you’re expecting to treat people with respect? You can’t do it. All those things that you were taught when you were younger are a reflection of your family. You represent the family and how they raised you. When people look at you—and I remember this—they don’t see you, they see your whole family right behind you, for more than one generation. They see your grandparents, they see your parents that raised you, they see your great uncles, they see your clan. And if you make a mistake and you show shame, that’s bad. That’s the way I remember it. And how can I represent my family to the best of my ability if I’m using, I can’t.”

— Chuck Miller was interviewed by Lisa Thomas on August 5, 2001.
Lisa shared this about the interview: “Roberta told wonderful stories of watching the Elders in her life practicing traditional customs, as well as the sadness surrounding the eventual oppression of these traditions. Her story, which includes many years of struggle with alcohol, demonstrates the power of relationship, commitment and love that supported her path to sobriety and a life of wellness.” Roberta was 52 at the time of the interview.

“The proper protocol from the beginning is to introduce myself. My English name is Roberta Kitka, Roberta Sue Kitka. My Tlingit introduction is “Taa soo yoo yat duwasakw, Kaagwaantaan aya yat, L’uknaa, al’i ya de yaa yat, Kook Hit Kwaan.” Taa soo is my Tlingit name; we follow our mother’s lineage, my Mother is called Kaagwaantaan which is our moiety. It means eagle wolf. Her name is Esther Kitka and my Father is Raven Coho and his English name is Jake Joseph. He’s the son of Charlie Joseph. And I come from the box house here in Sitka. And today I am very proud of who I am. It was not always that way.

I had moved away from Sitka and had been gone for about 25 years and that’s about the length of time that I used alcohol and drugs. I sobered up in a small reservation in Suquamish, Washington. And that was where I first learned about the medicine wheel and I started going to AA meetings. I didn’t go to treatment. I was one of those people who had reached their bottom where alcohol and drugs did not work. I was just miserable. And that’s where my spirituality started. I was in a state of misery. A doctor had told me that I wasn’t going to live much longer if I kept up the way I was going. I drank to get rid of, to not feel all the pain of the things that I went through as a child. And it got to the point that it didn’t work anymore and I was just miserable.

As I went along in my recovery, I discovered that I had become quite homesick. And I was struggling with who I was. And one of the biggest questions in my recovery was, “Who am I and why do things confuse me so much in this society?” I got my answer when I joined the Tlingit and Haida dance group in Anchorage and I went to my first celebration in Juneau. And I was standing there and I was just listening to the drums and the singing, and tears just started to pour out of my eyes. Because I had come to, in my recovery—I continually came to realization after realization after realization about the why of things. And I realized that I felt like I was at home. And back at my grandpa’s house and hearing the language. And then I understood that the reason that I am confused about society is that I’m full-blooded Tlingit. I think in Tlingit and it’s okay.

So when I came back, I started to resume learning who I was. And I know how to introduce myself in Tlingit and I can’t speak it fluently, but I know all my songs. When I sing, it’s a healing for me. I feel that I’ve released some of the anger and I just feel good when I’m finished. It feels like part of me is healed. (…) I found that just tying myself back to my culture was the answer to who I was. And put everything into perspective to—I know we’re in different cultures. I know how to function in the white culture and I know how to function in my own culture. And that’s very helpful with me, because of my education and the job I’m in now. And I graduated with my Bachelor’s degree from Sheldon Jackson and my uncle, Herman Kitka, and all my relatives were there. And they said, “You’re the first Kitka in our direct family that’s graduated from college.” And just to look at the pride in their faces was the best gift that anybody could have.

When I think back of all the struggles that I went through… there were a lot of things I had to grieve. I had to grieve all the years I lost. I had to grieve how I raised my first three children, but also be thankful for raising my last child without drugs or alcohol. He was born about ten years after my first three and he was basically raised as a single child. And went through being a single parent, learning how to go through a divorce without drinking or drugging.

Somehow I believe that all these experiences that I’ve been through make me good at what I’m doing today. And I never thought I’d achieve… I didn’t think that I’d come as far as I have this quickly.”

— Roberta Kitka was interviewed by Lisa Thomas on March 30, 2001.

Roberta Kitka
Lisa shared the following about the interview experience; “I flew into the community in which my father was raised to meet and interview Jeff. Jeff shared a very touching life history story that included tragedy as well as love and courage. It was a pleasure and an honor to get to know members of the Nickerson family, and the life history shared by Jeff is a gift from him to other Native and non-Native people who are seeking to understand sobriety, wellness and resilience.” Jeff was born and raised in Klawock and was 46 at the time of the interview.

“I seen my mom and dad with their other grandkids. And my dad would, I think he had nicknames for them. And I told my kids this when they were growing up, I said: My dad, when he was, when he died, was drinking. (...) I told my kids if it wasn’t for alcohol, that they would have the best grandma and grandpa around, you know. The lifestyle I lived and saying that every chance I had, about my mom and dad, and about not having a grandma and grandpa must have made an impression on them, because they never, as far as I know, anyway, they never drank.

I remember that, when I was small, when they would drink. And as I got older, my wife always said it seems like I was the oldest one, but maybe this is why; because from the time I was in about fourth grade or whatever, fifth grade, I don’t know, I had to take care of my mom and dad when they would go out and get drunk and be home alone. I have never thought about it, until now but maybe that’s why it seemed like I was the oldest.

But... my mom took care of me; my mom and dad took care of me. I never ever remember being hungry because we never had food. (...) When we were in Petersburg, my mom would drink, you know. And now I understand -- I guess it’s a disease, an addiction. And this is the other thing I always told my kids was: Anything your mind likes or your body likes, you can get addicted to it. That’s what I always told my kids. Because -- someone asked me one time why I don’t drink. And I told them because I don’t -- why I never tried it. And I told them, because I don’t trust myself; because I might like it.

In 13 months’ time, my dad and mom were gone and alcohol was in both of their bodies. And that’s what I told my kids all the time they were growing up. And there never was a point in my life that I said I’m never ever going to drink, that I remember. But I never ever, just never had a desire to.

I don’t think there really is anything else in my life that I can remember that had an influence. Or that influenced me. I guess one of things that I never mentioned that really, that I never ever had a desire to drink, was my kids; because I knew, and my wife, we both knew that our kids weren’t going to grow up in that kind of environment. And I knew that I was never ever going to take a chance, and my kids weren’t going to go through what I did... because that was -- that was really bad. I always knew I was never ever going to take a chance and they would never ever be exposed to it like we were.

My wife, she’s the same as me. She’s never had the desire. She knew what it was to grow up with alcohol. And a couple people that she really loved, when they died, they had alcohol in them. I don’t know if I would have been able to do it myself, you know, to raise my family without her help, as far as the alcohol part goes, to say no, you know.”

— Jeff Nickerson was interviewed by Lisa Thomas on February 24, 2001.
Tommy was raised mostly in Juneau and is a Tlingit Elder. Tommy emphasized the role of faith and music in his recovery and in his life. He remains very active in the tribal community and counsels young Native people from his own experiences and knowledge. Tommy was 72 at the time of the interview.

“When I got wind of this thing that’s going on concerning alcoholics, I thought it would be a good opportunity to maybe point somebody in the right direction, that has had problems, same kind of problem I had. Because I really believe I’m over that point not to drink again, because the longer I’m staying away from it, everything start to look stupid to me, how I used to be. So I thought I’d share, not only with the people out there, but with my children, how it was with me as I was going through this alcohol thing.

Back in the days I was doing it, I thought it was a good time; but when you stop to think about it, there was a lot of bad times too. So things began that way. Because I started awfully young. I started when, up in Yakutat, I remember when all those drunk, those old-timers used to make home brew. And it was pretty popular up there. And being kids, not just myself, some other kids, we used to see them drinking and stuff. And we used to sneak some. We used to get into the home brew and start drinking ourselves. And it felt good, so naturally it got ahold of us. So I started pretty young at that point.

One story I want to tell you is what I went through there. I was already taking care of my brother. And I never forgot that one. That’s one scene I guess I will never forget, Christmas time. My parents were out partying someplace and I couldn’t – we couldn’t find them. And the way they did it on Christmas, they used to bring all the presents to the ANB Hall. And everybody had the same traditions in the Native village, you know, they’d take it to the ANB Hall and bring their presents there. But we were coming past there, and apparently the place was already – it was all over. And looking for my parents, I couldn’t find them. Naturally, we were cold, so I took my brother in there to that ANB Hall. The lights were still on in there, but it was empty. We walked in there and I was holding his hand, and the big Christmas tree in the corner, empty boxes, just piled up high there in the corner. And when my brother saw that, he broke away from me, you know, I was holding his hand see; he broke away from me and he started running towards that tree. And he started digging in, in the empty boxes. That’s one I will never forget. I will never forget that. It really touched me; I felt so bad. And that’s one of the things. So this is the kind of a thing this alcohol does to people. I don’t have it against my parents, because I used to be one myself. That’s how I learned, I guess. I don’t have it against them. Once you get that stuff in you, you’re hooked. If you’re hooked on it, you have got a problem.

And that’s why I give God the glory. I have to. He got my attention finally, so to speak. He got my attention and I was sitting there and I was so miserable and scared, because deep in my heart I know I wasn’t ready to go, you see. That’s how I – my mind was working. And I cried out in my mind. I just cried out, Lord, you get me out of this one, I promise I will start going to church. I didn’t say it, but that was what was going through my mind. And I cried out to him in my mind. (...) And when I finally come out of it, Sunday came along, and my wife and I talked it over; we decided, well, okay, let’s go; let’s give it a try. So I kept my promise. I told the Lord in my mind: I promise I will start going to church, if you get me out of this one. So I kept my promise. Salvation Army hall there. We went to the church and went to the alter and made our commitment. And started to do pretty good.

I fell off the wagon after we got to Ketchikan. Just five days, I buzzed up there. And I got into more trouble in five days than I would in five years. And I knew in my heart I couldn’t handle it any more. (...) I fell off the wagon once and that was after that. (...) And then I quit and that was it, up until right now. But the thing is, it can be done, you know. All you have to do is put your mind to it. There is no other way. The way I look at it from my point of view, is when you quit, give it to the Lord and let it go.

The power of the Holy Ghost came upon me, right in my own house. And you know what, from that point on, my whole way of thinking changed. When I received the Holy Ghost power, my whole way of thinking changed. Sure it’s right not to drink stuff, but there was more to it. A lot of things, my whole way of thinking changed.”

— Tommy Jimmie, Sr. was interviewed by Gerald Mohatt and Lisa Thomas in March of 2002.
Dolly shared her memories of the interview: “Helen is a life-long abstainer from alcohol who has healthy and inspirational stories to share. She was very open and she spoke in a slow reflective manner as if re-living the experiences.” Helen's mother's family is from Klukwan and her father is Nisga'a. Helen grew up in Juneau and Anchorage and was 47 at the time of the interview.

“I was in my thirties, almost forties, before I realized that my life experiences were unique even within my own family. That no one else, being that I was ill, my father never drank while he took care of me. And he was one of those who, whenever it was time to fish or work, because he was a carpenter also, he didn’t drink while he worked. But when there was no work then he’d hang out with his buddies, my mother’s brothers, and they would go on, what turned out to be, a fairly long binge. Well that was the part that my siblings saw. The part that I saw of him was he was always sober.

During that time there wasn’t a label for alcoholism but I consciously recognized how just destructive that can make you. To see people be very nice and civil and then the more they drink the meaner and more spiteful they become. It was like seeing that Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde movie. I could totally identify with the process, because what he was saying is, this is what people do when they drink alcohol, and that’s a conscious choice you’re making. Well, do you want to be yourself or do you want to be mean and spiteful and hurt everyone close to you? And I always made a choice never to be that way. Because it’s a change I saw that the people have no control over once they start drinking.

There were times even before, when I would be home, and my dad would be taking care of me and he was telling me all the names of your fingers, toes, body parts in Sm'algyax and my mom came in the room and she started throwing stuff at us. “Don’t dare poison her head with all that, that will just ostracize her. And that’s the worst thing that you can do to any of our children is to teach them anything other than English.” Well, she never spoke Tlingit with us. I learned it from my grandmother. Because the time that I spent with my grandmother, that’s all that she spoke.

When I had my children, I wouldn’t let my kids see any of my family while they were drinking. I didn’t have any precedence for setting that boundary, I just knew it felt right. So my kids, if they did see any of my family drunk, it wasn’t because that was my choice. There’d be times that I would let them spend the night with their other cousins because they’re very close with, with their first cousin, but I didn’t let them see either of my parents when they were drinking either. So my kids are the only grandchildren that don’t have a memory of their grandparents as alcoholics. They had always seen them sober and as sober people they are very levelheaded and loving people. I’d set those boundaries from the beginning but it was going through Al-Anon that helped me set more boundaries in saying, “No, I’m not going to leave my house at three in the morning to come pick you up from the bars. (laugh) No I’m not going to bring you some alcohol just because you have a hangover and you can’t drive.” I would not give them any money for alcohol. If they ran out of money then I’d say well you can come over here and eat. I’ll feed anyone who’s here. And it was from Al-Anon I found how to make those choices and it was also through Al-Anon how I learned how to identify traits in a possible mate, that’s an alcoholic, nope, don’t want that. And I was finally able to see, why I was making the choices that I was.”

— Helen McNeil was interviewed by Dolly Scoville on March 22, 2001.
Cy’s father is from Sitka and his mother is from Angoon and is of Raven clan. Cy’s story is one of recovery by cultural and spiritual means. Cy devotes much of himself today to healing and teaching his own people. Cy was 66 at the time of the interview.

“The very first drink I ever had was when I was a student at Sheldon Jackson College in Sitka. My roommates and I had rented a house and we had lots of parties there. I remember the very first drink I had. It was a vodka screwdriver. I feel, even to this day, that that was when I felt addicted to alcohol. I went to the liquor store the very next morning because I felt that I needed a drink. Even though it was my very first one, I still felt that I needed it. My body started to crave it from that first moment.

I quit my job because I wanted to drink. I wanted all my time drinking. I didn’t say okay I’m addicted to this. It was in the years later that I looked back and realized my addiction. There wasn’t all these buzz words about alcoholism then. Later those words gave it a good name. But at the time I was a drunk, a dirty drunk. I didn’t care who called me names. I just wanted them to give me a quarter.

I was going to AA. I kept going there but I felt I needed something stronger. I needed to heal my spirit, my body, my mind and my vision. I realized my spirit was sick. More than anything else I realized that I had to be the one to discover my path, my path to healing. That decision is when my life began.

I felt that I needed to go down to Montana and start learning the medicine ways. I took back the responsibility for myself. It was a choice that would change every aspect of my life. I wanted to take back my spirit from the bottle. It was that choice that started my healing.

I’ve found my path in life. And I feel beautiful walking this trail.”

— Cyrus Peck, Jr. was interviewed by Gerald Mohatt on February 13, 2001.
Joe was born and raised in Klukwan and has spent most of his adult life deeply immersed in his culture and community. Joe has served as Village Council President for Klukwan and is currently involved in tribal justice efforts. Joe was 70 at the time of the interview.

“Our Native people are not used to alcohol and drugs. And I had a touch of it while I was in Service, in (19)51 to (19)53. And I credit my parents and grandparents for the wisdom of telling the entire family, drinking is not the right thing to do. Although we did it, they never scolded us. My mother always said, “Thank you for not coming home drunk.” When we drank we didn’t go home and show our parents that we drank. We stayed away from home and never exposed our drinking at home.

That there was so much unity in this village in the past. No one went to the river alone. You had to have someone. If you were going to go down there, we use to go down there and play with little canoes, we had to have three or four people to make sure that if one falls overboard that somebody is there to help or run for help. There was unity in everything. There was unity in their way of getting their food. Life was good. My parents were non-drinkers. My grandparents were non-drinkers. Most of the elders… I think there might be one or two of the elders out of 150 that drank, but not continuous, in the village.

My parents and grandparents, the church and the community, they all go together. If I try to separate myself from one or the other, we wouldn’t have a community if people separated themselves. You’ve got to have all those three. That’s the important part that I saw in life, if I am going to be successful in anything.

The people are important. That’s why I say we have to be involved as a community to overcome this. It’s not going to be overcome completely. It’s going to happen whether the community likes it or not, it’s going to be done. But we want to reduce it as far as we can by showing our love for the person. We don’t have to wait until they start drinking, we have to start early talking about abusing alcohol and drug. These things came around… Drugs is in Haines pretty heavy, it’s in the community of Haines. And it’s up here also. We’ve got to have our laws in place so that we do not allow drugs in this village. And I think it’s happened by the Council while I was in there that drugs will not be allowed in the community. But the people have been the strength, to me anyway, not to drink.

My culture is a journey without an end; until the last child is gone, and then we will see an end. But I don’t see no end, there is always a light there. That little child has to be the light. We got to see that child as a light in the tunnel if we want our culture to continue on, our language, our way of life, everything. Our future is in that little light, that little child. So how are we going to keep that child’s light burning? We’ve got to teach everything to that child.

I don’t see an end to my life. I see a long ways yet to go. Some people might think I’m too old now, but I got to see something in there that I want my children and grandchildren and my wife to live for, and that’s our future. And that’s what I see there; the elders, the church, the school and the community meeting. We’ve got to have that all the time.”

— Joe Hotch was interviewed by Michelle Rasmus on August 9, 2002.
Ruth Kasko

Ruth was born in Haines and raised in Klukwan. Ruth’s story is framed by her decision to never drink and the importance of her family, her culture and herself in making that choice. Ruth was 66 at the time of the interview.

“Things was happy when we were growing up, and our Mom very seldom went out to work so she was home with us a lot. And in summertime we did our gathering of foods and just kept busy. There were certain days set up for washing clothes and it seemed like every day of the week you’d have to wash something because we didn’t have a washing machine. But we didn’t feel like we were being cheated out of anything, it was just something that we had to do. We carried water in and we carried water out. It was just part of life and we accepted it.

So we were surrounded by grandparents, uncles and aunts that didn’t speak the English language so our first language was Tingit. We had a little BIA school that didn’t allow any Tingit speaking in the classroom and if we did we got punished for it. So I leaned over backwards with my children; I didn’t even try to teach them the Tingit language because I didn’t want them to be going through the same thing I did. And I regret that now because I think that the Tingit language has so much strength in it. Now I am trying really hard with my three great-grandchildren to be able to speak to the elders that surround us yet.

But as we grew older we became aware of alcohol. We saw it on the streets sometimes. But it finally hit our family probably when I was ten or eleven. Something happened. One of my brothers developed epilepsy and so he was never supposed to be left alone. My oldest brother said that he was going to take him with him that day so my Mom didn’t worry about him. (…) He was never supposed to go anywhere alone. And that seemed to start my oldest brother into the, well maybe like any, any teenager or older one would try beer and you know drink not to the excessive but after this happened to Jim who had the epilepsy, it just left George with a guilty conscience because he didn’t pick him up and he didn’t let us know that he didn’t find him and just left. So we didn’t know if he was with George or not. And that’s where my brother’s alcohol got worse and worse and worse.

This was around five when we discovered that Jim wasn’t with George. And we sent word down to him so he can come home. And the person that gave him the message told him that my brother Jim had died because he had one of his spells along the river and his face was in the water. So this is the guilt that drove George to drinking.

Watching George and how much, how much problems it caused the family I just swore to myself I wasn’t going to get involved in alcohol. And then I met my husband and he was an alcoholic then, but he drank I knew that. But I wouldn’t give him an answer for a whole a year and he swore that he was going to cut down on his drinking. And I told him I didn’t want him to cut down, I’d like to have him just stay sober because I watched my brother go through this life and I didn’t want that kind of life for my children. So he did, he slowed down and things went along good.

My husband thought he would introduce me to beer, but I got so angry. This is when we were still going together. And we were at a friend’s and they had just cases of beer just all over the place. And he kept saying, well all of his friends were saying, “It’s not going to kill you to have a sip of beer, if your going to hang around with our crowd.” So I got up, I told Ed if this is what you want, and I don’t want it and then he started arguing with me. So I spotted a hammer on the floor and I took the hammer and I broke up a whole case of beer. I just smashed the tops right out of it. He was trying to stop me but I was so angry and I slammed out the door. And I never saw him for about three weeks. He kept trying to contact me and I wouldn’t. So he realized how serious I was about not drinking. I just don’t have the desire for it.”

— Ruth Kasko was interviewed by Dante Foster on March 25, 2002.
Maggie Wasuli
James Gump
Lillian Andrews
Richard Tilden
Aaron Kaganak
George Nevak
Ronda
Arvin Dull
Sam Smith
Chase shared this about the interview: “I have known Maggie Wasuli for at least 10 years, and I have always admired Maggie’s kindness, her perceptiveness and her strength. She has always seemed very centered, a rock her family and friends depend on. The interviews took place at relatives homes in Bethel. We shared smiles, laughter, sadness, dried fish and tea.” Maggie is from Kotlik and was 55 at the time of the interview.

“I lived most of my life in Kotlik. And when I was nine years old, BIA came along and told our parents that we didn’t have a school in Kotlik, and they wanted us to attend school. So they sent us a thousand miles away from our home; that was to Wrangell Institute. And we were out there for three years, but we had a chance to go home during the summer and spend summertime with our parents. But that was very traumatizing – for a lot of our young people now. I mean for people who are my age, and a little bit younger. So it’s, we have suffered through the loss of our family lifestyle. We weren’t able to be with our mom and dad, like a growing child would want to be. So we were robbed of those years; the time we had to go to Wrangell and had to be so far away.

Fortunately we, I grew up in a very nurturing and nonalcoholic home, so I decided that I wanted to live that life, what my parents gave to us. And I wanted to live a life my parents had already showed to us. And... we never saw alcohol in our home.

We had two worlds. Right then, my father’s Yup’ik way and my mother’s western culture, which she learned at a Mission School. She believed in a lot of things about our Yup’ik lifestyle and the food was always Yup’ik, but on the other hand she sometimes questioned my father. There were times like my father would look at us and say if you use your common sense and you’re able to sort out or figure out what I’m trying to tell you or show you, like in the old times. He would say you’re like a shaman, because you’re sharp, you understand, and you sort it out and figured it out yourself. (...) When I started working with people, I started understanding that. I think my father meant that I was going to help people sort out their lives, help them to understand, be a good listener for them, and counsel them when they need it, or at least let them know they have tools to help themselves. Also let them know that we all have gifts from God that we can learn to apply them into our very lives, and those are the tools to work with. And they’re available, but lot of times when we’re hurting so much we don’t see them; we don’t understand them.

So when I go out in the wilderness even now, I still talk to the animals, a gift from Pa. And there are a lot of things that he told us and mother, both of my parents taught us, about boundaries, about discipline. And when my husband and I raised our children— I had the tendency to raise my children just the way my parents raised us, with boundaries, guidelines and rules. And I’m really grateful for the parents that I had. God blessed us with the parents that we were able to have. That really sent our lives in the direction that we have today.

I used to be a social drinker before that, when I lived in Anchorage for a while, but I never let alcohol become a problem to me. And in fact I used to, tell my friends, you shouldn’t drink; it’s not going to answer any problems to a lot of things, just create more problems.

I attended good workshops and sessions on different topics that were covered, despite all that, I always fall back to my childhood and thank God for my parents, Mom and Dad, thank you for being there for us; teaching us all the things that we have today, the gifts, good attributes that you have passed along to us. (...) My father and my mother gave us tools to understand ourselves through the teaching they gave us, by the land that we live on, the stars we have at night, the sun we have during the day, and all the survival skills. I’m very grateful and hopefully down the road my daughters and grandchildren will still be able to say these things about us, my husband and I. My parents taught us to cherish good memories, and above all totally rely on God for everything.”

— Maggie Wasuli was interviewed by Chase Hensel on February 20, 2001.
“...grew up at Ekvigmiut. And began to serve others, sweeping the sod houses, the ones they call igloos, there. The people subsisted in the winter and the summer. (...) When I became aware I sat down and planned my future, since I knew what I was doing. I wanted to become like the people I watched when I grew up and do what they did. The people I watched did and made things that were used, things they needed, hunting food for their people, working on wood, getting ice, getting wood, chopping wood, they worked all the time.

The food they ate all came from the land. All the food came from the wilderness, everything. Starting from spring to the point where it froze they hunted for their food. Like I said before I had planned how I would live my life. So, from that point on to this day what they said, what the elders learned from their elders, told us how they lived. From that time to this day I try to live a good life. I am now 76 but I try not to miss this kind of work, where I pass on the knowledge to the young people what I have learned. That is how I live my life.

When I began to hunt by myself and there were others who were my age, I would hear that someone was drinking, that that person was drunk. But I never heard anyone saying that something bad had happened. After not knowing for a long time, I learned that they would make home brew out of, maybe, flour, cornmeal, using those to start with, which they called ‘ekiluteng,’ putting them in. They were stirred in with sugar and fermented, I learned that. I learned from watching. (...) And I began to watch them make those. Some of them began to include me, asking me, “Do you want some?” And I would have some. It would not go away. They didn’t want to hunt anymore. But, they did that only occasionally.

I learned that once you learn to do that, you really had to have some after not having some for a while. It made you really want to have some. After time lapses and become aware, you would think, “So I didn’t get ice yesterday.” I would learn that I hadn’t shoveled the snow I was supposed to clear and hadn’t fed my dogs. I learned that that was how it was sometimes when I started to do that. My wife learned what I was going to do by observing me, by the way I prepare things before I do that, and knew. She would say to me, “So, you’re going to do that.” She learned by the way I would prepare for it, by the way I chopped a lot of wood, get ice, shovel snow and feed my dogs. I worked really hard and helped my wife with whatever that needed to be done, before I did that [drink]. She understood by the way I worked, “And so, you’re going to do that.” I knew that she didn’t want me to do that, but she never came right out and told me not to. I knew and understood that she really didn’t want me to do that.

That was what I did and I felt bad about what I did to the people I had to provide for. (...) I began to learn through that, knowing that it was not a good thing and knowing that you lose time to do things and began to do it less often. (...) One must be very careful if they want to use it and, like me, they won’t have a misfortune and will get to be my age.”

— James Gump was interviewed by Mary Stachelrodt on February 22, 2001.
Lillian is a Cup’ik woman of strong conviction and values. Lillian’s story is one of hope and personal growth and renewal. Lillian was 40 at the time of the interview.

“...grew up speaking my own language, Cup’ik. I didn’t speak English until I was like eight or nine. I came from a drinking family. There was domestic violence. And I thought it was just… Drinking was normal, you know. But then I use to see other people in the community, their parents didn’t drink. So, somewhere in the back of my head that’s what I wanted, that kind of a family.

And by the time I was in high school… Well you know what happened? I learned all these Cup’ik values at home even though my parents were drinking. They would take time out to tell me about life, because our ancestors did that. They talked to their kids about everything. And I did not realize this until after I got sober, that my parents really did teach me a lot of good things even though they were drinking. All this time I was growing up I only saw their drinking side you know. But it wasn’t until I did that moral inventory and went back to my childhood that they really taught me a lot of values in life; how to be a woman, how to live. And I’m like wow it’s so overwhelming. They’re so great you know. Here I’m looking at… I used to look at my parents as drunks, but they taught me life and I’m using that now to live sober. So it’s really, really good.

And when my parents try to talk to me or tell me, you know this is how you’re supposed to live, the confusion I got was… I’m being taught the Western school of how to work with paper and make money. You know, that’s what school is all about. And it was taking over my life so I’m like telling my parents, nah this time has changed and I don’t want to listen to you. We’re going to school, now we’re changed. Those what you’re telling me were for you when you were young. And my Dad would tell me no, “Allartuten,” you’re making a mistake. These values I’m teaching you are for you even if you’re going to school. And I said no I don’t think so. So I’d just go and he’d tell me I’m making a mistake. Now I can say that I was making a mistake. And it’s been several years now when I called him and I told him that I was sorry. And my brothers and sisters were, “What! You don’t talk to our Father, those emotional things.” And I said, well I did. I wanted to tell him I was sorry and that I forgave him for his drinking times. But that life turned out good I think. My parents taught me a lot. They taught me a lot about alcohol. For me to know that it’s not healthy to be drinking, you know. I think my past was positive, because I turned something really negative, got something good out of it, learned my lesson so I can teach it to somebody else. And I think that’s positive you know.

One time as I was doing my moral inventory I realized that I didn’t accept myself as a Cup’ik woman. You know starting from Junior High I had gotten so into school and how to make money and being so determined to live that way, and just forget about the values and traditional values how to have relationships with other people, how to live the life, you know how to survive in this world. That’s when I really cried, I found out— I better accept myself as a Cup’ik woman. So from then on I started studying my ancestors. And it’s mostly through, my parents, my upbringing that I study my ancestors way of living cause my parents taught it to me. So that part of it, the belief system that our ancestors had, it’s so precious to me.”

— Lillian Andrews was interviewed by Dante Foster on March 6, 2002 in Bethel.
Richard was born and raised in Dillingham. Richard was honest and open about his life in this interview. It was very important to him that his story was shared with other people who may be experiencing similar problems with drugs or alcohol. His recovery is inspirational. Richard was 46 at the time of the interview.

“My earliest memories are real good memories. I don’t think I had a very bad childhood. I was kind of the pet of the family. (...) I remember my mom always calling me over after she got feeling good, during the party. And she’d hold me by her side and then she’d always give me a little sip of her beer. And those were my very first experiences drinking. I was the youngest one in the family, and most of my memories are good ones.

And I know one thing about alcohol today that, when I look back at my life, is that I must have been a full-blown alcoholic when I was really young. I must have been, because it was, almost every time I drank, I would never know when -- I wouldn’t quit. And actually didn’t even -- I don’t think I ever stopped on my own. I’d go into blackouts for days, and wouldn’t even know it. My life it was nothing but alcohol, alcohol and drugs.

I remember going through a period of real deep reflection. A period of really asking for forgiveness. A half-assed willingness to go out and ask for forgiveness and say I was sorry to people. Its what wakes me up. And I am doing this for, I don’t know how many weeks, maybe a couple weeks. Maybe up to three weeks, riding around in the car, listening to the gospel tapes and praying and crying. And I remember being in the house, washing dishes, cooking, literally tears coming out of my eyes, going through all this stuff. I don’t know if my kids are aware of it. I didn’t care. I was experiencing something I didn’t ever experience before.

I was assigned 30 days intensive out-patient... That, the first day, October 31st, the day I was supposed to be in there, I woke up that morning, I had about six pints of vodka at home. I popped one bottle open and I drank it, and before ten o’clock, I was passed out. In the afternoon I woke up, rose some hell, acted crazy, got drunk again. And when I woke up at seven clock that night, I was home alone. And I was home alone, the house was real nice and clean. I had always had problems with the family when I was drunk, I’d usually throw them out or chase them out or do something stupid. But I remember that I had felt that I had done something really wrong, and that my family was gone, and I didn’t know what to do.

And I remember I went over to a window like this. We had a window like this, and it was open. And I put my arms on the window, and I was thinking, man, what the hell did I do now. And I remember looking up at the clouds, and I remember just like a growl came out of me. A growling sound. And I said, God, what hell is wrong with me? Could you please help me. That was my last drink. That was my last drink.

One morning I woke up. And I was sober. In my mind. My mind is as clear that morning as it is today, seven years later, without any booze. And that was a miracle. That was a total miracle, because before that, even when I was in jail, it was a constant paranoia, agoraphobia, fear, hatred, racism, lying. But that morning when I woke up, it was just like today, clear-headed. And I remember laying in bed and I remember thinking, God, I don’t want to get out of this bed, because I know I will screw it up. So I laid in bed, and I remember saying, man, this is how I want to die, this is how I really want to die. I want to die with a clear head like this."

— Richard Tilden was interviewed by Mary Stachelrodt on February 15, 2001. Richard passed from us in April of 2003. We will not forget him.
Aaron Kaganak

Aaron was raised in Scammon Bay, and lives there yet today. Aaron was 33 at the time of the interview. Aaron remains deeply immersed in the subsistence life and alcohol has never been a big part of his way of living as a healthy Yup’ik man, father and husband.

“Probably start off when I can basically remember, which was about six or seven. We were living here in Scammon Bay, and then my father got a position with Calista Corporation and we moved to Anchorage. And, from that, I can remember my childhood days over there. It was pretty good. We had a good time over there, and good experience living in Anchorage, but the only thing is, what I didn’t really like about it was the weekends. Weekends came and we’d have problems with cops coming over. Parents are both drinking. (...) Those were my growing up years. Seeing the drinking, seeing both parents being drunk, both parents drinking to a point where they’re going to say, “Oh, this time we’re going to just drink to have fun. No more fightings.” And it never was like that. It was always – you’d learn the pattern. The way I grew up, I got to understand the pattern of how the drinking was with my family.

When we moved to Mountain Village, things quieted down. No more drinking, no more partyings. Living with my aunt and my uncle and their family, they weren’t drinkers; they weren’t alcoholics, I should say. We had a normal life, I guess, for those couple of months, and that was a good experience, living with my cousins, and getting to know them more. Plus living in a different village was a good experience also. Plus, the best thing was to get away from the drinking.

In the eighties, I think things changed from that point. (...) I noticed things were slowly changing. I think it was 1985 when my father decided to quit drinking, after twenty-plus years of drinking. (...) And that’s the year when I started drinking.

I was fresh into college. I’d go to parties, but I’d hardly ever drink nothing. I was against drinking, against smoking, and I’d go to parties and just sit down and associate with everybody else. The next following weekend, or so, I’d finally decide to open a can of beer, and slowly sip on that. I think for the first two of three months, never got drunk. And then I think it was spring semester where I finally got drunk, and woke up with a hangover and that was pretty nasty. After drinking all night long – nothing but beer. I don’t like liquor or anything like that; it’s not good for my system. I guess it doesn’t work well with my system. I’m kind of a person who drinks and then baby-sits people. That’s how I was in college.

I moved back here to Scammon and I’ve been living here since. I don’t recall drinking that much here in this village. I know back in (19)87, one of my cousins passed away from Mountain Village. And I can remember drinking that night and drank up a storm, because he passed away. And I wanted to just maybe numb the feeling or something like that. And went over to my cousin’s and drank up a storm. Fast as I could – I can remember the first time just drinking up so fast. And by two o’clock in the morning I was blacked out. And those were – those are times where I said, “This is crazy,” and I didn’t want to live the life of how I grew up. I’ve already experienced it; I already know what the consequences are of drinking, how it messes up a family. So, now with my family, I can say that my kids have never seen me drunk. My kids have never seen my drinking. It’s a good feeling.

But, nowadays, I still drink once in a while. When I go into Anchorage, I don’t have that craving to drink. I would just drink once in a while or once in a great while. (...) And being Yup’ik, living my subsistence way of life, going out hunting, staying busy, gathering food, that keeps me busy. And in that sense it keeps me away from drinking, or even having thoughts of drinking. As long as I stay busy, I’m good to go. But, like I said, it hasn’t bothered me – drinking hasn’t bothered me. I don’t know if it will. In my head – in my mind, it never will. I’m a positive person and that’s the way I like to live my life, is live positively and things go smoother that way. But, living a Yup’ik life, just in general, doing all the traditional activities that we do on a day-to-day basis here in the village, this keeps me away, makes me not think about it.”
“I must have been seven years old when my mother died. Our father had moved away and I never saw him nor have I known him. But my mother died when I was small. I was orphaned and Wassugen and Nuraq took me in and took care of me after my mother died. (…) I felt the same way as other orphaned children; I longed to have parents. After I had experienced that, while I was in Tununak, a plane landed. It turned out that the plane was going to take me and my older brother to an orphanage. And it took us to Akulurak orphanage. There in Akulurak on the Yukon river we grew up some more.

When I matured into an adult I started acting like it, and did as I pleased and I started traveling. Even though I traveled to other places I did not change the way I was, and although people offered me alcoholic beverages I did not accept them. That is what is helping me at the present time and I begin to feel gratitude for not using it, or not using it excessively.

Soon I reached the marriageable age, and although I drank a little at times, my relatives never saw me in an excessively affected condition. I was that way, and when I married I continued to live the same way as before. But I would get my own only if I could afford it and I did not drink excessively nor did I changed the way I behaved. Before any changes occurred in the relationship between my wife and me, we got children.

After that time in Toksook I now say that I showed my love when I stopped my involvement with vices. I am not involved with it now. Also while we were in Toksook I almost started abusing alcohol. I would order and it was sent by plane. Although I used it my drinking would still be under control and there weren’t any changes in my demeanor. But I did almost lose control; I would reorder just before my supply was gone. Then one day my wife said to me, “Look, you are beginning to use alcohol more and more.” She was admonishing me that once, and I stopped. I stopped and never ordered again because it did not sit well in her mind. I thought if I had become addicted, the overuse of it might lead to severe anguish and that is something one should avoid for those reasons. She admonished me and I stopped then. She spoke with her mouth, admonishing me.

I did not totally quit alcohol after those years and when I traveled I would drink an occasional beer, but it did not lead to uncontrollable drinking since I would stop right away. I would drink as one drinks soda pop. I remember the time she admonished me that once. That is how couples show their love. Her words were enough for me because I loved her, and so I stopped.

Although there are nine of them our children know our character. I started to feel grateful that our children had not seen me behaving badly even toward my wife nor have to witness us screaming at each other angrily. They have not witnessed any of that at all. One could interrogate them about our relationship they would not lie if they talked about it.

Truly substance abuse causes mental anguish between couples. Avoidance of its use is better. It shows our love and encourages living positively.”

— George Nevak was interviewed by Sharon Lindley on March 14, 2002.
Ronda was raised in Dillingham and she was 35 at the time of the interview. Ronda’s story conveys a message of perseverance through adversity and hers is a message of hope and renewal.

“My earliest memories are of my family when we lived together. My mom is Alaskan Native and my dad is white. When I was very young my family did things like hunting for eggs, fishing, picking berries and other outdoor activities. Every summer we went to Ekuk, a little commercial fishing village outside of Dillingham in Bristol Bay. There I learned the traditional way to cut and smoke salmon. Ekuk was a favorite place for all of us.

My parents divorced when I was 10 and my sister and brother and I lived with my mom, who had begun to drink noticeably after that. By the time I was 12 she would often drink so much with her sister or her brothers that she would pass out. Sometimes I would see her so drunk that she couldn’t talk, couldn’t walk, that kind of thing, you know, just totally drunk. I never knew what I would find when I got home from school. At 13 we moved back to Aleknagik from Anchorage. We stayed with my grandpa; my apa. I don’t recall her ever drinking in his home but she did leave me, my younger sister and brother in his care. I never saw him drink. Once, when cleaning his room I found a case of wine under his bed. I was surprised. He took pretty good care of us you know. At his house we ate mostly traditional Yupik foods. We very rarely ate store bought groceries except for rice or beans.

One day, during this time, I went for a walk alone, sat at the top of a hill overlooking the lake and thought I wanted to die. I heard a voice in my heart say, “Someday I will save you from this mess that is your life.” It was hope and I clung to it. When my mom finally got a place for us to live in Dillingham, I still had no real stability or security. Drugs and alcohol were part of almost everyday life for my mom. I figured that’s how everyone else lived too. My cousin of the same age had the same story in her house and it just seemed normal. I moved out of my mom’s care at 17. I drank and did drugs. My life felt empty. Sometimes I would wake up, think about my life and look at the house I lived in: a total pigpen from all these people who had been there partying and totally trashing the place. While hung over I’d clean up and think, “I choose this as life and it’s disgusting!” Four years went by and I can remember only bits and pieces. When I first started drinking and doing drugs it felt like fun but, in the back of my mind I always wanted to go to college. I had always enjoyed learning and I had robbed myself of that. I was disappointed in my choices and that was hard to live with.

Now if I feel guilty or depressed about what I’ve done I remind myself about Jesus who paid the price of guilt and shame. I also tell myself, “Those are things I can use to encourage my own kids to make better choices.” I’m totally honest with them about my past. I know I can’t change what’s happened. I can never get that part of my life back. Seventeen to 21 are pretty important years in maturing to adulthood and during that time I made a lot of mistakes and I did a lot of stupid things.

The summer I turned 21 I went to a bar and saw a good-looking guy playing guitar. I thought, “I’m going to meet him next weekend when I come back.” Then I blacked out because I was drunk. When I went back the next weekend and introduced myself to him he said he’d already met me the weekend before. I was shocked and embarrassed but, we soon laughed over it and I didn’t drink much for the remainder of the night. He asked me to meet him the next night for a date after he got off work; so I did. He was the first person I’d ever met that looked like he enjoyed being sober. He was having fun living. I was curious and wanted to learn more about how he stayed sober, what triggered it and why. On the third or fourth date he told me he didn’t want a relationship with anyone who drank or did drugs and that we would have to end ours. I thought, “No, I don’t want to end this.” I quit drinking, I quit doing drugs and we continued to see each other. I didn’t know it at the time but, I used him as a crutch for that initial breakthrough to sobriety. I actually started enjoying life. Because he was playing in a band I could still go out to the clubs and watch him perform. I found that I didn’t need to drink or get high.

I fell in love with this man and I knew I was going to spend the rest of my life with him. This was the healthiest relationship I’d ever had. He and I communicated well and he was supportive of the decisions that I had made both good and bad. He told me it made me into who I was. Since the day I decided I wanted life I have been sober; the door opened, I walked through it. I realize now that God has been with me all along slowly changing me, almost imperceptibly. He has saved me from the mess that was my life. He is the one who has been giving me strength each step of the way. I know that in one moment I could throw it all away by taking a drink or a drug.

Over the last few years I struggled through many sleepless nights. I was tormented with tremendous guilt and shame from things done to me or that I had done to myself. I was invited to go through in-depth counseling with the Family Wellness Warriors Initiative to deal with my childhood wounds of abuse and neglect. It is amazing to have your life change by bringing out dark, dirty secrets into the light within the safety of a small group designed to help you go through your pain. I plan to continue my own healing and then go on helping others by sharing hope.

Thank you for listening to my story.”

— Ronda was interviewed by Jamie Mohatt on May 22, 2001.
They were all hard-working people in the old times, and I remember when I was growing up there was no food stamps or energy assistance. And especially it was noticeable in Mountain Village, where everyone had to work. You had to get up in the morning. My Grandpa got us up at 7:30, 8:00 o’clock in the morning. He got everybody up in the house. And my uncles -- and most of them were older than I was -- they had to get up and pack water or chop wood, and get the boat ready to go fishing; and it was a daily activity.

Everybody was strong and healthy. No TV, no time to sit around and waste time. And the food that we ate was -- it was good, but it was always the same type of food. You had fish, moose, ducks, geese. Things like that. People rarely ever ate to excess. Back then it was rare to see someone that was overweight. Everyone was working and everyone seemed to be happy, and everyone helped each other.

Back then, there was a lot of respect for elders. I remember my grandparents bringing us to other elders’ homes, just to introduce us to them, because our grandparents were proud of us, and they wanted to share us with the elders in the community. So they brought us to the elders and let us visit with them.

I remember when we started hunting and fishing, we got a lot of praise, and even more praise than today, from our relatives and elders. You know, if an elder found out that you caught your first rabbit or your first moose, everybody praised you for that. And it helped to build up our self-esteem. Nowadays it seems like there is less importance on it. But in the villages, when a young man catches their first seal or their first moose, they still have celebrations, and that helps to build the ego and self-esteem of all the young people, especially young men.

I didn’t indulge in any drinking or anything, until after my first year in college. Well, my graduation night I drank. But then after that I was sick the next day; I was sick for several days. And I thought, how can people do this every day? How could somebody do this every weekend, all this pain and suffering and being sick. And so it was even after over a year after, that I didn’t take anything. But after that, I started drinking; having a beer or two, or maybe a drink. But it was just light drinking.

There have been people in my life that had always encouraged me to be successful, to work hard, to do well in school, and to dress right. These people weren’t always the ones that were sober. I mean, some of these people were alcoholics, or some of these people were drinking at the time they told me these things. Up front, I would say yeah, yeah, yeah, but deep inside, I thought about what they said; and it made an impact on me. So I didn’t always try to work hard and be successful for myself, but for other people too, to gain the recognition and to earn the praise of other people.

When my wife and I decided to have children, I didn’t want them to grow up in the conditions that I grew up in, to where I saw drunk people all the time and I witnessed drinking daily. I didn’t want my children to see that.”

— Arvin Dull was interviewed by Mary Stachelrodt on February 24, 2001.
Sam was raised in Mekoryuk on Nunivak Island and was 64 at the time of the interview. Sam's story carries the message that it is never too late to live a good life and make a difference. Today Sam gives back what he has learned to his own communities through his work as a Wellness counselor.

"I was born on Nunivak Island in 1935. And I first drank alcohol at Mt. Edgecombe at the age of 18 or 19 years old. Once. I drank only once during a dormitory open house. And then after that I did not drink alcohol. I graduate from high school without drinking alcohol again. And then I started drinking alcohol. I think I started drinking alcohol when I was 23 years old, once a month, when I was working up at gold mining company up at Nome. And that progressed into monthly. I mean, I was drinking once a month because we were getting paid once a month. But after one year, I started drinking weekly, every weekend.

I got fired from my job. And I drift down to California in 1960, October 18th. In California, I started working again under BIA relocation program and then I started drinking again. And through drinking, I had accident. And I got no more job and I drift to farm labor work and start drinking. (...) And I started going in and out of county jails. I have been picked up for DWI two times, for protective custody, endangering myself and others over fifty times. Sometimes I get released from jail and land in the same jail before the day is over. And it's a cycle, a cycle that's very hard to break.

I want to go back to like 1961 when I used to be drinking in the Bay area. I feel very bad about myself because I cannot get out of this drinking cycle, drink, and in and out of jails. And they pick me up again and I take my belt to hang myself. And I know my jailmates will holler or something. And I wake up in a mental hospital and all strapped down in leather. I can't move my head and my arms and my legs. And I was there for about two weeks for observation and they let me go. The feeling before I done that was, I feel hopeless. I got no future. That's why I try to end my life that time. Some people like to know why, why people do commit suicide, because I'm drinking too much.

And later on I went to Seattle. And start drinking again, living in the streets. Later on I end up in a halfway house called Thunderbird Fellowship House. I stayed down there like, nine months. I finally gather up courage to contact my father where I was at Seattle and my father start to send me letters saying that he need me at home to help him, he also tells me that he loves me and over. My father's love for me let me go home. When I finally went home after 14 years, I was like a prodigal son who returned home. When I went inside the house my father was doing something and he did not recognize me. I did not tell him who I was. He continued to do what he was doing and he finally ask me who I was. I told him that I am his son and he hug me and welcome me home.

I did not recover by myself. I attended lots of AA meetings and make changes in my lifestyle, life. I have to work on myself to feel better about myself. I have to forgive myself, forgive myself for what I'd done when I was drinking.

I have many reasons to be thankful in my recovery process from the depths of alcohol addiction. I like to forgive my former enemies at police departments who pick me up and pour my alcohol into ground, refusing my requests for last drinks and put me in safe places to keep me alive. I like to thank my other former enemies at courts, the judges who sentence to help me sober up for a few days. I like to thank the doctors and nurses who tend to my cuts and detox treatment me for a few days. I like to thank the mental health workers who help me and talk to me. I like to thank the alcohol counselors who did not give up on me or on my recovery after many relapses. I like to thank the people in AA meetings who make me feel not alone in my sufferings and gave me sense of home for my recovery, including teaching me how to pray to my higher power. I like to carry on this natural power of caring for other people to help them."

— Samuel Smith was interviewed by Mary Stachelrodt on April 4, 2001.