

Creating Community: Connections and Celebrations at the Top of the World

In September, I was invited to be a keynote presenter in Barrow, Alaska. Peggy Cowen, Superintendent of the North Slope Borough School District (NSBSD) in Barrow was conducting an All Hire In-service. She brought together all professional and classified staff for a 3-day professional training experience. This was an important plan. Staff in this vast district—the size of Minnesota—serving 2,000 students in 11 schools in the northernmost part of Alaska had not been all together in over 20 years. Many of the 400 participants from the villages in the district had to fly to Barrow for the district-level meeting on improving schools. Many came with their dogs and children in tow.

The district's policy and goals for students make clear the important links of school, family, and community for student learning and success in school: *Learning in our schools is rooted in the values, history, and language of the Inupiat. Students develop...skills...to be:*

- Critical and creative thinkers able to adapt in a changing environment and world;
- Active, responsible, contributing members of their communities; and
- Confident, healthy young adults, able to envision, plan, and take control of their destiny.

To help implement the policy, the NSBSD joined NNPS. At dinner after a full day of workshops on school improvement projects, everyone was excited to hear that a whale had been caught at sea. Here is my account of this unique experience.

Waiting for the Whale

I stood on the edge of the Arctic Ocean with about 100 others on that freezing cold September night watching in anticipation as two dots on the horizon pulled in the whale just caught.¹ I

thought, "What an interesting way to build community." Wrapped in a turtleneck, sweat shirt, sweater, borrowed parka and earmuffs, hat, scarf, warm boots, two pairs of socks, and two pairs of gloves, I stood shivering. I was wishing for a hot flash that seems to come only at the most inopportune times. It was about 20°, but with wind chill it felt like -50°.

Karen Melin, Administrator of Instructional Support from the Alaska Department of Education & Early Learning, Lillian Stone, a conference participant from Anaktuvuk Pass (a village in the district), and I took turns shooting photos of the growing specks coming in from the ocean. As the boats made their way to shore, we also took turns running back to a heated car to try to thaw out. When the boats reached the shore, we forgot how cold it was and stood in awe watching the community work and cheer together to help the crew drag in the whale.

The Whale Arrives

Tractors helped pull in the enormous whale onto the frozen tundra. The boat crews who had sailed on the freezing waters and those who had pulled the whale ashore were able to warm up a bit. Then, the celebration really started. Car horns sang out in approval. Birds circled the whale in anticipation of a feast to come. I'm sure the women of the community

thought about all of the ways they would prepare the whale meat and blubber they would receive. Men measured the length of the whale. While they waited for just the right knives to begin cutting and sharing this bounty with everyone in the community, the kids were allowed to climb on the whale to enjoy a slippery, wet sliding board.

Reflecting on the Celebration

At home the next weekend, I watched my 13-year-old nephew become a "man" at his Bar Mitzvah. The celebration of our community marked his rite of passage and was no less triumphant than the celebration by the community in Barrow, Alaska. I thought of the young children at play climbing on the whale dreaming of their turn to hunt for their first whale or caribou. I imagined the young girls thinking about how they would preserve and prepare the valued meat to sustain families through the very harsh winter. In both celebrations, I felt the connectedness of the community and the traditions being passed from generation to generation. What an important place rituals have for every culture. How honored I was to experience both.

¹ The International Whaling Commission sets catch limits or quotas of bowhead whales for Alaska Eskimo subsistence hunters. This "catch" was within those limits.

Marsha Greenfeld,
NNPS Facilitator

