**Amy O’Brien Environmental Technician**

**PO Box 927 Bethel, AK 99559**

**(907) 543-2608 FAX (907) 543-2639**

**aobrien@nativecouncil.org**

**BOB’S STORY THE FINAL STAGE**

My grandmother lost both of her feet, mid-calf. The story behind that was when she was young, they used to live between Kalsgak and Holy Cross. Winter time when a mailman came- back then mail was carried by dogs - he was a big guy with blond hair, blue eyes. My grandmother fell in love with him. The next morning when everybody woke up she was gone. A search party was formed and they went out in search of her. Thankfully she was found. But she had already frozen her feet. Before Bethel had a hospital they had a hospital in Akiak. When she came back she had no feet. She used to wear socks backwards. The heel of the sock fit perfectly on her knee. She made her own moose, or bear hide boots, and she walked on her shins. I liked walking behind her winter time after a huge snowfall because she cleared a perfect path for me.

One thing I remembered about her and her husband Tutak was that Tutak had a regular long house with dove tail corners because he was a carpenter he knew how to do that kind of thing. She always had big windows. She had three wide windows in a row on the south wall. Every day my grandmother and I went down to her friend. They never spoke English; they spoke only Yupik. But they knew how to play cards quite well.

When the elders gathered I would sit with my feet in a kerosene box, close my eyes, because kids were not allowed to look at elders as a show of respect. The elders would talk, and talk. And once when they got quiet, I took a peek and noticed the rays of the sun shining through my step grandfathers nose just right and I could see red which made me huff trying not to laugh. My grandmother caught this and asked me, “Why did you laugh?” After I told her she took a look. They never used to laugh at each other. They were always stone faced. They probably laughed when they were alone.

The Elders would tell me. “So sorry you don’t understand what we are talking about right now, but one day when you come to your senses you well remember and understand. Only when you understand you can share this information with other people.” They used to teach me how we are to be human, how to behave as humans should. What you do in the morning, what you do in the evening, what you do different times of the day. And even during different seasons, or occasions. Over and over again the one instruction was, “Always be grateful. Be grateful about everything.”

They told me over, and over again to be grateful for everything, absolutely everything throughout the day.

I try my best to pass this teaching on to my children and my grandchildren. Especially my grandchildren. When my daughter lived with me for seven years with her son, I would eat with my grandson and have talks with him, the same talks that my grandmother had with me when I was going up. These are treasured moments. The older I get the more I treasure the talks my grandparents had with me.

Some of the instructions were, if you see something laying around, don’t touch it. Unless it belongs to you. Don’t take it. Someone else bought it, and they work hard to get the money for that object. Respect that and don’t take or touch it. Don’t even wish you had it. Remove yourself from the area if you get the urge to own someone else’s belonging. After my grandsons first day of school he asked me, “Uppa, how come the grandparents never talk to these other kids? These kids are crazy, they take anything, they steal anything. It’s not right.” I answered, “It isn’t right that’s why I tell you. If you want to use something, just ask. If they say you can use it, use it. But always remember to bring it back to where it was. Don’t just leave it laying around anywhere, because if you just leave it anywhere it is a show of disrespect. You are disrespecting not only that person, but their belongings, and showing what kind of person you are.”

I can spend 10 days talking about what the commandments are. The Yupik commandments. Inerqutets, are commandments, thou shall not. You don’t see that emphasis on teaching infants on how to be human beings anymore. The last time me and my wife went to Tununak for six days straight. We tried to bring that back. When we got to the village, my wife and I told the host to invite the elders so that we can explain what we are going to do. What we came for. “Why?” The man asked. To which I answer, “It’s protocol, we honor the elders. We would like to ask for permission for us to speak to their people.” The man answers, “Oh.” Like he forgot, or was just reminded what he already knew. This is proper etiquette.

After the elders were invited, 10 elders show up. Including all the children from the village of Tununak. Jents, was listening, as I ask for permission to speak to the residents of Tununak. Jents answer was, “No.” My heart just broke hearing that. Jents continued, “You don’t have out permission, but you have our blessing.” Wow that was something else, and my heart just lifted up and soared. So we had that teaching for 5 days, all in Yuggtun. I instructed my wife to only speak Yuggtun also because it is her first language. To which she complied even if she was shy.

It takes some kind of situation to take you back to where you began. Old Jents would invite us to eat at his house. Once Jents asked me what is it when you go like this. Making a ‘ok’ hand sign. I replied, “Its ok, it just means everything is ok.” Jents replied, “This is how I do it.” Pointing both his pinkies inward towards his forehead. When I asked, what is that? Jents replied, “This is my personal sign for everything is ok.”

When me and my wife went to villages to talk to the people we always dedicate to our first day to our beginnings, to prayer, to thank our Creator, and our ancestors. The second day we devote to our grandparents. We always asked the people to bring pictures of their grandparents, as far back as possible. Third day was devoted to our parents. Some people didn’t have parents so they were asked to bring pictures of their stepparents, or adoptive parents.

On the fourth day we ask the people to bring pictures of themselves. We dedicate the fourth day to ourselves. We have a tendency to forget ourselves. We are part of the universe. So we include ourselves. And on the fifth day we dedicate to our future. To our children, our grandchildren, our unborn. The future generations to come. And pretty soon the whole wall is covered with pictures. And Everyone can see how they each are connected to each other. And get tickled at how much resemblance there is to each generation. Pictures are so powerful.

When we were done on Friday, I told Jents that they, me and his wife, are going home. Jents said no they can’t. Because they have to complete their training yet tomorrow with a celebration feast and dance in conclusion. So the whole village brought a huge dish to be shared. Afterword’s they have a big Yuraq for three hours. Everybody, the whole village came. The elders in competition with the younger people tried to out dance the youngsters. Oh that was great fun. We forgot so much, me and my wife came to remind the people of Tununak what they already knew. I told the people that they were there just to remind them.

Just like the elders of Bethel. They all had different gifts to bring to the people. They open up their hearts and their spirit, they will give all their gifts to the young. That is the best gift. The elders give so much. Just like when I was a newlywed. I would get frustrated just like any newlywed. So I would go across the slough and have some tea and a talk with the elders about old times. Before I knew it all was right with the world once again. I would get renewed, rejuvenated. I didn’t even have to tell the elders why I came in the first place. They could just see it on my face. That is how in tune the elders were with this world. Even with people. So when I came they already knew what they were going to talk about. After words they would ask me what I came to talk about but everything would be right again. So there was no need to talk about any specific topic.

Myron Naning once said kassak’s (foreigners) always have portraits of their ancestors on the wall. But we Native people we have portraits in the manner of naming’s. We name our children and grandchildren after our elders that passed on. A lot of time the children act like or say the same things as the person they are named after. That is the best example of what they have, living ancestors, living grandparents, uncles, and aunties.

My oldest grandson Olrick, he began talking before he was two years old. He would start talking about things that happened before he was born.

I asked Olrick; “How do you know these things?”

Olrick; “Because I’m old. I was born before you.”

Olrick is named after his wife’s uncle, my uncle, who was from Upper Kalskag.

Once Olrick said, “Uppa, how come we don’t live in your big blue house anymore?”

I asked Olrick; “What do you mean?”

Because me and my family moved out of Bethel before Olrick was born. So Olrick was never in that house. Olrick even remembered Shorty. The man that had a shop across from my old blue house.

Once when I took a ride with Olrick, Olrick recognized my old blue house when we went driving past it. My daughter asked; “How did Olrick know where we lived before our move up river, at a time before Olrick was born?”

I answered; “Because his Old Olrick. Olrick used to live here with us.”

So I explained to Olrick why I had to sell the house.

Olrick replied.; “They don’t better do that. They better give it back. I don’t want to live in a dirty little house.”

You see me and my family moved into a smaller house when we moved up river. Our new house can fit into the living room of my old blue house here in Bethel. And Olrick’s namesake remembered that.

Once when it was foggy one morning we were walking to the river.

Olrick; “Uppa? Why is it smoky?”

Me; “It isn’t smoke, its fog.”

Olrick; “What’s fog?”

After I explain fog to Olrick.

Olrick; “Who make it foggy?”

Without thinking about it gave I answered, “God.”

Olrick; “He don’t better do that. We have to go hunting.”

Another time when it was my birthday.

Olrick; “Uppa? Are you 70 zero now?”

Me; “Yeah.”

Olrick; “Are you old?”

Me; (with a deep sigh) “Yeah.”

Olrick; “Who made you old?”

Without thinking about it I answer, “God.”

Olrick; “He don’t better do that. He better make you new again.”

Olrick always get irked about something, and scold God.

There’s a guy in Kalskag everybody calls Boss Man. Once Olrick and I were talking about God.

Olrick; “Uppa? Who is God?”

Without thinking about it I replied; “He is the boss of everything.”

Olrick; “No way! Boss Man is the boss of everything?”

That afternoon when we saw Boss Man, I said, “look there’s Boss Man.” To which Olrick replied, “Shut up.” With a glum face. And when Boss Man asked what was behind all this talk. I told Boss Man the whole story and he just start smiling so hard. After that every time, we saw Boss Man, I would ask Olrick, “Who is that?” Olrick always seriously answered. ”Shut up.” Always with a glum face.

That just want me to live longer. Just to see what else he will come up with. His such a deep thinker. You can just see his face change when his going to ask a question. Olrick, I always call him my old boss. Because his named after eight old men.

Once when he was 3 years old we went to Russian Mission for a spring carnival. And a man was selling a sled for $500.00 and that’s a lot of money. So my wife told me to just buy a ticket as the old man was raffling another sled. So I bought one ticket. And put it under Olricks name. Well, what do you know. That was the winning ticket by golly! When the winning ticket was called I said, “Olrick, you won a sled.”

Olrick; “I never bought a ticket.”

Me; “I bought one for you. Now go get the sled.”

Olrick; “No I never won.”

But eventually went to get the sled. When Olrick came back he looked a bit down faced.

Me; “What’s the matter Olrick?”

Olrick; “Now I gotta buy eight dogs.”

Me; “Why eight dogs?”

Olrick; “Because I’m named after eight old men.”

To which I had to conceal my laughter.

Getting back to the interview, the thing that hurts me is the simple fact that you cannot tell anybody why there’s no more salmon. At least not the way there used to be. Since, in 1960 they opened up commercial fishing in the river. And I will never forget what the elders said, “There’s going to no more fish. The money will eat them.” I always remember that and try to share that with the young people now. And those young people always reply, “Oh no, there’s always going to be commercial fishing.” So, I tell them about the time when fish were truly abundant.

I would like to emphasize for people to be grateful. Always be grateful. Throughout the day. Thank your Creator for absolutely everything. There is nothing too small to be grateful for. Give thanks.