


Interview with Esther Green  
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Photo copy of the Children's Home from Alaska Public Media

Esther Green was born and raised in Nunapitchuk Alaska to Lucy Evon and her biological father Wassillie B Evon. Esther shares her story of growing up with her single mother and working as a team to survive. Her childhood memories in Nunapitchuk as a child and the epidemic outbreak of Tuberculosis impacting many including Esther and her best friend Katie Roehl. Waking up to a nightmare to realizing it's not a dream. The government taking over who placed her and her 5-year-old brother in the Children's Home near Kwethluk Alaska to attend school. Being brought back to live with her mother in Bethel while suffering the disconnection from her 5-year-old brother. Meeting her husband and starting her family in Bethel and reconnecting with her best friend. How she coped with her life shattering like glass, every time there was a tragedy within her family caused by death, murder, suicides and accidents. Esther loves to fish and berry pick to this day and store away her traditional foods. She is 79 years old and well respected by everyone and many organizations seek her for advice or traditional ecological knowledge.

Here is her story

I remember living in a sod house alone with my mother. I don't recall how old I was because I never grew up with birthdays. I realized it was just me and my mom living together, I began wondering why my dad wasn't with us. My mom never told me what happened or where he was just other people told me that my parents separated while my mom became pregnant with me. I loved my mom very much we did everything together. I used to go fishing, berry picking, trapping and cutting down willows to keep our sod house warm with her. While growing up I observed my mom while she cut fish to hang and I learned how to cut fish. I watched her when she brought her batch of fish in the smoke house I would follow her and hang my fish separately from hers. She never mixed our fish together after they were dry and ready to store away, and I did not mind. My mom was always proud of me and shared my berries and fish with

elders in the community. My mom was very preservative she worked hard for the both of us to survive, in my part I helped her cut fish. My favorite foods I loved was dry fish, fermented fish, birds and agutak. I grew up with no electricity so we did everything by hand.

While I was growing up Katie Roehl was my neighbor who became my best friend. The only toy I had was a story knife, I used my imagination while drawing to make up stories. For fun we played outside with Katie's brothers. We mimicked some adults, told stories and played hide and seek and tag. Katie felt like my sister and her brothers felt like my own brothers. I was very close to her family. We never spoke English just our Yupik language. I remember when Katie was sick with Tuberculosis, she was always sick lying in bed coughing up blood. I was infected also but I didn't need to be hospitalized after taking medicine from the hospital here in Bethel. I continued to play with her brothers, so I was never bored. Later Katie was sent away to be further cared for. During that time my mother re married and I had 3 brothers. So my stepfather was there to help my mom. Many people died from TB I used to hear people talk about their loved ones dying and being buried where they passed away. Some of them died in Seattle, Sitka, Anchorage and Dillingham.

### The nightmare

Me and my 5-year-old brother were taken away by the government and brought to the Children's Home near Kwethluk. It felt like a nightmare just like a bad dream I thought, but it wasn't! it was for real. The place was new to me I didn't know anyone there which made me feel lost, heartbroken and afraid. I wanted my mother I felt displaced terribly. I felt helpless I was placed in the Girl's dorm and my brother was placed in the Boy's dorm. I prayed for his safety, protection and that no harm will come upon him. I got to see my brother at meal times. At every Sunday services we hugged each other and I held him for a while.

Moravian missionaries owned and ran the Children's Home. The staff was very nice but we had to keep busy with chores every day. The Children's Home taught us a lot of things. We went to school there and learned the basic survival skills too. As time went by the Children's Home became peaceful and we were protected nothing bad happened there was no sexual abuse or abuse at all. They taught us to speak English. There were a few of us who spoke in our Yupik language and they never punished us for it. The staff took care of many kids. Some orphaned, some were placed by parents and others were placed by the government. I helped take care of the little girls bathing and grooming them on Saturdays. We were always working and keeping the place tidy so we had no time to play. Except for Sundays all the kids including the staff played lap game they never left us playing alone. We had choir members there. We always sang good gospel songs, prayed and read our bibles too. We were given tons of clothes too which I liked very much we had clothes for all seasons. A barge came during the summers to drop off clothes that came from out of state. We dressed nicely for service and always kept clean.

One day a staff member told me I need to go home to help my mother. My heart began racing because I was in the Children's Home for years, I quickly got my things packed. When I got into the boat my brother wasn't there. They weren't taking him with me. I did not want to leave him behind I felt helpless! He wasn't able to go home with me. We were under the government's control back then. As much as I wanted to take my brother home with me I was unable to. I cried all the way to Bethel by boat from the Children's Home near Kwethluk. I began to ask God why? Why are we under control? Why cannot my brother come home with me? I was so heartbroken, I continued to pray for my brother's safety and well-being. After arriving in Bethel I found out my mother was living here. It was great to

reconnect with my mom! It felt like a hundred years had passed by. Mommy and I cried together during our reunion. We were very heart broken about my 5-year-old brother Moses Wassillie not being able to reunite with us. Years had passed and we never heard about my brother so we decided to talk to the Moravian Mission and asked them how my brother was doing. They told us that he was in high school and in Mt. Edgecumbe in Sitka Southeast Alaska. I became angry it was like they owned him and didn't care that he had a family.

I attended the Bethel Public School. The BIA teachers punished kids in school for speaking their native language. I did my best to behave and not get into trouble. After school I decided to get some side jobs to help my mother make ends meet. I worked in restaurants as a dishwasher and waitress. Back then we didn't earn much I think it was 50 cents a day or a dollar a day. But I used the money to purchase milk, tea, food and whatever my mom needed. I decided to quit school I made it to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and help out my mother in return because I loved her very much. She took well care of me growing up, I was never left hungry nor cold. So I worked at the restaurants and helped out my family until my stepdad came back. The restaurants back then were the Tundra Shack, Joe Mendolla's, and the Road House. People back in the day used to square dance and play music with old fashioned jukeboxes. Bethel also had live band music the players were Billy Pete, Buggy Wheeler and Tom Conquest.

I was 18 years old when I met Evan Green of Eek. Evan was a handsome man with skills. He was a mechanic for Wein Air and Samuelson's Bush Air. He didn't have education but he was gifted and talented. We started talking about marriage and then married. After our marriage I was 19 when we had our first child. Altogether we could of had 7 children 3 boys and 4 girls. But I had 1 miscarriage. I stayed at home taking care of my children while my husband worked. For fun I loved to go fishing and berry picking and visiting with friends. When my last baby girl was 3 years old my husband and I separated. I raised my kids speaking only English because of the abuse at the school for speaking our language was severe. We survived said Esther my kids and I survived even if I had to raise them alone. I deeply feared for my children because I witnessed abuse to students growing up.

Years later I ended up going to Nunapitchuk for my childhood friend Katie Roehl's mother's passing. When I got there I saw Katie! I forgot she was still alive. It was great to see Katie well and not ill from TB. I remember when she was gone for a long time. Years later Katie moved to Bethel with her husband. They became my neighbors in slough. Esther laughed this time I saw Katie with 3 little children. It was great to reconnect with her. Now to this day we are like sisters, I am thankful for her to be a huge part of my life. Through good times and in bad times Katie and I are there for each other's.

### The tragedies

Esther began talking about the tragedies in her life. It felt like my life shattered to pieces like glass when I lost my brother to the government. Later I lost my 8-year-old brother who died from poison water hemlock during spring at camp. My 3-month old baby died that was very hard for me and my family. My sister was murdered here in Bethel by her boyfriend a long time ago. I had a daughter who had 2 children, they burned in a house fire and died. Later on 3 of my grandsons took their own lives. I was devastated every time. I was angry and I cried and shouted asking God why?! Why God why? Why God why? Why God do I have to suffer deeply? Why have I lost my family? What did I do to deserve this pain? It felt like I had drifted away from God but I always came back to Him. It felt like my life shattered to pieces like broken glass every time after losing a family member. I took steam baths as part of healing

and spoke to friends about my feelings and spoke to God deeply about how I felt. I chose joy and not to be burdened, my family who passed will always be held close to my heart with cherished memories.

Even if I went through storms of tragedies God was always there with me. Esther giggled, and said "all my dogs went to heaven one by one". I sure loved my pets they became family, I took care of each and every one of them as puppies. My pets were my friends too when you take care of your dogs they learn to respect and protect you. It felt lonely when my last dog died I felt a big emptiness. When my pets died my 2 grandsons Stanley and Marcus the boys I raised made coffins. We had burials for them without crosses, the boys sure loved the dogs too. I thank God for friends and family who comes to visit me and for cell phones to keep connected with everyone.

I love to fish and berry pick to this day. I am thankful for all my friends in my life. I am proud of all my kids for helping me in any way they can. My daughters are great for helping with subsistence. I appreciate all my family my children, grandchildren and great grandchildren for everything they do for me. I am blessed with family who are carpenters, plumbers, electricians, hunters, berry pickers, fish cutters, they all have done something good for me.

Esther's advice for the world is- Good communication is the key to every relationship. Young couples do not have kids at an early age, there are lots of opportunities with college or trainings. Stay connected with the elders and choosing to live a healthy life is all up to you. Do your best to make good choices. Before choosing to make the wrong choice, think about the consequences. If you are in an abusive relationship think about what's best for you if it's not good for your mind, body and soul make the right choice and leave. Talk to someone when you are feeling hurt or bothered. Do not commit suicide. Don't take your own life even if you live in a village. The whole village will be impacted because they too are a family together. Live one day at a time with forgiving hearts you never know what's going to happen. There is no perfect person we are human and some of us will make mistakes in life. Forgiveness comes to you when you are ready. After you forgive those who have done you wrong, and forgive yourself from your past it will heal your heart, body, mind, soul and spirit. Even if you do forgive you will never forget but move on with life. Strive to be on the right path even through your struggles.

No matter what pains this wonderful elder crosses she is strong willed to continue to live day by day! Esther is well respected in the community of Bethel, she lives for today and does her best to do everything mindfully. Different organizations seek her for advice or traditional knowledge. Esther said her brother has his own life after high school in Mt. Edgecumbe he now lives in Anchorage she sees him from time to time. Esther may have been a young teenager when she was in the Children's Home near Kwethluk. It was an honor to listen to her powerful story. No matter what crossed her path she still smiles and brightens others day.

In 1976, High schools for Rural Alaskan Villages was in the process to be built after the Molly Hootch case, a Young Alaskan Native from Emmonak Alaska. Her case brought high schools for villages in Alaska. I have heard stories of many Alaskan's being forced to attend boarding schools, being placed in remote areas away from family for a long period of time. Being abused physically for speaking their native language. Some were forced to attend the BIA Mt. Edgecumbe Boarding School in Sitka, Chemawa Boarding School in Salem Oregon, Chilocco Boarding School in Oklahoma, Wrangell Institute in South East Alaska, and the St. Mary's High School. According to [www.alaskahighschool.com](http://www.alaskahighschool.com) there are 343 high schools in Alaska. 321 are public high schools and 22 are private high schools.

[ In 1972, Alaska Legal Services sued the State of Alaska on behalf of Molly Hootch. Molly, a high school student from the Western Alaska village of Emmonak, attended school in Anchorage. The suit charged that boarding schools and correspondence courses did not provide the same educational opportunities as attending high school in the student's whole community. In 1976, the State of Alaska agreed with Alaska Legal Services that villages that had an elementary school should have high schools. The State of Alaska immediately began a \$143 million program to construct schools in compliance with the consent decree. [www.akhistorycourse.org](http://www.akhistorycourse.org)]