

ATHABASCAN

word of the week

Essay: A grandfather's influence

Out of the 7 billion people around the world, there is one person who has had the most significant influence on me. He was the greatest man who I have ever known. He held onto our Native Eskimo values and practices while others gave in to the easy life of the modern world. Even though he lived his life purely in the Yupik way, he expected me to thrive in both the Yupik way of life and the modern world. He definitely proved to me that it does not matter who we are, where we come from, or what language we speak, we can all attain our dreams. That person is my grandpa, Alexie Nicholai. Even though he is gone, he continues to teach me. I hold onto what he taught me about our Native values while also trying to thrive in the modern world.

For many years I lived under the same roof as my grandpa. I am lucky because I learned daily about my culture, while also learning how to live in the present. My grandpa had an abundance of courage in the Yupik tradition, living most of his life without modern conveniences. He undoubtedly qualified as a wise elder.

My grandpa greatly influenced me to achieve any goals that I set, even though I come from a small village. He made me realize that just because I come from a village that has no roads, just one small store, and a high school that offers few class options, that does not mean that I cannot accomplish my dreams.

My grandpa never received any formal education, but he still influenced me to expand my knowledge as an indigenous person, and continue on in school. One thing that my grandpa fought for was the Yupik way of life. He lived his life the way he wanted to and the only language he spoke and understood was Yupik. Even though new technologies were invented, he still did things the old way. For instance, my grandpa still used a handsaw to cut wood instead of a chainsaw. Many people offered him rides on their four-wheelers, but he always refused and walked everywhere. Even in his personal hygiene, he avoided showers, only taking traditional steam baths every night, which he loved. A lot of people would be amazed by him because he still chopped wood by hand into his 90s, which most elders around here cannot do. I think the way he lived his life allowed him to live for 98 amazing years.

My grandpa brought our Native language, values and the subsistence lifestyle to the 21st century, and I am thankful for all the influence he had on me. His teachings made me believe that I can maintain my traditional Native values and practices while thriving in the demanding modern world.

— Francis Nicholai, 12th Grade, Napaskiak, Alaska Association of Bilingual Educators first-place essay contest winner and 2012 AKABE scholarship recipient.

The Athabaskan Word of the Week appears every Saturday on page A3 of the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner. The words are provided by Susan "K'etsoo" Paskvan of Yukon-Koyukuk School District. She is originally from the village of Koyukuk on the Yukon River in Interior Alaska. She is Tleeyegge Hut'aane, which is Koyukon Athabaskan. She seeks stories and phrases from both Denaakk'e (Koyukon Athabaskan) and Denak'a (Lower Tanana Athabaskan), which are languages spoken in the Yukon-Koyukuk School District region. Yukon-Koyukuk School District serves the villages of Allakaket, Hughes, Huslia, Koyukuk, Nulato, Kaltag, Ruby, Manley Hot Springs and Minto. The Board of Education places a priority on teaching the Native languages within the district.