

ATHABASCAN

word of the week

Traditional dance reflects upon afterlife

When one loses a loved one, our strongest traditional practices reflect the beliefs we hold about the afterlife. This week several people from Kaltag are being dressed at the 2012 Kaltag Stickdance.

The loved ones are released on their final journey at the Stickdance. The family saves the best Tl'eeyegge Ma'am (Native food) from all year for their loved one's tl'ok (dish) and potlatch. In the evenings new songs are made in honor of their memory. Afterward, dzaahtaah k'eleek (memorial songs) from previous potlatches are sung.

During the speeches, elders explain our beliefs and practices so they can be carried on in the right way.

Pauline Peter explains: "By dancing out there you are really helping the people who are putting up this Stickdance. These people are healing themselves, they're healing their heart by what they're doing. Every time you make one little thing toward this potlatch that's another piece of healing in your heart. All you kids, you think this is all fun. It is fun, but there's lots of heavy heart behind there. Those people are working from the bottom of their hearts who's in here for the loved one that they lost. And it means a lot that you people are like that (dancing) and thank you very, very much for the people who are putting this Stickdance up. And God bless all of you."

Jerry Isaac, president of Tanana Chiefs, and one of the Kaltag people (in jest) talked about the dance motions, first you go down then come back up.

He said, "when we lose someone, it seems like there's nothing to be happy about and you just barely survive. And at the very end, when you get back up and you commit to live, go on with their lives. That's what those songs mean. The way we position our bodies, it's just like I survived. That's what our motions (mean). Lot of our kids don't know that. . . . It's our pride, our strength, courage and determination."

Heeyo: Stickdance
— memorial potlatch held only in Kaltag and Nulato.

The Athabascan 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 Athabascan. She seeks stories and phrases from both Denaakk'e (Koyukon Athabascan) and Denak'a (Lower Tanana Athabascan), 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.