

Elders - Words of Wisdom: Episode 5 - The Importance of Elders Transcript

Thomas Moore

Welcome to another episode of Elders - Words of Wisdom, a podcast from the National Resource Center for Alaska Native Elders. This month, I spoke with Paula Jones, an Alaska Native student pursuing her Bachelor's degree in Human Services here at UAA. We talked about elders in her life, her relationship with them, and how they helped guide and support her while growing up in Alaska. Here's Paula.

Paula Jones

I was born in Bethel, Alaska and moved out to Quinhagak, Alaska actually when I was like a week old. Quinhagak is about 85 miles southwest of Bethel.

Thomas Moore

Growing up in a small village was a unique experience as Paula remembers.

Paula Jones

I grew up in a completely Yup'ik community. Everyone spoke Yup'ik, so Yup'ik was the first language I learned. I was around my grandparents a lot and so I was really brought up in the traditional Yup'ik Eskimo values. It was just a very traditional Yup'ik family, living off the land.

Thomas Moore

When she was eight years old, Paula moved with her mother to Anchorage where she said the difference in lifestyle was a challenge.

Paula Jones

I think the most difficult part of me moving was being away from my family. Not having that sense of community, that family to look back on, no friends, and definitely a new way of living. It was a culture shock.

Thomas Moore

After high school, when she was nineteen, Paula moved back to Quinhagak for three years with her grandparents.

Paula Jones

Being around elders from my community, especially my grandparents, really just helped me understand my roots. They showed me the right way to live. They're non judgemental, they're there to talk to you about things that their grandparents taught them, that they're taught them, so

it goes back generations of things that they're teaching you and the values that they say are so important.

Thomas Moore

Fast forward a few years, Paula is now a single mother living back in Anchorage and when her daughter was four, Paula began to have some personal struggles.

Paula Jones

I went through depression. I was just really lost, confused about what to do with my life. I ended up in legal trouble during that time. It's the first time I ever had to be away from my daughter. A few months after things settled down, I was still, how we say, not quite right. I wasn't really comprehending what was going on and I had family and friends notice a change in my behavior. Somewhere down the line, we ended up going to the doctor, found out I actually had a very large mass in my brain. I actually ended up going through a sixteen and a half hour operation, where I lost my hearing, the entire right side of my face is completely paralyzed. It was during that time my grandma actually moved, we moved my grandma to Anchorage. At that point she was a widow, she was about 80 years old and just couldn't bare the winters in Quinhagak any longer, so my parents moved her in. We ended up being a support system for one another. At that point, I could do stuff on my own but very carefully. She was the same way, she had a walker as well, but was still able to move around and get things done. During that time, she just kind of brought me back to reality. She talked about her upbringing. She talked about forgiveness of self and others and how important family was, how important tradition was. We did that for two years as I was recovering.

Thomas Moore

Those moments Paula spent with her grandmother during that time mirrors the lessons she learned from elders when she was younger living in Quinhagak.

Paula Jones

It's all about community, working together as a community. Working together as a family in order to provide for each other, to always be there to help one another out. No matter what circumstances we face or what hardships we go through, that the elders from our native community are always there to lend a supportive hand to talk us through it. I just think it's really important that our younger generation keeps the connection going with elders so that we can then, when we become the elders, can pass that down to the younger generation.

Thomas Moore

A thank you to Paula for talking to me this month. This episode marks the finale of our first season of the podcast, but we're working on something exciting for season two, which you'll probably see at the beginning of next year. To keep informed, follow us on Facebook. Until then, I'm Thomas Moore. Thanks for listening.