

April 4, 2003

To: Native Alaska College Students
From: Verna J. Kirkness

Cathy Rexford, the Moderator of Future Alaska Native Network invited me to share with you some thoughts related to education. I had the privilege of meeting Cathy and several young Alaska Native students at the education conference held in Anchorage in early February. If the students I listened to at the "Youth Perspectives on Education Workshop" are any indication of how the Alaska youth in general are thinking, you are well on your way.

Recently, I had occasion to talk with Native high school students from across Canada who had come to Ottawa to attend the National Aboriginal Achievement Awards program. These awards are given out annually to recognize Aboriginal people who have made an outstanding contribution to their people and to society in general. As we chatted, I was pleased to find that many of the students already had definite career goals in mind. One wanted to be a fashion designer, another a psychologist, another an architect and so on. What they wanted to know was what I had received my Achievement Award for and what were the challenges they would face when they got into higher education and into the work force.

Here is what I told them in a nutshell.

Whether we admit it or not, we all have dreams of what we want to be when we grow up. I always wanted to be a teacher. When I was little, my family lived right next to the school. At four and five years of age, I would sneak away from home and go and knock on the school door. The principal would tell me to go back home, that I was too young to come to school. After I was old enough to go to school, I hated to have to miss any days. When my mother would keep me home to help with the laundry, I would get very upset and cry until she would finally say, "Oh, go on to school then".

This passion for education stayed with me and I spent my entire working life in education. My educational journey took me from being teacher, to a principal, guidance counselor, teacher supervisor, curriculum consultant, education director, to an associate professor at the University of British Columbia. My focus throughout was to make education more relevant and friendly to Aboriginal students. It was for my dedication to Aboriginal education that I received an Aboriginal Achievement Award in 1994.

I believe that each person has a dream. We must have confidence in ourselves as we are growing up and keep our eye on our goal even if that goal changes several times. When I was growing-up, I had very few role models. There were no Aboriginal teachers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, architects, etc. While I secretly wanted to be a teacher, I would not tell anyone about it as I did not meet/see any Aboriginal teachers. Except for one day, when I met this young Cree woman from another reserve who was visiting with her boyfriend. I found out she was in Teachers College in Winnipeg and she was going to be a teacher. I

was so excited to meet her that I hung around with her and her boyfriend as much as I could. Her boyfriend was getting tired of this ten-year old who wouldn't leave them alone. He would give me a dime and tell me to go to the store to buy myself a treat and they would try to get away on me. By the way, a dime was enough to buy a pop or a chocolate bar back then. Before long, I would find them again. She was my role model. I had an opportunity to tell her many years later that she was very important in helping me to achieve my goal in life – to be a teacher.

I believe that role models are very important. Today, the scene is very different as many of our people are educated and you can grow up with the knowledge that you can be whatever you want to be. Not only do you have role models, but you also are a role model to those who are of a younger generation.

Much has to be done to make our communities viable and self-supporting. Education plays a key role in this endeavor. If everyone is able to achieve to his/her fullest potential and fulfill a life-long dream whether it is in the field of vocational, technical or university education, we can contribute to the well-being of our communities and to society in general.

I enjoyed my time with these bright young people in Ottawa just as I did listening to the young people in Anchorage. It gave me the assurance that our future can only continue to improve. I wish you all success as you advance day to day toward your chosen goal. I would like to leave you with the words of a great man that I had the privilege to work with early in my career. I think of the late Dave Courchene as warrior for our people. This was his message to young people.

“Education is the golden key to the future and the educated are its protector. To our Indian (Aboriginal) students, I say that you must take advantage of all the education offered you because our forefathers gave up this entire country so that the right would be yours. Our people need you like never before. You have an entrusted obligation to return to their midst, prepared to fight for the cause—your weapon being education and your shield being determination... We have placed a sacred trust in you---With education, positive views, and constructive action you have an obligation to prepare our people for the exodus to independence.”
