



*Aan yatxu saani, Shyáa awudanéix'i, Yak'éi yee
xwsateeni. Wáa sá yee yatee? Kaax'utkeich yóo xat
duwasáakw. Tlingit áyá xat. Yaakwdáat Kwáan xat sitee.
Yéil naax xat sitee. Ginéix Kwáan áyá xat. Tiskw' Hit dax.
Six Nations yádi áyá xat. L'uknaax ádi dachxán xat sitee.*

Noble People of this Land, People of Honor, It is good to see you. My name is Kaax'utkeich. I am Tlingit, from Yaakwdáat Kwaan. I am Raven Moiety and from the Copper River Clan. My lineage is from the Owl House. I am the child of the Six Nations People. I am the grandchild of the Coho Salmon Clan.

This is the traditional way for the Tlingit to introduce themselves. We are an Alaska Native tribe that has occupied the coast of southeast Alaska since time immemorial. We lived in harmony with the land, using its resources and protecting it from harm. I have learned the values and ways of my people from my grandmother Elaine Abraham, the first Alaska Native registered nurse, and my grandfather George Ramos.

I would like to honor an unrecognized American hero, Elizabeth Peratrovich. She was a driving force behind the first anti-discrimination bill in United States history, almost 30 years before Martin Luther King Jr. fought for civil rights. Her work brought equal opportunity and rights to all Alaska Native peoples. Her commitment to her people and heritage achieved the impossible in a time where she, as both a Native and a woman, would have had little power to effect politics or society and its perceptions. Her story is a landmark in the legacy of those fighting for a better world.

To understand her story you need to know our history. In 1741 Russia claimed Alaska by "right of discovery". They sought to control Alaska's vast natural resources, most notably the sea otter trade. Their impact decimated the Native populations, especially the Aleuts as well as the animals they hunted for the fur trade. Their presence brought them into many conflicts with our people in southeast Alaska, who before their arrival had a trade empire along the entire northwest coast. In my own community we fought and destroyed the Russian Fort in 1805, after their brutal abuse of our people.

The arrival of American traders from the south led to creating conflicting interests. Russia finally sold Alaska to the US in 1867 for what came out to five cents an acre. When they sold Alaska they had little power over the indigenous people but the treaty stated that all “civilized Indian tribes” should be treated as American citizens, although it had no clear definition of “civilized”.

Elizabeth Wanamaker Peratrovich was born in 1911 to the Lukaax.ádi (Sockeye Salmon Clan). She attended both Sheldon Jackson Junior College and Western College of Education in Washington. She married Roy Peratrovich in 1931 and they moved from Klawock to Juneau in 1941.

By the time they had moved to Juneau, a complicated procedure of giving Natives citizenship was in place. A Native had to abandon all ties with their culture and have five white people testify on their behalf. Even those with an education better than non-natives found it impossible to be granted citizenship. Businesses and schools actively segregated or discriminated against native people. Elders living today remember signs that said “no natives and no dogs allowed”.

Elizabeth herself was a victim of the blatant racism present throughout southeast. This experience led both Roy and Elizabeth to become Grand Camp Presidents of the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Sisterhood, organizations created to better conditions for the people. The accomplishment of these organizations is an astounding list.

With the support of Governor Ernest Gruening, they bought the Anti-discrimination bill before the territorial legislature in 1943, to overwhelming negativity from the senators. The bill was not passed.

After continuing their campaign they bought the bill back to the legislature in 1945. The debate was fierce, often filled with statements of blatant racism from the senators. Through all this Elizabeth sat quietly in the rear knitting. Towards the end of the debate Senator Allen Shattuck stated:

“...Rather than being brought together the races should be kept apart. Who are these people, barely out of savagery, who want to associate with us whites, with 5,000 years of recorded civilization behind us?”

Elizabeth then stood, and walked up to the stand and said:

“I would not have expected that I, who am barely out of savagery, would have to remind gentlemen with 5,000 years of recorded civilization behind them of our Bill of Rights. When my husband and I came to Juneau and sought a home in a nice

neighborhood where our children could play happily with our neighbors children. we found such a home and arranged to lease it. When the owners learned that we were Indians, they said no. Would we be compelled to live in the slums?"

Out of the "awesome silence in the hall" Senator Shattuck asked:

"Will this law eliminate discrimination?"

Her reply was:

"Do your laws against larceny, rape, and murder prevent those crimes? No law will eliminate crimes, but at least you, as legislators, can assert to the world that you recognize the evil of the present situation and speak of your intent to help us overcome discrimination. There are three kinds of persons who practice discrimination: First, the politician who wants to maintain an inferior minority group so that he can always promise them something; second, the "Mr. And Mrs. Jones" who aren't quite sure of their social position, and who are nice to you on one occasion and can't see you on others, depending on whom they are with; and third, the great superman, who believes in the superiority of the white race. This super race attitude is wrong and forces our fine Native people to be associated with less than desirable circumstances."

The Anti-discrimination bill was passed by an eleven to five vote.

The problems they faced then are still present today. Three teenagers targeted and attacked native people with paintball guns in the city of Anchorage in 2001. The incident got nationwide media attention but it was but one of many acts of racism that have occurred since Elizabeth Peratrovich's time. Racism cannot be stopped but the damage that happens to our culture can be.

I will attend the University of Alaska Southeast in Juneau for my first year and continue learning Tlingit in the Language Program. My goal is to have enough money to get a Bachelor's Degree in Media Arts: Film & HDTV from Collins College in Tempe, Arizona. I will use my skills and experience in video production and computer media to preserve the Tlingit culture, language, and history for the generations to come after me.

I will create video biographies of the culture both historical and present as well as language learning tools for the youth in school. The new forms of media can be use to pass on our heritage and values like oral tradition before it. I will not let our culture die.

Works Cited:

Nora & Richard Dauenhauer. Haa Kusteeyí Our Culture: Tlingit Life Stories. Sealaska Heritage Foundation, 1994.

The Land Is Ours. Videocassette.

**-Lingítx Aya Wahaan-
-We Who Are Tlingit-**

