**Qasgiq: Promoting Youth Sobriety and Reasons for Life**

**Alakanuk, Alaska**

We are Yup’ik people from an Alaska Native village called Alakanuk and we have a story to tell. Long ago, in traditional Yup’ik culture, the qasgiq, or a communal sod house, was the central place where our people gathered together. It was a place where men made tools for survival. It was a place where decisions were made and where people could listen to the elders’ wisdom. It was a sacred place for ceremony and a place for purification. The qasgiq brought families together, creating community, which was central to Yup’ik health and well-being.

When outsiders arrived from far away, the Yup’ik world changed. Our people were told to abandon Yup’ik beliefs and to become dependent on the outside world for survival. The qasgiq structures stopped being built and new practices brought new problems to our communities. Several generations later, our village, like many other Yup’ik villages, became plagued by an evil spirit.

This was the spirit of suicide and alcohol abuse. It grew stronger with each victim it claimed. Behavioral health interventions from outside the community helped in some ways, but failed to stop the spirit. We knew we had to do something. By uniting the strength of our ancestors with the power of prayer and togetherness, our elders created a ritual to protect our young people and shame the spirit into leaving our community. Just the musk ox surround their young to protect them from harm, we must gather together, hold hands, and form a circle around our youth, sheltering them from evil.

*“Each of us adults are going to pick a child from in the circle and you are going to say something that you like about the child.”*

The point is to communicate to our children that you are appreciated and are valuable members of our community. Our ritual concludes with stomping and grinding our feet as if we are crushing out the bad spirit.

*Stomping feet*

We then laugh as loud as we can as if we are laughing at someone.

*Laughter and clapping*

Protection and praise for our children, prayer, stomping, and laughter defeated spirit of suicide and abuse. These efforts caused the spirit to feel weak and shamed for its vicious acts and so it was forced out of our small community.

This ritual was the beginning of the *Elluam Tungiinun Egelruciq Ikayuulluta Agayutmek Ikayurcirluta (Movement Towards Wellness Together with the Help of God)* project of Alakanuk that brought our people together to revive a contemporary qasgiq to remind us of our strengths and traditions. With support from the Center for Alaska Native Health Research at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, we created an intervention that focuses on protective factors that promote youth sobriety and reasons for living.

This qasgiq model uses a centuries-old process to select experts in the community to teach youth survival skills: traditional and contemporary, practical as well as emotional. The questions that we were asking ourselves became the research questions to understand how our culture and our values protect young people, give them strength to overcome hardship and trauma. Research provided us with evidence we needed to advocate for services that are grounded in our culture and delivered though our care. We continue to address community wellbeing by asking questions about sustainability and translation of our knowledge and teachings into holistic health interventions for new generations of young people.

Based on the qasgiq, the intervention was created by our ancestors, revived by our elders, and kept alive by our community. It has allowed us to heal together and provide support for one another, reminding our youth that they have much to live for.

Dedicated to:

Elders of Alakanuk

Music:

Alakanuk Dancers

Narration:

Josie Edmund

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