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Photo courtesy of Anupma Prakash

Provost Anupma Prakash, center, purple vest, celebrated Indigenous Peoples' Day with Rural Student Services staff Oct. 11, 2021.

Oct. 15, 2021

— by Anupma Prakash, provost and executive vice chancellor

Quvianaġli Iñuqaat Nunani Uvluat! Thank you Dr. Sean Asiqtuq Topkok for adding four new words to my vocabulary this week and for helping me wish everyone a Happy Indigenous Peoples' Day in Iñupiaq. As a reminder to all, Indigenous Peoples' Day occurred on Oct. 11, 2021.

For me, the day started at a slow pace. It was an extension of a long and quiet weekend that had given me a lot of time for reflection and gratitude. Twenty years ago, when I came to Alaska, I knew very little about the place and the rich learning opportunity its people would shower me with. I knew that Alaska was vast, remote and with a very low population density. I did not know that no other state in the United States has such a [diversity of Native cultures and languages](#) as Alaska.

My mapping research and related outreach projects gave me unprecedented opportunities to spend time in different parts of the state. I spent time and learned from the stories of residents and Alaska Native elders in Utqiagvik and Kaktovik in the north; Kenai and Seward in the south; Juneau and Ketchikan in the southeast; Nome and Bethel in the west; and Tok and Eagle in the east. Stories of schooling, wilderness, fishing, creating, traveling, hardships, survival, perseverance, kindness, dancing and celebrations have all had a humbling, enriching, and indelible impact on me.

My all-time favorite story was from a local resident who worked at a remote field site with me. We had reports about a bear sighting, and he continued to tell me how he had handled such situations all his life. The story sort of evolved over the period of the week that we worked together, with the addition of more details and humor with each iteration. By the end, I was not sure which version of the story was correct, but the key point was that he did an excellent job in keeping me calm and facilitating my work.

I continued the day reflecting on how fortunate I was to work alongside Dr. Charlene Stern, our interim vice chancellor of rural, community and Native education. Her diverse perspective and mindful and inclusive leadership is something I admire and learn from. I thank Dr. Stern and her predecessor Evon Peter for their strong leadership of our community colleges. I also thank the team of Alaska Native faculty, staff and students who lead the UAF discussions for our [Alaska Native Success Initiative](#). [↗](#)

Our Troth Yeddha' Campus was abuzz with activities last week. The digital displays at the entrance of the campus flashed "Welcome to Troth Yeddha'," a first step in our efforts to increase Indigenous signage. The UAF film and performing arts program and FRAME Film Production Services, in collaboration with KUAC TV, produced and broadcasted "[To Continue or Be Remembered](#)" [↗](#)," a "must-watch" film showcasing the excellent teaching and learning happening at UAF's Alaska Native Arts Center.



Photo courtesy of Anupma Prakash

Provost Anupma Prakash and Vice Chancellor Charlene Stern pose at the Indigenous Peoples' Day Gathering Oct. 11, 2021.

At lunchtime, [Dr. Pearl Brower](#) gave an [informative and fun keynote address](#) that recognized the incredible accomplishments of the Alaska Native peoples while at the same time discussed ways in which we all can set aside implicit bias and work together in cooperation and partnership for a brighter future for all Alaskans. I had a great time watching her keynote address with the [Rural Student Services](#) staff while learning to make Navajo frybread (thank you, Deanna Fitzgerald) and eating together in the Gathering Room of the Brooks Building. And because once is just not enough, I got to eat another frybread for dinner, courtesy of Doyon Ltd., as we continued celebrations with songs and laughter. What a great way to conclude the day with food for the stomach and for the soul!

Note: Indigenous Peoples' Day is recognized on the second Monday of October to celebrate and honor the culture, heritage, knowledge, contributions and accomplishments of the Indigenous peoples or the First Peoples of the Americas. For thousands of years, Indigenous peoples have lived in harmony with their land guided by their strong values and spiritual beliefs and have passed their traditional knowledge and wisdom from generation to generation. However, the formal recognition of their contributions in the form of a recognized holiday is relatively new. It started as a counter-celebration and rejection of Columbus Day, which was viewed as a reminder of the dark history of colonization that led to systemic racial bias and racial inequity. In 2017, Gov. Walker signed a law recognizing Indigenous Peoples' Day in Alaska, and this year, U.S. President Joe Biden signed a proclamation declaring Oct. 11, 2021, to be a national holiday. The University of Alaska Fairbanks hosted celebrations for the first time in 2017, and you can view the [archives of all UAF celebrations](#) since then.

Friday Focus is a column written by a different member of UAF's leadership team every week.



#NanookNation

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