

Catalyst for Youth Success in Hooper Bay

A Story with Wilma Bell-Joe

The BIRCH (Building Initiatives in Rural Community Health) AmeriCorps Program supports 15 AmeriCorps Members from rural communities across Alaska. BIRCH AmeriCorps Members plan and implement community-wide events and activities for youth, families and Elders in the areas of health education, substance abuse, prevention and wellness.

One BIRCH Member in Hooper Bay has successfully created and led the Native Survivors Youth Group. According to Wilma Bell-Joe, the Native Survivors Youth Group has surpassed seventy participants who are actively engaged in cultural afterschool activities.

Rural Alaskans can face various struggles; Wilma had to escape domestic violence, and work on her addictions before becoming a leader for youth in the community. “There are so many things that distract us: bills, the stove oil, the gas, the money, money, money. Compared to the old days, we would worry about questions like,--Where is the next dinner? --Where am I going to get the fur to keep me warm for the winter? One elder told me you cannot help people unless you help yourself, you have to fix whatever is wrong.”

Leadership and caring can help all community members succeed, especially youth. Wilma noticed the teens in her community lacked activities. She also recognized their potential, “I have to stand up, I have to speak. The youth need to know they are good, they have potential, strength and courage.”

By starting the Native Survivors Youth Group, Wilma hoped parents and Elders would support the youth. “The kind of Elders that I had were always coming to the school to help the youth. If I start this, the parents might start to turn their heads and say--- hey; we should start supporting the kids.”

When Wilma started as a BIRCH Member, she went to all the organizations to announce the new Native Survivors Youth Group and gain support. Even if they knew who she was, she introduced herself. She also started going to the school and telling the teens that they could hang out in the Youth and Elder Building. In the past, Wilma had sponsored dances. “I came up with fundraiser money for a little group but we did not have a consistent stable place to meet. The youth group just quit coming. Now, I am very grateful that City Office put our group in Youth and Elders Building.”

As a BIRCH Member, Wilma discusses suicide prevention, bullying prevention and education. Wilma believes, “Education is very important, how to stay in school and then learning how to work together as a group, work with the council members, work with other organizations. The teens thought at first that the adults wouldn’t listen to them. The youth really came together

and they all started writing letters, asking the city office and TC Counsel Members if it was okay to meet after hours, if they could use the building to sponsor dances, to provide and fundraise.” The youth got permission and realized that by working together they can get things done. After a few visits the youth realized they had many similarities; they like to bead, knit and work together. The youth have learned to help support and love one another.

The most rewarding activities involve the Elders. They share stories and traditions with the youth. The youth listen, think and have many questions. “The youth put their feet in the ground and find their roots.” The youth were curious about Man’a man’a or Kukgaq, kuk’ak, the Eskimo games and Cak’emnaaraayaa, the jump rope song. Wilma remembers learning the jump rope song from her Grandpa. By singing it with the Elders at the Youth Group meeting, the words quickly fell into place. The youth enjoyed hearing the song, all together and complete.

Success has come in many steps. Wilma says that “Overtime, the youth started putting their hands deeper towards the roots.” The youth helped the Elders for the first time this year with the Louie Bunyan Festival. The festival is a gathering to celebrate life and survival. The community as well as other villages enjoy healthy activities such as games and dance. Everyone at the gathering was excited and happy to participate. Next year, the youth will plan the festival with the Elders and have their own song and dance.

In conclusion, Wilma states, “The youth need to know their history because this motivates and builds self-esteem. We need to bring back what we used to have.”

We are all inspired by Wilma’s determination and her success story. Do you have a success or challenge to share? Please help fill The Basket and contact resourcebasket@ruralcap.com or call 907-865-7396.

For further information on BIRCH or other AmeriCorps programs visit www.ruralcap.com.

Sarah Benson, AmeriCorps VISTA for *The Resource Basket*, respectfully contributed to this story.