What’s going right with young Alaska Native men?

by Diana Campbell / Center for Alaska Native Health Research

FAIRBANKS — The first Freddie Edmund saw of Washington, D.C., was from the jetliner window.

It was night, and to the horizon, thousands of lights twinkled against the darkness.

Back at his Western Alaska home, any light that Edmund would see in the distance would be from a snowmachine headlight bobbing along a faraway trail.

The lit landscape made an impression on the 20-year-old as he’d never been out of Alaska. Not even Anchorage has lights to the horizon.

“It was pretty,” noted the young man of few words.

The trip was the result of a recently awarded $149,595 grant from the National Science Foundation to the University of Alaska Fairbanks’ Center for Alaska Native Health Research and two other universities. Edmund, his mother Josie Edmund, friend Travis Isidore, all from Alakanuk, traveled to D.C., with principal investigator Stacy Rasmus and co-investigator Billy Charles, in October to meet people from four other indigenous arctic communities to talk about youth resilience. The two young men also showed a short video about what it means to be a strong teen in a Yup’ik community at the Inuit Studies Conference.

The opening of the video shows how the young men set a fish net, harvest the fish, and then cook them on an open fire riverside.

“It’s the best that way,” Edmund explained. “I say it tastes a lot better than in a regular oven.”

Rasmus said the video also shows the teens’ resilience in the face of adversity. Much has been said about the risks Alaska Native or indigenous youth face with suicide and substance abuse, but Rasmus’ work, in this research project and several others at CANHR, focuses on identifying strengths and finding ways to build on them.

The D.C. trip allowed the Alakanuk young men to meet peers from Canada, Siberia, Norway and Northwest Alaska.

Isidore, 17, said the other teens weren’t that different, even with the Eveny, the indigenous group from Siberia, who spoke through a translator.

“Sometimes we had to use body language, but we had fun and laughed,” he said. “It was fun hanging out with them.”

But finding out that others were more fluent in their own language made Isidore realize how important it is for him to continue learning Yup’ik.

Edmund and the Sami, the indigenous group from Norway, tried to learn words from each other’s language.
“Theirs is a lot harder,” he said. “But I could say some of the words.”

Edmund and Isidore found the other arctic indigenous people also hunt, fish and live close to the land.

“It was different to hear their take on their own problems,” Isidore said.

This is what Rasmus hoped would happen. Young people can learn more about themselves and their place in the world by discovering, in person, how other people in similar situations live.

“It wasn’t about, ‘Here I am,’” Rasmus said. “It was, ‘Here we all are.’”

The trip only lasted a week and while the young men are involved in other CANHR resiliency research projects, they both went home to Alakanuk with changed points of view.

Now that Edmund has seen more of the world, he is more anxious to start his life. He’s thinking of becoming a diesel mechanic or heavy equipment operator.

But he also knows his friends and Yup’ik culture help keep him strong.

“It’s great to be a kid in Alaska, he said.

Isidore agrees. The monuments, parks, museums and federal buildings in D.C. were astounding to see, he said. He did notice that if you had to get somewhere, the way was laid out by sidewalk, rail or road.

The tundra of home is not like that.

“There is more adventure out here,” he said. “Your path is not marked for you. You have to make it yourself.”

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