Letter from the Editor in Chief

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Letter from the Editor in Chief

Our goal: to celebrate and showcase the voices of Inuvialuit across Canada, bringing you the best coverage of our news, vibrant culture, and perspectives.

Correction Notice: In the Summer 2011 edition of Tusaayaksat magazine, there was a picture of Frederick Kimiksana which was incorrectly labeled Roy Kimiksana. We are sorry for the mistake! If you notice any errors in this publication, please email us at tusaayaksat@gmail.com and we will correct it!
When we look at what challenges the Inuit youth are facing in today’s society – we have to say that education is a #1 priority. Dropout rates are higher than our southern counterparts and it is something that we have to address as a community.

When you’re young and facing all of life’s challenges, you need a strong support system. If you do not have parents at home to talk about these challenges with, then youth will fall through the cracks. Many lose hope in finding happiness in life and at times, this leads to very severe results.

Through the years, Tusaaayaksat has featured many stories of accomplishment and success with the youth through sports and traditional culture activities. One must seek these positive opportunities and help our community work towards healthier lives. Educating our children is an important step to a healthy community.

We’re at a time where the Inuvialuit are producing material, which are created and written by the Inuvialuit. Many educators and members of the Inuvialuit community are using these materials and our history is beginning to come together. We are able to relive the lives of the elders of yesterday through books, such as Paulatukus – oral history project, Call me Ishmael and many more.

Through all the stories that have been published, one thing is certain. Our people are resilient. History has proven this. Let’s just help our children be resilient too.∞

Topsy Cockney
Editor-in-Chief

Tusaaayaksat is Inuvialuktun for “something new to hear about.”
Published quarterly by Inuvialuit Communications Society at 292 Mackenzie Drive, Inuvik, NW Territories, Canada.
For advertising and subscription inquiries: please email us at ics@northwestel.net or call (867) 777-2320.
Mary Simon is facing the greatest social policy challenge of her time. There is an education crisis in Canada’s north and 75% of Inuit children are not graduating from high school. “Simply put, if we are to succeed as a people the status quo cannot be allowed to continue. The educational gap between Inuit and non-Aboriginal Canadians must be closed,” Simon wrote on her blog.

Education reform in the North is long overdue. Since the 1970s, Inuit leaders such as Tagak Curley, John Amagoalik, Jose Kusugak, Charlie Watt, and Jack Anawak have demanded an overhaul of ineffective education policies in the North. It was not until a few years ago when Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami’s (ITK) Mary Simon aggressively tackled the issue of Inuit education. ITK held the first-ever National Summit on Inuit Education in Inuvik in 2008. During the summit, a number of Inuit organization decided to create the National Committee on Education responsible for drafting a National Strategy on Inuit Education.

On June 16th, 2011, the National Committee on Inuit Education, chaired by Mary Simon, released its Strategy entitled “First Canadians, Canadians First” which outlines a modern vision of Inuit education, including 10 recommendations to raise the performance of Inuit students. Before the release of the Strategy, Mary Simon aggressively tackled the issue of Inuit education. ITK held the first-ever National Summit on Inuit Education in Inuvik in 2008. During the summit, a number of Inuit organization decided to create the National Committee on Education responsible for drafting a National Strategy on Inuit Education.

Among the Strategy’s core recommendations for education reform are: 1. Mobilizing parents to be more involved in their children’s education; 2. Developing bilingual curriculum in Inuit language and one of Canada’s official languages; and 3. Developing education leaders.

I asked Mary Simon to define what an educational leader is and she responded by saying that “Education leaders are Premiers & Ministers of Education, Chairpersons and members of School Boards and District Education Authorities, union representatives, and parents. They must place education as a priority and tirelessly promote the message that Inuit have to educate their way to prosperity and healthier communities.” Given that the mandate of the Committee on Inuit Education is to lobby governments on behalf of Inuit people, it is not surprising that the Strategy places importance on developing policy makers, political leadership and administrative structures.

However, it is crucial to go beyond politics, administrative structures and policy. Political leaders can create campaigns and media resources to promote education but who will take the responsibility to teach a child to love learning and make better choices for his or her life at home and in the classroom.

As parents and as a community we always tell children to “Stay in school.” It is also necessary that mentors tell children why education is relevant or how school fits into the larger scheme of life. It is hard work to show children living in the isolated north (perhaps distracted with family problems, alcohol and substance abuse or poverty) that education might open opportunities they do not know about.

A lot of the difficulty also stems from the fact that the legacy of residential schools in the north has produced generations of parents who dropped out of school early or do not value formal education. “Moreover, parents tend to feel inadequate when interacting with the education establishment or supporting the education of their children at home. The cumulative effect is that there are no strong community norms in support of motivating young people to succeed in the context of formal education,” as quoted in “First Canadians, Canadians First”.

The Strategy’s emphasis on introducing the Inuit language, culture and bilingual educators into the curriculum could help create a stronger partnership between parents and schools. The Strategy also recommends developing campaigns and media resources to promote the role of parents in education. “No Strategy will walk children to school. No Strategy will ensure that children arrive in class well fed and well rested. This role falls to parents and guardians,” writes Simon.

Four months after the launch of “First Canadians, Canadians First” Simon is still gathering funding from prospective partners. Thus far Vale Corporation Inc., which has business interests in Nunatsiavut, has confirmed it will make a $500,000 contribution toward the creation of the National center for Inuit Education.

“Similarly, the Regional Inuit Organizations are examining how they might support the Strategy’s implementation. The Government of Canada have indicated support for the Strategy but would like to see the level of commitment from Inuit and jurisdictions first before determining where and how they will participate,” writes an optimistic Simon.

Once further confirmations of support are received, Simon will commence discussions with governments on specific project initiatives. With generous donations and support “First Canadians, Canadians First” could prove to be a landmark document for Inuit people of Canada.
Garrett Ruben

By Maia Lepage  Translation by Albert Elias

Garrett Ruben was born on February 4th, 1934 in Tom Cod Bay, close to the coastal community of Paulatuk. His mother, Sadie Sukkauaaluk and father, An'ngik Ruben, lead a traditional lifestyle, which suited Garrett and his love of the outdoors. When he was 12 years old, Garrett had his own dog team and toboggan.

He also had his own rifle, which he used for hunting seals for his dogs. “We started young,” said Garrett. “We learn how to drive dog teams from our parents. Your dad would bring you out and after that you could go alone, even if you were eight years old.”

As a child, Garrett would travel around with his family. They would move from place to place, depending on the season. In the fall, they would hunt caribou and build caches so they could return in the winter months to get the meat. The caches were built into the ground, and then willows were packed at the bottom so the meat wouldn’t freeze directly to the ground. Once the meat was placed on the willows, flat rocks were piled on the meat to keep it covered. Round rocks were placed on the very top so that bears and wolverines wouldn’t be able to pull the meat out.

“One in a while bears clean one pile out, but very seldom,” recalled Garrett. “When you put big size rocks, even bears can’t scratch it out. Then, in November when the snow is good for traveling, you haul the meat back.”

Life was very different before skidoos and four wheelers made their mark on the North. “When you wanted to hunt caribou in the summer, you had to depend on your legs. Nobody would bring you there,” Garrett said. “You took a couple of pack dogs and walked up... When you walk 18 hours without a bite, you get pretty weak. Couple of times we did that but we were used to it. Sleep first, then run to the lake, have some water and take off like animals again.”

“Compared to those times, life is pretty easy now,” laughs Garrett. “No young people can do that anymore.”

“We used to see caribou and take off like animals. Take your rifle, a piece of string and your knife, that all. Now them young boys, when they see caribou across the lake, its too far to walk,” laughs Garrett. “Four wheelers in the summertime sure help but it sure spoils people too.”

Garrett relied on the many tricks his father taught him when it came to navigating the land. When it was dark or conditions were bad, the old snowdrifts would be able to show you which way the wind was blowing days before. “When I was a little boy, I started learning from my dad travelling with a dog team. Day or night, blowing snow, things like that,” Garrett said. “Before you start, you had to know which way you were going to go.” Travelers would find drifts from previous days to help guide them to their destination.

“They are used just like a compass,” said Garrett.

Snowdrifts were not the only natural compasses that were used to help travelers find their way. “One time me and my dad were travelling, and I didn’t know what he was doing,” remembered Garrett. “I was inside the sled and I was pretty young...Every time he got to a lake, he kicked the snow out, chipped the ice a little and tasted it. When we hit...”
ice again, he chipped a little and said: ‘We’re in a bay, we’re in salt water now.’ He was testing to see if it was lake or ocean water.” Once they knew they were on the ocean, then they knew to follow the coast.”

Stars were also used to guide travellers, but you had to be careful because stars are always moving. “If you start straight for it, by the time you travel one hour, you got to… keep going to the left side a bit. Every hour you shift a little bit because in 24 hours that star is going to go back to the same place.”

To keep warm on his journeys, Garrett grew up wearing traditional caribou skin clothing that his mother would make. His traditional clothing would last 3 or 4 years if it were taken care of. “That’s all I lived on when I was a kid. Caribou boots, caribou feather pants and caribou parki,” said Garrett. “When we used to trap, I guess we never used scarves or anything like that; just caribou parkis. Especially when you have a thin caribou skin inside and a big thick one on top. You walk around and the heat is inside of you always.”

In 1964, when Garrett was thirty years old, he got his first skidoo. It was an old double track bombardier, which cost him $900. “Every two months, I used to bust the track,” smiles Garrett. “The track cost $59! Now to get a track, it is $700 and a skidoo is $7,000-9,000. I did a lot track patching in those years.”

Garrett. “One time in February, my engine started choking up so I started looking. At that time they had a little carburetor, had no cover on it. It was full of caribou hair! After that we started using a thin snow shirt on top [of the caribou parki] so the caribou hair didn’t get sucked into the carburetor!!”

Skidoos weren’t the only thing that Garrett had to adapt to using. When the DEW line started, workers from the south were building heated houses and many others followed suit. “At first, you can’t sleep, they were too warm” remembered Garrett. “People were so used to sleeping in the cold at night. After that, houses get so warm, everybody start to feel cold.”

“When I was young, we could live in a single tent on April 20th,” remembers Garrett. “Now, either the heat spoiled us or our skin got thin. We get cold easy.”

Garrett Ruben went on to be Paulatuk’s first official mayor. He spent over 20 years speaking on behalf of the people. He was a hard worker and when things needed to be done, you could always count on Garrett to be there to lend a hand. Although he is remembered as one of the founding members of Paulatuk, Garrett always saw himself as a hunter, trapper and provider.

Before his death in 2007, Garrett’s stories were recorded and later published in Paulatuuq Oral History Project, Volume II.
Garrett Ruben

By Maia Lepage

Translation by Albert Elias


Garrett Ruben

Elder Story:

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1964, 30-nik ukiunikluni, Garrett skidoo-niktuaq sivulirmik. Utuq malruklik, $900.00. “Tatqiqsiutik malruk naamatnik tassaqtuk “tracks” kituqalutaqpaku,” “Track” uqalaktuq $59.00! Qangma taimaasiq $700.00. Amalu “skidoo” qangma skituqtaqlu, $7000.00-9000.00. Taimani qapsiiqtuaqlunga savaqivakatka aksaluutit.”


I first met Inuvialuit from Aklavik and Inuvik in the summer of 2002, when I conducted a dig for Parks Canada at Qainuirvik (Clarence Lagoon), in Ivvavik National Park. We had a three-week field season in the park, camping and watching both the incredible wildlife and the amazing 24-hour sky. Jimmy Doug Meyook, Northern Beattie, and Daryn Archie were our student trainees—and they started to think archaeology was pretty cool when we unearthed items like an 1895 Marlin 32-40 calibre rifle, placed just inside the door jam of a hundred-year-old sod house. In the debris under the homemade table that fit into an alcove at the back of the house, we found a small piece of newspaper which read ‘The U-boats are Coming’, from the London Daily Mirror, that had a date on it of 1915—World War I. The newspaper would have crossed the ocean on one of the whaling or trading ships, probably around the tip of South America, and traveled all the way up the west coast of the continent, wrapping some innocuous trade item such as the prunes found in that sod house.

My first introduction to Inuvialuit Elders was when Nellie Arey and Ida Joe (Inglangasuk) visited our site to tell us about their experiences traveling and growing up on the Yukon North Slope. They flew out on a floatplane from Tapqaq (Shingle Point) and spent a day telling us their memories of the area. How they traveled as children, what they trapped and hunted, the kinds of tools they used, the families who lived in the area (such as the Uqalisuq, Iriqaqtuaq, and Inglangasuk families), and what they knew of Inuvialuit history based on the old things left in the ground. They laughed a lot and told amazing stories!

After my summer at Qainuivik, I decided I would really like to keep working with the Inuvialuit community, and applied to do PhD research at the University of Calgary. Working with community organizations, I came up with a project that would focus on Elders’ memories of growing up on the North Slope and in the west Delta, and their knowledge of the material culture (artifacts) that their grandparents and ancestors left behind. Anthropologists and archaeologists, like myself, often focus on the oral histories of an Indigenous community, collecting this knowledge to help interpret what we see within the archaeological record, and also because communities are very interested in their Elders’ stories about how they experienced historic times. There are many Inuvialuit trained in anthropological and archaeological techniques who do this kind of work, and as an outsider from the south, I have felt a great privilege to be invited into the homes and hamlets of Inuvialuit to hear and record family stories and histories.

I have many great memories of the primarily Ummarmuit-speaking Elders I worked with in the mid-2000s from Aklavik and Inuvik. A significant part of my work has involved listening to these Elders, and as we came to know each other, talk about what we as anthropologists ‘do.’ If we listen carefully to what the Elders say, of course, we learn how to do our work better, in addition to learning a great deal about community perspectives on history and heritage. Here I would like to share some of my memories of our conversations together.

Beyond the usual ethics procedures, a number of Elders had particular questions about what I was doing so they could make sure that they could trust me and figure out if they wanted to work with me. Billy Day questioned me for a good length of time about my goals, my intentions for the recordings, and where they would all end up. I was happy to have this conversation with him (and others), so that I could explain that I wanted to make the work we did together accessible to Inuvialuit, and to feed it into Inuvialuit curriculum and websites that the community would benefit from. I have very fond memories of Victor Allen, with whom I always had extremely amusing conversations. Victor asked, when we first worked together: “I ask you: why do you study us? Why don’t we go down there, study all your bones, measure your earlobes, that kind of stuff [laughs]. All these explorers—they had anthropologists, archaeologists...[They] tried to look for the Northwest Passage; they thought the Orient was up there [pointing →]..."
north!" We laughed for a long time about that—then we ate some more cookies, and kept talking.

Moses Kayotuk was another Elder who was hesitant to hear what an outsider like myself had to say about Inuvialuit artifacts and their functions. He thought my ideas might be a little bit 'crazy'—after all, I didn’t grow up hunting, and I wasn’t from a northern community either!

Moses and Barbra Allen taught myself and Mervin Joe (who did many of the interviews with me) a lot about Inuvialuit artifacts. Sometimes, when an object was really old and had been replaced early in the contact period by European trade items, he didn’t mind hearing what an outsider might say. One example is an object that anthropologists call a ‘bird blunt’, which was used to stun flying birds without breaking their valuable feathers. Unlike most other objects, Elders had no memory of this artifact or word for it in their language. Danny A. Gordon had seen an adaptation of these objects growing up in Alaska—where an empty cartridge was slipped over an arrow shaft and used for the same purpose. However, I did agree with Moses that his own knowledge should come first, and those of book-learned outsiders second, as a supplement.

Hilda Irish was one of many very sweet Inuvialuit ladies whom I enjoyed spending time with. Hilda showed me, on several occasions, the diary of her father-in-law Old Irish Kuiruya’s, from the time in the 1920s when he ran the store at Clarence Lagoon. This ‘diary’ is essentially a log and account book of the weather, transactions, and other occurrences at the store. Part of what makes it so interesting was the fact it was written partly in Inuvialuktun syllabics, and partly in the English Old Irish was teaching himself. Hilda was very excited about the work we were doing together, and said many times, “It’s really good that you’re working like that, you know, making something to remember…long ago.” Ida Joe described our work together, and the Elders’ role in telling stories to describe old artifacts and explain the past, in the phrase ‘quliaq tohongniaq tuunga.’ She translated this phrase as ‘I’m going to tell you stories’ or ‘I’m going to make histories’ for you,’ and it became the title of my PhD thesis.

Ned Kayotuk saw archaeology as a way to document “old camps, old people, that way, you could find people, what they use for hunting [etc.].” When you find “the old people’s stuff,” Ned felt, you can “use it. That way, we could learn...how the old peoples long ago lived,” and share it with others. His niece, Nellie Arey, and many others, have shown me their extensive archaeology collections and talked about where and when they gathered the different objects. Danny C. Gordon has always said that he thinks archaeology is important to Inuvialuit people: “I think it’s appreciated ‘cuz we’re actually retrieving what’s on the ground. That should have been done years ago, you know. Because we can’t even recognize some of the stuff you’ve got, [We] should be able to, but we don’t. We’ve never used it. If somebody would’ve came 40 years ago when my dad was alive, you know, he would have said, ‘oh yeah, I used that stuff, I know how to make it.’ But I don’t, I’m too young!”

Danny C. is one of many Elders who makes old-style items for use today—fishhooks, ulus, and other hunting and fishing gear. Many Inuvialuit are interested in re-creating historic items, and this is the drive behind the website we are producing as part of the Inuvialuit Smithsonian Project: www.inuvialuitlivinghistory.ca.

I have been very fortunate to be able to continue my work with a range of amazing people in the Inuvialuit community, from Elders to community leaders, educators, anthropologists, and youth. Working closely with Elders has taught me a number of things. It has certainly taught me to enjoy and appreciate the moments we have together because they are so short. Over half of the twenty-five Elders I worked with between 2002 and 2007 have now passed on. This makes me value the time I have with the Elders I work with, and also cherish time with my own young family, and with my own parents. As my children get older, it will certainly be fun to bring them north to spend time with their Inuvialuit ‘cousins’, and show them the beauty and freedom of life in the north.
I find my greatest strength in wanting to be strong. I find my greatest bravery in deciding to be brave. I do not know if I have ever realized it before, [...] I think we both realize it now. If there’s no feeling of fear, then there’s no need for courage.

— David Levithan, Boy Meets Boy

we can only do it by sticking together. It might look a bit weird, but it will get us to the other side.

We need to stop thinking so much about it getting better tomorrow, and we need to make it better for ourselves today. There is love out there for all of us, from our families. Whether it is the family we were born into, or the one we have chosen, we will find love if we are open to it.

Now you. You, who kicked us when we were down. You, who called us names and told us how worthless we were. You, who told us we would never amount to anything.

From the bottom of my heart, I am sorry. I am so sorry that things are so bad for you that you need to take it out on us. It breaks my heart to think what you might be going through. It breaks my heart that you think it is okay to do what you are doing.

I offer you an olive branch. I want to tell you that you can make it better today as well. I want you to know that you are loved; there are many people that love you want to help you get through what you are dealing with as well. Really, all you need to do is ask. What you are dealing with is scary, and you need to put on this act because of how terrified you are, but it is not you. I know you are a better person than this, because I see you hiding behind your actions.

Finally to you. You, who is with us no longer. To you I say, with all of my heart, that you are loved. I want you to know that you will not be forgotten. You need to know that you have touched many lives, and left behind a hole in my heart, and all others who loved you. Most of all, I hope, with all of my heart and soul, that you are finally at peace from the torment you went through. You were brave and strong until the end, but I understand how tired you were. Rest my love, you deserve it.

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By Davi D O’Garr

YOU.

BY DAVID O’GARR

Yes, you. You who cuts yourself. You, who cries yourself to sleep every night. You, who is so tired of being strong and brave. You, who attempted to kill yourself. You, who had to drop out of school because of the bullies. You, who had to leave home because of the abuse. You, who is surviving from sexual assault. You, yeah you, all of you. Except you, I have something else to say to you. And you? Of course, I did not forget you... hold on, because I have something really important to say to you. I want you to know how amazing you are. I want you to know that I see you. I see what other’s do not; I know how brave and strong you are. You think no one really understands, and you are right. No one really does, because what you are dealing with is unique to you. Seriously, you are amazing. Each and every day is torture, I get it. The shear will power it takes to get out of bed. To not want to reach for the scissors and slit your wrists, or down that bottle of anti-depressants in hopes that it will end the suffering.

I could sit here and tell you it gets better, but I would be lying. I do not know if it ever does. I am still trying to figure out when ‘it’ is supposedly going to get better for me but I can tell you one thing, it gets a bit easier. That does not matter to you, or to me really, because what matters right now. What matters is today, because you and I both need to figure out how to get through this alive.

I would offer to be your bridge over troubled water, but truth be told the best I can offer is a rickety old raft. You know what? If I tie my raft to yours, then we tie our raft to his. And you? You have that kayak; we will tie to that too. And you? Sure, we can tie on to that paddleboat too...

Pretty soon, together we have built that bridge, but we can only do it by sticking together. It might look a bit weird, but it will get us to the other side.

We need to stop thinking so much about it getting better tomorrow, and we need to make it better for ourselves today. There is love out there for all of us, from our families. Whether it is the family we were born into, or the one we have chosen, we will find love if we are open to it.

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By Davi D O’Garr
Kevin Floyd’s Odyssey: One Man’s Quest to Revive Authentic Arctic Qayaks

By Shafia Usman

Whether Floyd is building traditional-style qayaks, running a non-profit qayak club or planning the launch of an outdoor recreation company he has always included young people in his vision – making Floyd a rare blend of athlete, craftsman and mentor.

In 1966, Nuligak wrote in his memoir about the thriving qayaking and whaling expeditions of his people he witnessed as a child. “At the great whale hunts, I remember there was such a large number of kayaks that when the first had long disappeared from view more and more were just setting out,” wrote Nuligak. By 1966, these expeditions were dying out in the Mackenzie Delta.

By 1985, only five Inuvialuit kayaks remained hanging in museums around the world.

In late August of this year, Kevin Floyd, founder and president of the Inuvik Qayak Club, was preparing a sea kayak expedition using Inuvialuit-style qayaks, which he built with 40 other people at the Great Northern Arts Festival. It would be the first time in eighty years that Inuvialuit qayaks would hit the waters of the Mackenzie Delta.

Floyd’s wife, Jennifer Lam, likes to refer to Floyd as her “dashing, handsome, dear husband” which is an accurate description. He is the tall, dark and handsome type. Born Inuvialuit, Floyd was adopted by a couple in British Columbia and grew up on Vancouver Island. His parents were educators and were open »
Kevin Floyd and his wife, Jennifer Lam, are all smiles and laughs as they work under the midnight sun on a traditional qayak.

and accepting of other cultures. In 1988, when Floyd was 16, his family moved to the United Arab Emirates and he spent a total of almost 2 years there.

Floyd founded the Inuvik Qayak Club in 2010 to revive the traditional qayak and paddling skills. Before founding the club, Floyd was the coordinator of the Arctic Youth Leadership program until 2010, when the Arctic Youth Leadership program ran out of funding. He wanted to continue to do something good for the youth. “That’s one of the reasons I created the qayak club,” says Floyd “because I wanted it to be accessible to all youth, especially Inuvialuit, but also other youth in our community.”

The Inuvik Qayak Club was exceptionally successful this summer when it collaborated with the GNAF and built three Inuvialuit-style qayaks. Among the forty people that participated in building the qayaks, there were a handful of youth and multiple generations of Pokiaks. “If you look at any of the books or literature on qayaks around the arctic and you see ours, you see a picture of ‘Old Pokiak’, explained Kevin “In the qayaking literary world, he’s just known as Eskimo in Mackenzie Delta Qayak.”

Floyd was thrilled when some of ‘Old Pokiak’s’ grandchildren, like Elizabeth Pertschy, were enthusiastic to work on the qayaks or just came by to give support. “It just gets that dialogue going within the families,” says Floyd “and we had so many different artists from across the ISR come up and share different stories of how their families did this; how they remembered different aspects.”

When the use of Inuvialuit qayak died out, all the stories that went along with it were lost. Slowly Floyd is collecting these stories that were so much a part of Qayak culture in the Delta.

Floyd started to do research on Inuvialuit qayaks while still living in BC. He recruited the help of archaeologist Don Gardner and the owner of Nomad Boat Building, Mark Reuten to help recreate traditional Inuvialuit Qayaks that used to voyage the Mackenzie Delta 100 years ago.

Inuvialuit-style qayaks have upturned horns that make the bow and the stern. Traditionally the wood frame was dressed with ugyuk (bearded seal) skin and sinew. Without the dressing, the frame is a fine piece of craftsmanship. The process has made Kevin very respectful of tradition. “We were stone tool users with very sophisticated stuff. This TK [traditional knowledge] is huge,” says Floyd.

His next step to promote the traditions and techniques of Inuvialuit qayaking is to launch an outdoor recreation and tourism business. Renowned qayakers from America and Greenland have given Floyd a lot of moral support and Floyd wants to capitalize on the growing interest in traditional arctic qayaking culture.

One of the great things about small businesses is that they think local. Floyd’s business model includes mentoring youth in the north in qayak building, guiding and customer service skills. “It will [be] a multi-year process for them,” said Floyd. He would ideally like to hire local youth who graduate from the Qayak Club program as assistants.

Qayaking in stormy waters has transformed Floyd’s perspective of himself and the world. When the winds are strong and the waves are steep, you cannot fight the sea. You have to let the sea carry you alongside seals and whales, creating a connection with the life and environment around you. Whether its tourists or local youth, Floyd wants everyone to walk away with a greater appreciation for traditional knowledge and a deeper understanding of themselves and their place in the universe.

Unfortunately, the funding for the qayaking expedition Floyd was planning for came in too late to organize an impactful expedition this past season. Floyd was not discouraged. Instead, he spent the fall mastering the use of the traditional paddle. “Our momentum is going slow, it’s not going away,” said a determined Floyd. “I’m not going anywhere, I keep gaining knowledge and I’m just so eager to offer it up.”
Bilky stared gloomily out the window of his grandfather’s pick-up. What a waste of a Saturday this had been! This morning Billy had been almost out the door when his grandfather called. He was driving up to Tuktoyaktuk to see his sister Julia and he wondered if Billy wanted to come with him. His mother, who had answered the call, said that Billy would be delighted to go on the trip.

“But mom, I have plans with my friends today!” Billy whined, “Plus hanging out with Grandfather is boring! All he wants to do is talk about old things. I don’t think he even knows what an iPad is!”

“Billy,” sighed mom, “Your grandfather isn’t getting any younger and it wouldn’t kill you to spend some time with him. Take advantage of this! He knows about a lot of really interesting things. You only need to ask him.” When Billy opened his mouth to protest, his mother’s face hardened, “Look, you’re fourteen now, you’re not a child, so stop acting like one.” That had ended the discussion and Billy knew he was not getting out of this one.

The trip up to Tuk was very quiet. Billy had sulked the whole way and his grandfather seemed content to drive in silence. When they arrived in Tuk, it seemed like the longest visit of all time. Grandfather and Auntie Julia talked and talked about things like the weather, and hunting, and people they both knew and all sorts of other things Billy found really boring.

Finally, they said their good byes and left Tuk. They were now on their way back to Inuvik.

It had grown dark outside, and the ice road gleamed underneath them, illuminated by the moonlight. Billy was gazing at the trees whizzing by when something caught his eye and he called for his grandfather to stop the truck. The truck slowed to a stop and grandfather looked over at him.

“What is it?” he asked, “Are you all right?”

“I thought I saw something in the trees back there. It looked like a person.”

“Are you sure?” asked grandfather. When Billy nodded grandfather said, “Well, we’d better check it out. Maybe someone went off the road and we don’t want them to freeze out here.” He turned the truck around and slowly went back the way they had come until Billy pointed out the place he’d seen the figure. They got out of the truck and headed for the side of the road. The moon was full and bright and it lit up the landscape like a night-light. As they got near the shoreline, the snow became very deep.

“Well,” said grandfather, “There aren’t any tracks here. See how the snow is smooth and unbroken? We haven’t had a snowfall in a week or so. Maybe your eyes were playing tricks on—” Billy looked over and his grandfather was staring straight ahead. Following his gaze, Billy saw a woman standing between two trees. She looked to be no more than nineteen or twenty and she was very beautiful.
wearing a parka and her hood was pulled back and her long black hair rippled down her back. There was something odd about her though. Her parka looked really old fashioned, like Billy had seen in books. It was made from fur and skins, as were her mukluks. There was no sign of cloth or embroidery. He gasped when he realized that when he stared at her he could see through her to the trees behind. They were hazy, but he could see them.

“Grandfather,” he whispered, “I think she’s a ghost! Let’s get out of here!” Grandfather looked at him and asked, “So, you can see her too?”

“Of course I can grandfather, she’s right there in front of us. We should get out of here!” Billy was surprised at how calm he felt. He should be terrified, seeing a ghost for the first time, but for some reason the fear didn’t come. The woman moved towards him, seeming to glide over the snow but never touching it.

“She’s a spirit. There are many spirits around. They are stuck here in the world for one reason or other. Sometimes they have unfinished business, or their ties to the living world are still too strong. Sometimes, they are trapped here by evil men, as this spirit was. It is important to help these spirits continue their journey, so they don’t interfere in our world.”

“How can we help you break free of your spell?” asked grandfather calmly. Why was he so calm, Billy wondered, this was the fraiciest thing Billy had ever seen.

“If you could return the ulu to me and break the blade, my soul would be free. The ulu was placed near what is now the gathering place you call Inuvik.” She leaned forward and pressed her lips against grandfather’s forehead. Her lips passed through the skin and sealing it in the blade of an ulu. He said that if he couldn’t have me, no one could. I became as you see me now, forced to wander the delta forever, unable to touch anyone or anything.”

“How do you know all this?” asked Billy.

“We come from a long line of shaman. A shaman has special gifts, and one of those gifts is seeing spirits and other beings that the ordinary person cannot see. I knew our powers would continue into your generation and I suspected it was you who had these abilities, but I wasn’t completely sure until tonight. You were able to see the spirit when no one else would have. We have a lot to talk about once I have recovered the ulu.

“So I guess you’re taking me home first aren’t you?” asked Billy in a disappointed voice. Grandfather looked at the road, lost in thought. After a few minutes he said, “no, I think you need to see this. Your training starts immediately. I warn you that this can be dangerous and so I want you to hold back and just observe. Do not get involved directly.”

Billy beamed happily at the thought of getting to finish this adventure. He suddenly remembered something the spirit had said and looked over at his grandfather. “What is an amarok?” he asked.

“An amarok is a giant wolf, larger than any wolf you can imagine. Unlike other wolves, they don’t hunt in packs, preferring to hunt alone. They are cunning and very intelligent, and they live for a very, very long time. They are almost impossible to kill, but they can be frightened away. They are afraid of their own reflection. This one will probably not attack you if it doesn’t see you as a threat to the ulu so you must stay back and let me handle it, okay?”

“Okay grandfather, I promise.” They rode the rest of the way in silence as Billy digested all this new information and tried to come to terms with his newfound abilities. Soon they reached Inuvik and, after a stop at grandfather’s house to pick up a couple of new mirrors as well as a mysterious bag, they headed out to Boot Lake. Grandfather told Billy that the spirit’s kiss pulled him here. They parked the truck by the lake and started walking across it. Since it was such a nice night, there were quite a few people on the lake, skidoosing across it, and sliding down the big hill on one side of the lake, ending up on the frozen water. Billy ignored everything going on and focused on his grandfather. The old man was walking unerringly »
to the shore across the lake. He stopped in front of a wall of willows that lined the shoreline.

“We need to go in here,” he said.

“But how do we get in there?” asked Billy, “there is no path. Plus, I don’t see any ulus or wolves in there. We’re just going to end up down on River road by the Mackenzie River.”

“Not everything is visible to the naked eye,” said grandfather. “Sometimes you have to look beyond.”

He closed his eyes and started singing and chanting in Inuvialuktun. The air rippled in front of them and a creek appeared where before there had been only willows. Grandfather opened his eyes and smiled. “This is where we need to go.” Astonished, Billy followed him down the frozen creek. They walked through a part of the forest that wasn’t there before, that couldn’t be there as far as Billy could tell. Before long, they came to a clearing. In the centre of the clearing was an ulu that glowed with a faint green light. Billy started to run toward it, but grandfather’s strong arm held him back. “Stay here” he said warningly.

As grandfather stepped into the clearing, Billy heard a deep growl. Walking into view was the largest wolf Billy had ever seen. It was about the size of an SUV. Its fur was pure white, and as it growled, saliva dripped from its huge teeth and splashed onto the ground. The beast sank its giant fangs into grandfather’s shoulder. Billy heard the old man cry out in pain. With a giant leap, the amarok landed on top of grandfather, knocking him to the ground. The beast sunk its giant fangs into grandfather’s shoulder. Billy heard the old man cry out in pain. Billy knew he had to help his grandfather. There was no way he could just crouch here in the shadows and let that monster kill the old man. Without thinking, he drew from his jacket his iPad and ran into the clearing.

“Hey ugly! Leave my grandfather alone!” he cried, holding up the iPad. The amarok looked up from his prey and Billy clicked a picture of the wolf. The image popped up on the iPad screen and the creature saw prey and Billy clicked a picture of the wolf. The amarok yelped and backed away, its front leg bleeding from its huge teeth and splashed onto the ground. The beast sunk its giant fangs into grandfather’s shoulder. Billy heard the old man cry out in pain.

Billy gasped as he saw the wound close, healing as if it had never been there. The amarok renewed its attack and for what seemed an eternity, Billy watched his grandfather and the wolf continue their dance, slashing and biting their way across the clearing. Every time grandfather managed to wound it, the wolf would heal almost instantaneously. Grandfather had managed so far to avoid being hurt, but that luck could never last. With a giant leap, the amarok landed on top of grandfather, knocking him to the ground. The beast sunk its giant fangs into grandfather’s shoulder.

“I’ll be okay” winced the old man as he shakily got to his feet. “Thanks to my nice big puffy winter jacket, the teeth didn’t get that far into my shoulder.” He walked over to the ulu and picked it up. “Come on, let’s get back to the truck and get this to the spirit.”

It didn’t take them long to bind grandfather’s shoulder and drive quickly back down the ice road to where the spirit had been. She smiled gratefully at the two of them.

“Thank you so much,” she cried, “now please, break the blade so my soul can be free.” The ulu blade was made of stone, in the old style, before the Europeans had come. Billy picked it up and brought it down as hard as he could on a corner of the bed of the pick-up. It cracked in half and a green energy pored out of it and drifted over to the spirit, enveloping her in its light.

Billy looked up at the sky and gasped as the northern lights started swirling around in the largest pattern he had ever seen. Spinning masses of green and yellow with lines of pink moving in and out of the other colours filled the night sky. As he watched, they seemed to get closer and closer. The northern lights were descending! Before long he could see hundreds of people in the green and yellow. Some were dancing, others were drumming and still others seemed to be singing and laughing. As part of the lights touched down, he could see four people standing in the green mist looking longingly at the spirit.

“That’s my family and my beloved husband,” the spirit smiled, as she turned to Billy and his grandfather. “They are waiting for me. Thank you so much for everything you have done. I must rejoin my family soon.” She glided forward and entered the green mist. Her family surrounded her, hugging her, kissing her and laughing as tears ran down their faces.

As the northern lights started to rise off the ground, all the people inside turned and waved to Billy and grandfather, until they could no longer see the people and the northern lights took their usual place in the sky. The ice road seemed unnaturally dark and silent after that incredible display. Grandfather turned to Billy and said, “Well my boy, what do you say to heading back to town and getting some warm food? I’m cold and I’m starving!”

“Sounds good to me grandfather. Then we need to talk. I think there is a lot I need to learn and I want to learn it all now.” Grandfather smiled and ruffled Billy’s hair.

“In time, Billy, in time. Tonight, I just want to eat and maybe you can tell me how that iPad of your works.”
The one word that describes Nellie’s mood when she wakes up in the morning is ‘optimistic’. “It is always a positive experience to wake up and face the day,” she says. Despite the difficult task of developing social and economic opportunities in the Western Arctic during a time of global economic crunch, Nellie still finds it a privilege to meet the new challenges and people that each day brings.
Whether she was a station manager of CBC, an activist with COPE, the Premiere of the Northwest Territories, or the elected CEO of Inuvialuit Regional Corporation, Nellie has made it her life’s work to give the Inuvialuit people a strong voice. “To me, I want the Inuvialuit to be the most respected, most successful people in society, [who are] contributing to society. And anything that I can do to make that happen, I’ll do it.”

On the day I sat down with Nellie in her office at the IRC building, she was wearing a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt – the uniform of a woman who dedicates herself to looking for solutions. She has a warm smile, mischievous eyes behind her signature eyeglasses, and a bone-crunching handshake. I was interested in learning her personal story rather than her accomplishments as a public figure. I wanted to know about her family, childhood memories, her dreams, her regrets and her heartbreak. After all that she has accomplished, was Nellie the woman that she endeavored to be?

“I never asked myself what kind of person I want to be,” she says. “I was always ask what we can do. I was always interested in how society moves ahead and where we are going. I always work with a lot of people so I’m not alone in these endeavors.”

Nellie spent her childhood among the harvesters in Aklavik. In a traditional economy, a young girl like Nellie did not have aspirations of becoming a leader. “We all lived the same way,” recalled Nellie. “We were all relatively poor but we didn’t think we were poor because we’re all about the same.”

The skills that Nellie learned growing up in a traditional economy prepared her well for a life as an activist and community leader. The most successful harvesters were both, hardworking and knowledgeable about where to go to survive. “Because of the way that we lived, it required you to think about what you’re doing and everyone around you,” she explains. In other words, all decisions had to be well thought out since “going down the wrong creek” could have harmful results.

In the 1970’s, the members of COPE began negotiating a land claim agreement to ensure that the Inuvialuit would be included as a fundamental part of Canadian society. COPE faced a lot of resistance from aboriginal and non-aboriginal societies because there were no precedents for land claims in Canada at that time.

“When you’re trying to move a society that has very few years into community living...to try to move and support that change is a big unknown,” says Nellie. “I think we all knew there was no one in government that would understand. Therefore, to try to get that message across was big. That takes a lot of effort and time; a lot of patience.”

During this time, Nellie looked to Agnes Semmler — a no-nonsense entrepreneur and activist — for guidance. Semmler, a fearless woman herself, taught Nellie not to hesitate to take the challenge. “Sometimes it is not very clear in the future where it is all going to lead but you have to really believe that you can do something... and don’t expect it to be done without great effort if it is going to mean something.”

Despite her optimism and having worked to the best of her ability, some things are difficult for Nellie to accept. “A lot of what I do is working for Inuvialuit. To me, in the communities, I really do not see the education process delivering good academic levels for the students. I am not blaming that totally on the educational system. Some of it is parental. And that is the thing that worries me the most,” she admits. “Traditionally you had to be smart and know what you were doing to survive. It is no different today. You cannot just sit and think that something is going to come to you. The students, at a very early age, learn that they do not have the academic levels and they give up. That is what is heart-breaking for me.”

Being the optimist that she is, Nellie tells me that she is very confident that the youth are resilient and that she would not work as hard as she does unless she believed in them.

As I walked away from the interview, I realized that I had failed to get Nellie to tell me her personal story. In some ways, Nellie is impenetrable. In other ways, her personal story was imprinted all over what she has accomplished for the Inuvialuit society.
Gerry Kisoun is one of Inuvik’s most recognizable residents. Maybe you’ve seen him in his red and green Parks Canada uniform, working on one of the many programs he is involved with, or maybe you’ve seen him at demonstrations for the Northern Games. If you have ever been to the Muskrat Jamboree, you’ve definitely seen him in his glory as the event MC, with his amazing stories echoing across the frozen river and warming up all those who are braving the frigid temperatures that accompany Inuvik in March. He also sits on numerous boards and participates in countless community events. He could possibly be the busiest man 3 degrees North of the Arctic Circle.

Kisoun already does so much in the community, and now he has added another title to his name: Deputy Commissioner of the Northwest Territories.

Kisoun was born in the Mackenzie Delta. He attended Sir Alexander Mackenzie Elementary School and Samuel Hearne Secondary School before becoming a Special Constable in the Provost Section with the Inuvik RCMP. During his career as an RCMP Constable, he served many communities in Alberta, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories before returning to Inuvik to raise his family. Currently, Kisoun...
is working as the Client and Heritage Services Manager in the Western Arctic Field Unit of Parks Canada, where he is able to showcase his culture and his community, two things that he is exceptionally proud of.

Kisoun was appointed as the Deputy Commissioner of the Northwest Territories on October 24th, 2011 by The Honourable John Duncan, who is serving as the Minister of Aboriginal and Northern Development.

“The Government of Canada is pleased that Mr. Kisoun has agreed to serve as Deputy Commissioner,” said Minister Duncan. “Mr. Kisoun has a wide range of experience in the community and a passion for the territory that will help guide him in this role.”

The Commissioner of the Northwest Territories serves a very important role in the governance of the Northwest Territories, and exercises a function similar to that of a provincial Lieutenant Governor.

As Deputy Commissioner, Kisoun will assume all the activities of George L. Tuccaro, the Commissioner of the Northwest Territories, if Tuccaro is unable to fulfill his role in the event of illness or other inability.

With all of his experience and everything that he has done for the community, Gerry Kisoun will undoubtedly be an excellent Deputy Commissioner. Next time you see him at any of the many events he is involved with, make sure you say congratulations!
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