

Kenai Fjords Oral History and Archaeological Project 2003

Report from Gale Parsons Education Director, Pratt Museum

Year three of *Kenai Fjords Oral History and Archaeological Project 2003* brought a new level of participation from the Pratt Museum high school student intern program. As a result of the excitement generated by year two and especially by the oral history taping and videos created in 2002, several students from the villages of Nanwalek, Port Graham, Seldovia and Seward were recruited to be student interns with the Pratt and to travel to the Aialik Bay site. These young descendants of the Native people who inhabited the sites linked the past to the present as they discovered how their ancestors survived on this harsh and beautiful coastal land. Their enthusiasm for the experience and the knowledge they gained connects the project to the future as well.

Working in consort with Kenai Fjords National Park and the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center, logistics and participation for Pratt interns was planned and carried out. We were able to include youth between the ages of 14 and 18 as well as two adults from the Native communities.

Forest Kvasnikoff, who grew up in Seldovia and now attends Mount Edgecomb Boarding School, expressed interest after working as a student interpreter for the *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People* exhibition at the Pratt. Karen Moonin, Forest's mother, has been very active in Pratt and Village collaborative workshops and programming at the Pratt and has developed teaching strategies and marketable traditional skills in bentwood hat making, skin sewing and beading. Forest's stepfather Herman Moonin's roots are in Port Graham and Nanwalek. Herman traveled to the dig site in year two of this project and is interviewed in the resulting video *Bringing the Stories Back*. Both Forest's parents encouraged his participation. Since Forest had turned 18 he made his own decision to sign on for the entire six weeks. As observed during my stay at camp and reported by Dr. Crowell, Forest became one of the most valued workers, ready to do what needed to be done, and also well-liked and respected by the other team members. He clearly understood the importance and significance of the work and was a role model for the other interns.

Forest learned the entire process for fieldwork from setting up camp to the final demobilization. His strength and willingness to participate in each aspect brought a new perspective to the word teenager. Surveying, carpentry, generator and pump experiences topped the expected tasks of camp maintenance, cooking and careful record keeping. Forest proved to be a capable team player in all of these endeavors. Curiosity and energy took Forest to other parts of the Bay by kayak, which he handled with great skill and good judgment, taking a radio and reporting back on a regular basis. Camp experts became a resource for Forest who paid attention to their discoveries and who asked questions to satisfy his own queries. An interest in geology was kindled and he would report back his findings from the kayak travels.

Katrina Dupree, from Seward, spent two weeks on site with her mother Connie Hedrick as chaperone. Connie was raised in Port Graham where her parents still maintain a residence. After the year one site visit, myself and Luba Moonin were hosted overnight at Connie's home. Learning about the coming project from our visit, Connie kept herself informed and was able to interest Katrina in participating. I already knew her mother and father from staying with them at their Port Graham home. It was very special to have the three generations connect through this project.

I was able to observe Katrina and Connie at work and play in Aialik Bay as my time with the other interns overlapped their stay by a few days. When I arrived, both mother and daughter had settled into the project, choosing to concentrate on tasks that they felt most capable with such as data keeping, digging, measuring and screening. Before and after her archaeological experience, Katrina worked at the Pratt in the High School Intern program. Her grandmother and grandfather are residing in Homer for medical reasons and were able to be her sponsors. The experience in Aialik Bay appeared to have brought Katrina's skill for interpretation up a level and she seemed more comfortable in her interactions with our visitors. She truly shone when interpreting her time at the dig and the magic of sitting in the same space where her ancestors had prepared and eaten food from the bones or fashioned tools from the slate we found.

Connie proved to be a valuable team member much admired for her cooking skills and willingness to pitch in where needed. Her connection to the site and its past was expressed through her words of honor and respect, but also by the way she embraced its beauty walking, observing and caring to clean up the debris left by others or washed ashore.

Cora Moonin, 14 and Stacey Hetrick, 16 from Nanwalek watched the video *Bringing the Stories Back* and talked to Cora's grandmother and uncle who had traveled to the site in 2001 and 2002. These close friends applied together, but were unknown to me. I asked for recommendations from community members and teachers and was assured that the pair would be productive team members. When they arrived in Homer to travel with me to Seward it appeared they were more interested in being away from the village than they were in the project. I believed strongly that the experience would change their perspective. From their expressed desire to return to the project in 2004 I believe the brief experience change these two youth in a significant way.

Day one taught Cora and Stacey that, as promised, expectations for their participation as team members was high. They were shown how to open a meter and carefully excavate for artifacts. Stacey found an incredibly crafted slate point in her first hour of work. They were taught to screen for objects missed in the digging and Cora in particular took to this skill with a careful eye to picking up even the tiniest of beads. Digging, measuring and recording data, hauling dirt to the beach for screening and screening were the tasks which they became proficient doing. They performed their other camp duties sometimes negotiating time trades so they could work side by side. A camaraderie developed between Katrina, Cora and Stacey and they spent much of their leisure time together.

News of a death in the Nanwalek village, brought to us by Miller's Landing, cut short our work. The tragic news arrived the evening after both Cora and Stacey had asked Dr. Crowell and myself if they could be involved in the 2004 excavation. The girls felt strongly that they should return for the funeral so we left the following morning with Miller's Landing who generously did not require payment for a trip we did not have planned or budgeted.

During our drive back to Homer we discussed the experience and what we had learned.

As a result of my experience in Kenai Fjords National Park with these High School Interns, I am more dedicated than ever to offering field experience to our interns. Both the Homer High interns and this year's Native Interns were deeply changed, made plainly aware of the rigors of field work, connected on a stronger level to the natural world, and taught the true meaning of teamwork. These are rare opportunities which make me wonder how different this world might be if we could offer such opportunities on a broader scale. When I describe the experience to Museum audiences and friends,

people react with tremendous respect for the effort and often with a sense of sadness that they had not had similar opportunities in their youth. Continuing to build programs such as this with a strong youth component should be a high priority for educational organizations.

It is with much gratitude to the collaborating partners in this project, the villages of Nanwalek, Port Graham, Seldovia, National Park Service, Smithsonian Institution Arctic Studies Center and the Pratt Museum that I submit this report. Without the dedicated cooperation of all parties this valuable project would not be working.

Submitted by Gale Parsons, Director of Education and Exhibits, Pratt Museum