

TRANSCRIPT
Interview with Karen “Dean” Katelnikoff
Resident of Tatitlek
July 17, 2020
Phone Interview by Andrea Floersheimer
Reviewed and Edited by Karen Katelnikoff on February 3rd, 2021

AF: We all have stories from our childhoods. What is your favorite story or memory from your days in school?

KK: Well I think there are actually a couple. I grew up in Old Chenega. It was destroyed by the tidal wave. School was great, we had the same snack every day, crackers, peanut butter, milk. The teachers were always pleasant and willing to teach us one on one if we needed it. In the cities and good-size towns you can't do that. And there were absolutely no field trips. Nowadays the kids fly all over the world and of course Alaska. The only field trip we had was around the point to Long Beach. [Laughs] And, we looked forward to Halloween, Christmas and Easter and we would make decorations and hang them all over the school. We didn't have all the supplies that we do now. We'd make cards to bring home to our mom dad and other family members. Our supplies were construction paper, crayons, paste, paper mache, rulers, pencils watercolors and scissors. We did our schoolwork on brown paper similar to the school paper that the kids use now.

KK: I saved one (brown lined school paper) We used to eat the paste, mostly on a dare. [Laughs].

AF: [Laughs] Oh gosh.

KK: I think the teachers were great to come to an isolated Alaskan village to teach us. We had Mr. and Mrs. Avy until 5th grade. Then we had Mr. & Mrs. Pease until I graduated 8th grade. We had two teachers for the whole class, a dozen to fifteen students for grades 1st to 8th. It was a one room school house. Friday nights were movie nights and on the evening of March 27, 1964, when the earthquake happened, the teachers were supposed to show “The House on the Haunted Hill”. Of course after the earthquake and tidal wave hit there was nothing left of the village except our school on The hill We named Chenega School, the house on the haunted hill after that huge disaster. [AF: Wow] Yeah, yeah. Okay, I'm ready for number two.

AF: So the next question is what did you learn from your parents or community that you were not taught in school?

KK: Forgiving and sharing. Forgiveness was taught in the Orthodox church, Sunday school and by our parents. If we tried to be angry at someone, our parents would sternly talk to us about being nice and please don't hang onto grudges.

Community members shared flour, sugar, salt, pepper, lard, a soap called Fils Napa. It was a rough, soap but it cleaned us, kept us clean. The number one item was a cup of sugar! Besides the basic staples, the hunters and fishermen shared their catch with all of the villagers.

We grew up on bear, porcupine, porpoise, brown bear, black bear, seal, sea lion, salmon, Bottom fish, geese, all different kinds of ducks, clams, cockles, mussels, sea urchins, crab and herring spawn on kelp or popping seaweed.

AF: Thank you for sharing. Number three is what did you like about going to school, and I know you touched on some of this earlier.

KK: The camaraderie was awesome. We all knew each other, and everyone knew what the other person didn't like or liked. We had mutual respect for each other. We supported each other and there was absolutely no bullying. You know how they have bullying in the schools nowadays? You read about it all the time here and all over the world? Well there was none of that.

AF: Wow, that's so nice.

KK: Mhmm

AF: And on the flipside, what did you dislike about going to school, if anything?

KK: We had to climb sixty-five steps to school. In the winter the guys shoveled but sometimes they would still get icy. We would race up the steps and count the steps almost every day.

AF: That's a lot of steps.

KK: If Christmas (December 25) fell on a school day we would be excused. Russian Christmas and Russian Easter we would be excused from school. and it lasted three days. On Easter kids to adults played basketball, one of my fondest memories.

KK: The only thing I really disliked was when the school was actually closed like on Christmas (December 25) because back then we didn't have all the activities like they do now, like basketball, volleyball, games, traveling to school events.

Recess time in Chenega School, we played tag and Red Rover, Red Rover, hide and go seek, on the school playground.

AF: So transitioning to what you're observing in Tatitlek today, what do you like about the schools in your community today?

KK: In their spare time, the kids have all kinds of knowledge they can access on the internet. Families are encouraging students to go to college. We didn't have that push growing up. And that one saying we had "Knowledge is power". Beginning in the early 80s and after that, kids started going to college. Not all of them, but there was quite a few of them, even to this day they're still going. We have great

teachers, good educators. Yeah, I like the school here. The kids learn quite a bit and they have their own Friday night fundraisers where they make money to go on field trips, [AF: That's wonderful] . We also have a couple of educators from Chugach school district come in to help with the kids that are falling behind. I think that's really great. And they catch them up.

AF: Definitely. Regarding....you said that students in Tatitlek are frequently encouraged to go to college. Is it, based on your observation, community members encouraging them, parents, teachers....?

KK: Community members, parents, teachers and family members. Like this one lady when her kid didn't go to school she ran away, so the mom brought her down to the oyster farm, and the kid was saying "Oh it's too stinky here Mom I want to go home." Well this is what you're going to be doing if you don't go to college. And she listened and she went to college and now she's working for Tatitlek Corporation. [AF: Wonderful] Tanya never forgot that. [Laughs]

AF: It's some tough love.

KK: That's one example of what the parents do when their children skip school. Another one is if they skip school is they can't go to after school activities at night for about a month. My kids anyway. [AF: Wow!]

AF: What concerns do you have about the school in your community today?

KK: There's really not that many concerns, we pretty much have everything under control. The only thing of course, is the Covid 19 pandemic. Most kids are getting antsy, they are wishing they were back in school. They think going to school over the I Pad is boring. They miss interacting with the other kids. On field trips, they sometimes forget to do their homework, they catch up though.

AF: That makes sense. Are the field trips mostly for sports, or are they directly education related?

KK: There's AFN, Native Youth Olympics and The Sobriety Celebration in Cordova. The Sobriety a Celebration is on a weekend and AFN and the Native Youth Olympica are on weekdays . These Events are about leadership, participation with outsiders and living a sober life. There's really no concerns, because we have a good relationship with the teachers, Jed and Nicole Palmer, they know our likes and dislikes. We love them. They're retiring in five years.

AF: That's wonderful. So do you have any suggestions for not necessarily improving education because it seems like you have a lot of wonderful things to say about the school, but for making it even better, or for better supporting Native students accomplishing their goals?

KK: What about that now? What was the question?

AF: Do you have any suggestions for ways to improve education in your community or make it even better for the students?

KK: Yes, we have EAC (Educational Advisory Committee) meetings. It's for the parents expressing their concerns and challenges and what they want done for the kids. ?

AF: Is there anything you would like to see taught in school that is not currently being taught?

KK: Cursive. But I think they might have started it. I know they were talking about it at the end of the year and then the Covid thing happened. Because there was this one time I was at AFN at the Elder and Youth meeting up there, the Dena'ina center, and they were asking questions and I was helping this young boy, he was a junior, and I was writing suggestions down in cursive, and he said "I can't understand that." So I had to go back and print it.

When I did the language at Tatitlek School, Penny (teacher) Moore started Home EC . It was great!

When I went to high school we had home ec and we were taught the basics of cooking and sewing.

. This one boy wanted me to teach him how to filet bass. That's kind of tough because of those sharp bones on the fish. They poke you and it hurts really bad, the worst is if they poke you under the fingernails. So I taught, you don't touch this, you don't touch that, because you're going to be sorry if the bone pokes you!

May month we have the Peksulineq festival, but everybody calls it cultural heritage week because more often than not they can't pronounce the Aleut. [Laughs] But anyway that's where they do the fish fileting, stripping fish for smoking and canning. They also do skin sewing, beading, stained glass work, mask carving, Aleut song and dance, glove making, sometimes qaspeq sewing, kayaking in the bay, bonfires every evening if the weather is nice, making little fur bags and making medicine using devil club roots. I probably left some activities out.

When I did Indian Ed, we had beading classes and the kids would estimate how many beads they needed for their headband and headdress. Then we would go from their and order the beads. It also tied in with math and they would pass their math target. We gave the kids three weeks to complete their project.

AF: Wow, that sounds like so much fun.

AF: Did you say it lasted three weeks?

KK: Yes so this was their first time beading. And of course as they got more experienced we shortened the time like two weeks. It was mostly two weeks after that.

We also worked with leather. We had this class where you make the holes in the leather with an awl for the thread to go in. With leather we used waxed thread and the glover needles, those are leather and skin sewing needles, and we'd have to take all that into consideration and estimate how much that would cost, and the kids did a great job. They each made their own estimations and turned it in. And pretty much everybody came up with the same thing. You know like how many beads you need for one headband with

four dangles, or three dangles, and maybe about eight to twelve of the big six mm beads on one dangle, the second one maybe shorter, the third one shorter and then we'd estimate how many we need for all that. And then of course for the girls' headdresses it's way more beads. And the thing is, for the girls, there were several of them that finished with all those beads, and the boys only had about four dangles, three or four dangles on each side, and they got done about the same time. [Laughs] Another time we started fundraising and the boys said "We want to cook!" "Okay then, go in there and cook." Go in there, the girls went out of the kitchen so we're just sitting around yakking and bouncing the ball. The first fire we just ignored them...They put it out themselves. The second fire we got kind of alarmed. And then third fire, they got fired. [Laughs]

AF: I love that there are multiple fires [Laughs]

KK: [Laughs] because they kept spilling the hamburger grease! And the girls would tell them "No no no you got to pour it into here!" You know, the excess. So that was the last time they cooked that year. But we had fun though, it was always fun. Oh and by the way, it wasn't a very big fire. It was alarming though, there was a lot of smoke and we would have to open all the doors.

AF: So moving on to question number ten, do you feel like the school in Tatitlek promotes the history and culture of the Sugpiaq people?

KK: Oh yes, yes yes. Not only the school, but the parents. Because my niece, she just helped her mom you know, camp fish, and she told her ten-year old boy "You're going to help, you pile all the fish over here in this bowl." So he jumped right in. But the five year old, he said, "With my hands?" And the mom said "Of course, what are you going to use, your mouth?" [Laughs] And then Leonte said no, "I'm going to use a foak!" A fork. [Laughs] But yeah, we teach them. They reluctantly help sometimes but some of them jump right in they are happy to help. And then eventually they're doing it real smoothly. Like my boys, they learned when they were young. And both of them learned how to fillet fish, they fillet fish better than me. My dad and husband started them when they were seven, eight years old.

AF: That's wonderful. And for activities like the beading where you went into the school, was that something that you had to ask the school to do, or did they invite you in?

KK: No actually it was a part of our curriculum. And later on we got into dance outfits, regalia. And of course we had a bunch of moms, the ones that beaded made beaded flowers for the girls, or one mom beaded a giant blackbear and put it on her son's vest. [AF: That sounds beautiful] And my friend, yeah, and this one boy, his sister put a lot of dangles on her brother's vest, he was eleven, and she walked into her room, "What are you doing Matthew?" And Matthew said "You made it too girly," so he was taking out all the dangles. [Laughs] That was funny, yeah. But we had fun each time though. We always try to make it fun. Like when I did the dance, they notified us last minute, they asked us to perform Friday and this was a Monday so I jumped in and did the practice with the kids, so this one boy kept throwing himself on the floor, and pouting and saying he didn't want to do that. Finally out of desperation on Thursday morning I threw myself on the floor, I said "This is how you look" and I stuck my lip out. And everybody laughed even he laughed and after that he jumped right in. He still remembers, he likes me real lots now, I just love him, he's all grown up now. So.... but we had a lot of good times. There weren't

many bad times at all. You know we all had our rules to follow and they respected the teachers and we respected their space and privacy and it works.

AF: I think we're on the last question. Is there anything else you would like to share about education in Tatitlek?

KK: Not really, the thing I think we should just start encouraging these kids to attend summer school, because in the late 80s and the 90s, I would say about 1997 we encouraged them to go [to] summer school

AF: Did it conflict with fishing?

KK: Chugach School District developed this program and they purchased a house and they named it Anchorage house and the kids that were all caught up with their work, they got good grades, they got to go to Anchorage house to learn more things. It could be anything to check writing to getting your license, banking, stuff like that, everyday things that we do when we're adults, and this was mostly for the high schoolers. So we usually had it open pretty much all year because there are always those kids who have all their work done. And when we started Indian Ed, that's where we started with Dennis Moore, he was the principal, that they had to have good grades and do all of their work, then they'd have to write an essay before they could go on any kind of trips. Maybe there was one or two who didn't go because they didn't complete their work. But then they caught up and they were able to go next time. And one thing they didn't want to miss was dance performance, so they usually got their work done. They didn't want to miss the trip. Because there were several times that they performed at AFN and other places, or gatherings, the oil executives, they invited us and we performed for them. But, I think we did pretty good over the years. I think we had everybody graduate. got set behind like one or two years but it wasn't really that bad they caught up right away because they didn't want to be left out because they see these graduates going to school or something, or going to a job in a different town/ city.

AF: Sounds like you have a lot of fun.

KK: Yeah, yeah... And we have Jed and Nicole and they dream up all kinds of good activities, they have a sad sack night, and different nights, pajama night, they have all kinds of stuff, different socks, backwards clothing or something like that, they've got a good sense of humor the kids love it. Face painting and crazy hair-dos and stuff like that. It keeps the kids awake and interested and on their toes and they get their work done.

AF: I enjoyed... Thank you so much for participating in this and I really hope I get to meet you when this pandemic is finally over.

KK: Oh yeah, that's what I was going to tell you, I hope I get to meet you too.