

FAMILY SPIRIT GATHERING

STRENGTHENING INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

"At the beginning of the Family Spirit Gathering, Elder Peter Jacobs Sr., knowing DFYS's reputation to take away kids, asked the white DFYS worker to join him in the middle of the gym. He then thanked him for coming to help with family matters involving children and gave him a big hug."

-Patrick Frank

This is the story of how Yup'ik and Cup'ik villages are collaborating with regional, state and federal agencies to build healthier communities. The collaboration combines the traditional and non-traditional techniques of treatment and care supported by both local and non-local resources. The village plays the central role in allowing a program into the village as well as determining and managing the joint strategy. The story is based on the written history of the first Family Spirit Gathering in Kongiganak and on the generous input and assistance of Julia Kanuk, the Family Spirit Project Coordinator at the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation in Bethel.

The Origin of the of the Family Spirit Gathering

In 1997 the State of Alaska's Division of Family and Youth Services (DFYS) contacted the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC) to help develop an approach to better deal with concerns about possible child neglect or abuse in the home. They wanted to put an end to removing village children from their families because of threats caused by alcohol abuse, domestic violence and other family problems. Together they decided on a strategy of bringing the family in crisis to a fish camp setting for "culturally relevant" counseling and other supportive services. They felt that this approach had been effective in other Native American communities and could help in the villages selected.

YKHC and DFYS then took their ideas to the Traditional Council of the Village of Kongiganak to seek advice and request permission to introduce this program in the village. An elder at the meeting advised them that the program would not work because it would only stigmatize the family. It would compound, not solve, the problem. The elder went on to explain that these are complex problems that belong to the community as well as to the individual and the family. He stressed that it is the responsibility of the village to help address and solve them.

With village guidance and advice, a new Family Spirit Gathering program was designed for full community participation. The YKHC's Family Spirit Project helped organize what it called a Village Wellness Team from people with a lifetime stake in the community, with special knowledge and with a commitment to make the gathering a success. It included two Kongiganak Tribal Council members, an Elder, Village Alcohol Education Counselor, Village Public Safety Officer, Community Health Aide, Community Health Aide Practitioner, Child Care Provider and a Community Health Representative. The Team's purpose was to assure that the Family Spirit Gathering addressed the village's needs in a way that would work and also meet the concerns of DFYS and YKHC. The community's Village Wellness Team, in collaboration with Tundra Women's Coalition, The Association of Village Council Presidents, Orutsarmuit Native Council, YKHC and DFYS, developed a Vision Statement and identified results they wanted from the Family Spirit Gathering in the form of expectations.

The Village Wellness Team selected a dozen training facilitators to help run the gathering and broaden involvement and community ownership. The entire team spent several days of training in Bethel to



The Gathering's Expectations

- Children will have safer homes
- Safer and happier families
- Fewer reports of harm to children
- Better communication among participating families
- Learn basic conflict resolution skills
- More involvement of family activities with participating families
- Parents have better access to substance abuse, mental health and social services

increase their skills and add to their wealth of knowledge. The training sessions included anger management, alternatives to violence, conflict resolution, peer mediation, positive Yup'ik parenting, grief and healing, domestic violence, positive discipline and child development. Finally, the Village Wellness Team identified local and outside presenters to address the problems identified by the team. All of these efforts were designed to make the gathering a success.

THE FIRST FAMILY SPIRIT GATHERING

Day One

On the first of June 1999, after two years of planning and preparation, the first Family Spirit Gathering was held. The first day focused on sharing parenting values through personal and traditional stories. The Charlie Paukan family shared what they learned about their struggles with alcohol, about asking for forgiveness, offering help and drawing strength and assistance from their children and the Creator.

In the afternoon Pat Frank, one of the facilitators from outside Kongiganak, shared his story, which he called *The Quiet Duck*. The story was recorded during the gathering:

“From the beginning of time, Alaska Natives have been able to observe and listen to the whisperings of the Chief Spirit, heard in Mother Nature. Messages of peace, harmony and abundance flow continuously to all mankind if only we take the time to be still, aware and clear.

“Last summer while driving north on Lake Otis Parkway, I saw a female mallard duck, with closed eyes, cat-napping in the middle of a five-foot median. The brown duck looked so out of place as the noisy noon hour traffic surrounded her.

“Even more peculiar was my sighting of a cow moose the very next day at the same location. This time I slowed down while the adult moose, with lowered head, rambled through the heavy traffic. ‘Why did I witness these scenes?’ I wondered. It seemed that because I did not pay attention on the first day, a more distinct reminder loomed before me.

“Three weeks before seeing the duck, I was engrossed in several intense, consecutive workshops. The pictures flashing in my mind were similar to the racing traffic. I desperately needed to stop and sit quietly like the motherly mallard. Quietness restores peacefulness and restores perception. I have learned that my thoughts match reality in my life. Inner turmoil adds to life’s problems, while inner peace makes things flow smoothly.

“I have been reminded by several of my spiritual advisors to go to nature for meditation and prayer when agitated. But I so easily become entangled in the turbulence of trying to make things ‘happen.’

“How quickly I had forgotten to be still and ask for help and trust that my Creator will respond. I needed to take a few minutes each day, to remember that the seeds of tranquility inside will germinate into calmness on the outside.

“Even though both the duck and the moose were entwined in snarling city traffic, each one was poised and peaceful. Only now do I realize that my thoughts, my state of mind, condemn me or free me.

“Oh, freedom of choice in life ... I now choose peace.”

The gathering ate dinner together and by the end of the day men returning from hunting joined the group. More than 50 Kongiganak adults and 40 children attended the opening day. Visiting elders and Family Spirit Gathering guests were invited to take a steam. People sat together through the evening discussing and sharing their feelings about the day.

Day Two

The second day addressed Yuuyaraq, the Way of Life. Elders and members of the Tundra Women’s Coalition talked about raising children who have experienced trauma and abuse and small group discussions followed. The afternoon was filled with stories, and a talking circle of young and old discussing old and new ways of family life.

Day Three

On the third day the gathering shifted its focus to communication within the family. Presenters from The Association of Village Council Presidents, the State’s Division of Family and Youth Services and YKHC talked about the Indian Child Welfare Act, alcohol issues and child protection. Members of the gathering shared their personal ideas and thoughts through an open mike. In the afternoon the gathering divided into two talking circles, one for men and one for women. Thoughts from the talking circles were later shared with the whole gathering. Teaching and discussions continued.

Day Four

On the morning of the final day, presenter Mary Stachelrodt of Bethel gave a talk and led a discussion of the *Ellam-iinga* (pronounced “klum eengah”), the Eye of Awareness. The Eye is a traditional model of the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of experience. It helps you to see where you are blocked. Closing the Eye of Awareness can blind or cause a narrow view of the world and hinder positive growth. Opening the Eye of Awareness restores the relationship among the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. When the eye is open the circle is made whole again.

In the afternoon, the people of Kongiganak and their guests discussed the meaning of the gathering for them. They talked about what had happened, the best experiences, the lessons learned, the important Yup’ik and Cup’ik values shared, recommendations to the community wellness team about what topics they would like to discuss at their next gathering and the ways that they can help each other in times of need.

“Our children need to learn to listen about what is good, through well meaning words, such as those through our ancestors’ stories.”

*-Peter Jacobs Sr.
Bethel Elder*

“It does take a village to raise a child.”

*-Julia Kanuk, Coordinator
Family Spirit Project*

“Just because you are married, you aren’t separate from other families.”

-Open Mike Comment

“There comes a time when you have to take a risk and talk about the pain. If you don’t talk about it, the pain comes out as rage, violence or grief. When the heart is broken, the Eye is slammed shut. When you let the pain out, the heart starts to heal.”

*-Mary Stachelrodt
Kongiganak, 1999*

"Ellam-iinga is a Yup'ik word that means eye of the universe, eye of awareness or eye of God. Many old Yup'ik artifacts have the circle and dot motif which signifies God and man. Ella is the root word meaning the universe, all that is, weather or awareness.

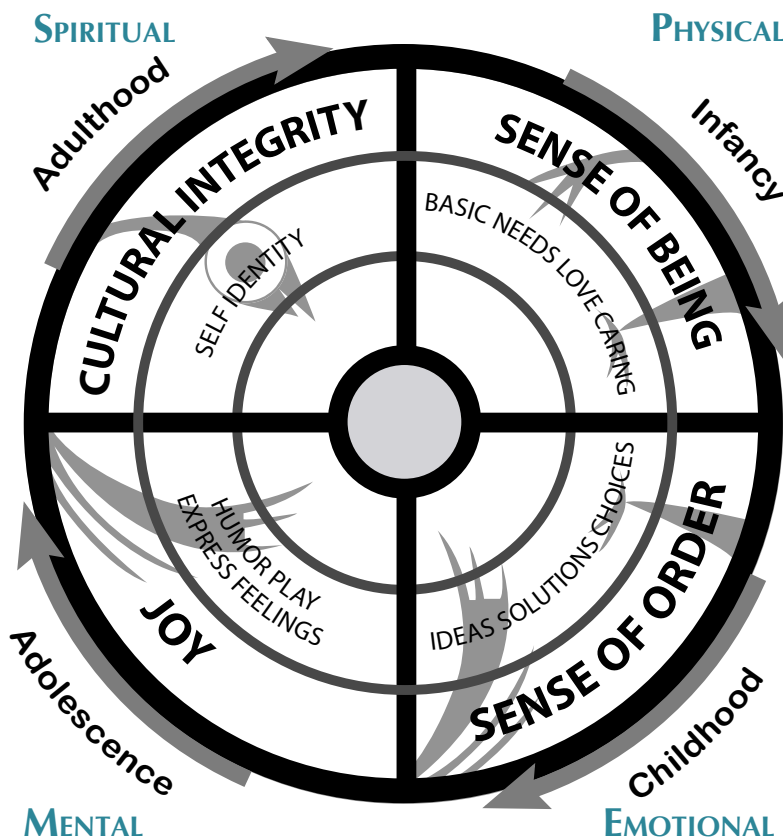
"My father and mother, Nicholas and Elena Charles, helped me understand the relationship between Ellam-iinga and the healing model I had been playing with when I was studying to be a counselor in the early years of my recovery. I was so excited. I had large sheets of paper and started drawing and asking my parents about the significance of eye of awareness and it all fit. It was really important to me that it had a cultural base.

"This model is very personal. The stylized raven was designed for me by my brother George Charles as part of a drum in 1986. I integrated the raven and drum into my model of the Eye of Awareness. The Raven in Yup'ik represents the Creator and a trickster and is also integrated here as an embryo in an egg.

"The red and blue are Nelson Island colors. My father is from Nelson Island. The blue is made from a mineral there and the red comes from the mountain. It is said that Raven had a daughter and that the red color came from her menses."

-Mary Stachelrodt

ELLAM-IINGA, THE EYE OF AWARENESS



Mary Stachelrodt explains concept and recalls the Family Spirit Gathering in Kongiganak:

"Yup'ik, Cup'ik, Inupiat and other Native Americans share a similar concept of *Ellam-iinga*, the Eye of Awareness. The root word, *Ella*, means awareness or the universe with the weather and everything around it. When you add *iinga*, it means eye of the universe or the eye of awareness or the eye of god. *Ellangeq* is such an important concept because it also means to wake up, to 'sober up your mind,' to 'come clean with things,' to become more open. It sees the universe from the perspective of the individual: mental, spiritual, physical, the weather, the stars and everything.

"We are using it a lot more now. It is as if it had been asleep for a while. Things go to sleep for a while and then they wake up. It is like a sleeping giant. Now it is awake and in the light again. For a while it was sleeping because people hadn't been paying attention to it much.

"The model incorporates my own personal experience as well as what I have learned from other recovering people. It is a dynamic model, expanding and growing just as our own human development. If given positive support, the process of human development grows in a predictable

and natural manner resulting in a healthy and productive human being. If the process is interrupted or ‘blocked,’ unnatural responses and destructive behavior emerge. The model is a simple and understandable way to begin to re-awaken the sleeping awareness in all of us. We are blessed naturally with the desire for love, understanding, a feeling of well being and a desire for positive change.

“The response was good in Kongiganak and people were able to recognize that they were going through a healing process and they were remembering that they had it within them to heal. It reminded them. Because this is a model with a foundation in traditional Yup’ik values and concepts, it was very understandable.”

After the Gathering

The Family Spirit Gathering in Kongiganak was a success. Not only was “work done” on problems, but also each day had feasts and opportunities to share laughter. Guests from neighboring communities were invited to observe, eat and take steams. By the fall of 2002 the villages of Napakiak, Tuluksak Emmonak, Tuntutuliak, Nunam Iqua (pronounced “new num ikwa” and formerly known as Sheldon Point), Mountain Village, and Hooper Bay had held Family Spirit Gatherings.

The Family Spirit Gathering Project has helped communities develop a new way to handle a wide range of problems. The villages call it the “mini-conference.” They initiate it and control it. YKHC’s Family Spirit Project and Village Services Department are available to teach how to coordinate and access local and regional resources for speakers and door prizes. Julia Kanuk, Family Spirit Project Coordinator, explains:

“The whole community gets involved and they invite surrounding villages. Young people and old participate. It seems like the people want to build a more positive community. They want to start bonding, creating relationships.

“Each year more people are using these mini-conferences to deal with issues that family spirit gatherings did not cover like grief, death and dying, how youth and elders should get along, how to keep the children in school, and teen pregnancy. And they have so many traumas happening and new problems. In one village a person shot a mother and child and then shot himself. That had never happened before. In another village a boy accidentally shot his sister. They had never dealt with anything like that. In dealing with these traumas they find these mini-conferences very helpful.

“People are getting a lot more aware that it’s OK to talk. It’s OK to feel. It’s OK to cry. These are not hidden agendas any more. They are waking up and are more aware that they don’t have something keeping them from community and personal growth. They want to see their future generations get the best out of their lives and want to help their community and help themselves.”

Quinhaqak (pronounced “kwin a hawk”), Kalskag and Kwethluk are preparing to hold their first Family Spirit Gatherings in 2003.

“Some people are in denial and some people are afraid to participate. Gradually things appear to loosen up and more participate. A month later, the people review what happened to identify needs—workshops, speakers, other topics, services—that may help in the future. A publication is then produced summarizing and documenting the experience.”

*-Julia Kanuk, Coordinator
Family Spirit Project*

WHAT NUMBERS CAN TELL US

In guiding the design of the Family Spirit Gathering, the Kongiganak Elder advised that the problem of the individual family belonged to the whole community. The problem belonged to the whole community and one family's crisis was one of possibly many symptoms or indicators that the community is "out of balance."

To help understand the effect of the Family Spirit Gatherings and subsequent mini-conferences, Kongiganak, YKHC and DFYS have chosen to track the number of "reports of harm." The safety of children is a core concern of everyone involved. The number of reports of harm to children can provide a clue to whether positive progress is being made or not. But such numbers must be used with caution because they may not reflect the true incidence, especially if there are different ideas of what should be reported, or hesitance to report.

Annual Reports of Harm in Kongiganak

FY 1999	FY 2000	FY 2001	FY 2002
66	42	29	19

The reports of harm in Kongiganak since the first Family Spirit Gathering have declined. Fewer reports of harm are being made every year. Is this because there are fewer actual incidents of harm? Or could it be because people are less likely to report incidents because they are more aware of the consequences or because they have other ways of dealing with cases of abuse? Is something else happening to affect the reports of harm? We can't tell by the numbers alone. We can't even be sure by looking at the numbers that the Family Spirit Gathering and mini-conferences are having any effect at all. But the numbers do suggest some progress.

In another community that had a Family Spirit Gathering, the numbers of reports of harm are quite different. Is this community doing better or worse since the Family Spirit Gathering? Maybe more people are aware of the problem so there are more reports of harm. Maybe the community as a whole was becoming healthier but only one or two families were having serious problems. In small communities sometimes one or two people or families can make a big difference in the way the numbers look. And you have to keep in mind that these are only reports of harm, not necessarily actual cases of harm.

Annual Reports of Harm in Another Community

FY 1999	FY 2000	FY 2001	FY 2002
56	111	60	61

In order to get a better idea of what exactly is happening, it would be helpful to get first hand reports from the community itself. This could be done by formal interviews with community members, especially with people in a position to understand the general situation: elders, counselors, or community leaders. Regular site visits from someone like YKHC's Family Spirit Project Coordinator are another way to get information to help interpret the numbers, in the context of familiarity with the community.

A similar approach would be to hold "focus groups" in which seven to ten people from the community would get together to discuss the effectiveness of the Family Spirit Gathering, including issues of domestic violence and reports of harm to children. As in a talking circle, the atmosphere of a focus group should be safe and inclusive with room for all participants to share their ideas and insights. The results of this type of discussion can be very helpful in knowing how best to interpret the Kongiganak data, for example. The focus group might also give us a better understanding of whether the community as a whole was becoming more or less healthy as a result of the mini-conferences or for some other reason.

In bigger communities, especially cities, a scientifically designed and administered questionnaire might also improve our ability to interpret a trend in the numbers of reports of harm and related issues such as arrests, substance abuse hospital admissions, suicide attempts, the percent of children succeeding in school, etc. Neighborhood or community associations, councils or agencies can organize to accomplish any part or whole of understanding needs, meeting together to strengthen community, or evaluating the success of efforts they may have undertaken, such as the Family Spirit Gatherings.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

A Family Spirit Gathering can be a powerful tool for helping small communities or neighborhoods deal with widespread problems, especially issues like personal, family, cultural or community trauma, intergenerational grief, substance abuse, child protection and parenting issues. It may not be for every community. That is for the community to decide. In recording their Family Spirit Gathering, the people of Kongiganak thought that the following were important ideas to keep in mind.

Things you can do to help families or individuals in recovery:

- “say something nice to them and pray for them”
- “watch their children so that they can go to treatment”
- “clean their house when they are away in treatment”
- “send them letters encouraging them while they are in treatment”
- “call them when they are in treatment (but not during the first two weeks)”
- “meet them at the plane when they come home”
- “make a banner from the community congratulating them”
- “bring them fish and berries when they return”
- “be there for them if they have a relapse”
- “hold a potlatch for them when they return home from treatment”
- “visit them”
- “invite them over for dinner or tea”
- “take them hunting with you”
- “take them to church with you”
- “forgive them for things they did when they were drinking”
- “hold a potluck for them”
- “invite them to have a steam”
- “start an A.A. group”
- “set an example”

Yup'ik/Cup'ik Values

Hard Work
Humor
Humility
Cooperation
Family Roles
Hunter Success
Knowledge of Family Tree
Knowledge of Language
Respect for Nature & Animals
Respect for Elders
Knowledge of Yup'ik Names
Sharing
Respect for Tribe
Respect for Others

"The best part of the Family Spirit Gathering was getting together and sharing the problems and knowing that we are not alone."

Some general reminders from the people of Kongiganak:

- "the Elders prepare a path for us"
- "talk to children in the morning"
- "respect children's feelings"
- "sharing feelings lightens the load"
- "be a role model to our children"
- "continue traditional teaching of values"
- "love is the key to our spiritual healing"
- "forgive yourself"
- "encourage young men and ladies to start visiting relatives in jail"
- "in order to change, you have to take risks"
- "only you know what works best for your community"
- "answers come from the community itself"
- "traditional teachings are our sacred way, the way to be human"
- "have a talking circle"
- "in this world we can live well and full if living in a good way"

TO FIND OUT MORE

Alaska Department of Health and Social Services
Division of Family and Youth Services
www.hss.state.ak.us/dfys/default.htm
www.hss.state.ak.us/dfys/Links/default.htm
(907) 465-3191

Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation
Family Spirit Project
1 (800) 478-3321

National Indian Child Welfare Association
www.nicwa.org/

REFERENCE CHAPTERS IN HEALTHY ALASKANS 2010, VOLUME I

Chapter 4. Substance Abuse
Chapter 5. Mental Health
Chapter 6. Educational and Community-Based Programs
Chapter 7. Health Communication
Chapter 8. Injury Prevention
Chapter 9. Violence and Abuse
Chapter 26. Public Health Infrastructure