

AYEA camp gets creati

ASHLEY SKABAR
For the Tundra Drums

Food is a way that we share love and nourishment with one another; to create a meal for another person is to offer an emotional gift and also to create cells in his or her body — we are, after all, what we eat.

But, especially in Alaskan communities where fast food and over-processed food-stuffs are becoming more common and, in some cases, replacing traditional subsistence foods, at the expense of our health and our environment we, as a people, are becoming less connected with our food — from what, where and who it comes.

Last week, participants of Alaska Youth for Environmental Action convened in Bethel for a week-long training themed “Getting Creative About Real Food,” where teens from various villages and communities in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region learned about the U.S. food system through group discussions, activities, and field trips, and worked with instructors to create art pieces, poems, and memoirs that addressed their own relationships with food and eating.

I was privileged to be selected as the creative writing/memoir instructor for this year’s training; working with AYEAs organizers and participants was rewarding and inspiring, and it reminded me, if nothing else, that perhaps at the heart of our unhealthy America is this: We’ve abandoned our cultural foods and forgotten the importance in our own stories.

The memoir is an ideal medium for a dialogue on food and culture; it enables the memoirist to explore his or her history within the scope of memory, which allows for seemingly insignificant moments in one’s life, such as meals, to become key characters

in a person’s autobiography. These characters are important by virtue of our experiences; what we eat and prepare as a culture (as well as what we don’t) says a great deal about who we are.

Throughout our discussions of food and writing, we read from a variety of pieces, from quintessential memoirs like Proust’s *Combray* to contemporary writings such as Jhumpa Lahiri’s “Indian Take-Out,” to convey the concept that food and our connections to it are important — people have been doing it, talking about it, writing about it for as long as they’ve been eating.

Although not one participant in my class had written a memoir before, all quickly selected moments or foods that have been important in their lifetimes and created unique pieces that explored their relationships with food — from salmonberry picking to eating popcorn with a close friend — which they then presented at Bethel’s community house.

Participants in other groups worked with instructors Apayo Moore and Micky Kenny to create a collaborative mural and spoken word pieces to express their connections with food, which they also presented to the community in Thursday’s showcase.

AYEA’s training, however, was a multi-part experience that discussed not only our personal connections with meals, foods, and recipes, but also the larger process of our food systems.

In addition to writing and expressing their stories visually, participants learned about the stories of food itself — from its journey from the earth to the stove — through field trips, lectures, films, and other activities.

The participants were organized into three groups, each lead by and an adult mentor and a peer leader of the same age,



and in addition to their daily activities, the groups rotated preparing and cleaning up after meals.

Throughout the course of a week, the participants created dishes from a variety of cuisines and foods — from baked salmon fillets from fresh-caught local salmon and fish egg soup to homemade pizza and kale chips.

There were a lot of firsts; I personally demonstrated to several participants the proper way to peel and chop a garlic clove, adult mentors taught participants how to properly fillet a salmon, and two participants lead the group in making traditional fry bread.

The group also visited Meyers Farm, an organic farm in Bethel, where they were able to see and hear first hand from farmer Tim Meyer why organic foods, local foods, and vegetables are better for personal and environmental health than processed foods with low nutritional benefits that require fuel to be harvested, fuel to be processed, and fuel to be shipped. At the end of our afternoon at



the farm, the group took home several boxes of fresh produce to be used for meal preparations throughout the rest of the week.

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THE MIND

Live with traditional food



LEFT: **Rebecca Brink**, of Bethel.



CAMP

From Page 10

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits from the week was the group's collective realization that young people are important, contributing members of our communities and that they are not alone, that they have a voice and stories that are validated by their experiences.

On the last day of the training, participants learned about planning for next steps and ways that they can continue to work within their communities individually and



COURTESY PHOTO

Left row, from the back are Nara McCray, Anchorage,, Zoe Fuller, Palmer,, Shannon Kuhn, Anchorage, Angel Ayojiak, Togiak, Sandi Echuck, Togiak, Heidi Kritz, Dillingham. **Right row**, staring in back are: Chris Beans, Pilot Station, Kalan Kelly, Pilot Station, Arlo Beans, Pilot Station, Apayo Moore, Dillingham, Jackson Kalistook, Bethel, Megan McBride, Anchorage, Brittany Akaran, Kotlik, Sassa Williams, Dillingham, Victor Onalik Jr., Noatak, Rebecca Brink, Bethel.

with one another to promote positive change for Alaska, from participating in groups like Americorps to simply making better decisions in their day-to-day food purchases.

"You are now all part of a state-wide organized group of young people who care about Alaska," said Program Coordinator Shannon Kuhn in the closing circle. "Don't let this end here."



MYTH

Alaska Native and American Indian people get free health care.

FACT

The Alaska Native Health System only receives half of the funds needed for a basic level of prepaid health care.

The Truth.

The U.S. government promised prepaid basic health services to Alaska Native and American Indian people in exchange for land and resources. That land continues to provide immeasurable value to the American people.

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