

## Alaska Youth for Environmental Action

# “Getting Creative ‘bout Real Food”

## *Spoken Word Poems & Memoirs*

**Waqaa!** In July of 2010, Alaska Youth for Environmental Action gathered in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta of Alaska to “*Get Creative ‘bout Real Food.*” Communities represented included Anchorage, Bethel, Dillingham, Kasigluk, Kotlik, Noatak, Palmer, Pilot Station, Quinhagak, and Togiak.

Amidst climate change, food insecurity, and loss of culture, these student leaders used art and writing as a platform to act for food, culture, and environmental sustainability in their communities, Alaska, the US, and the world.



**Environmental Education:** The teens explored issues around our current energy-intensive industrial food system and how it is impacting our health, culture, economy, and environment. Alaskans spend \$2.5 billion a year on food, with most of these “food dollars” being exported to the lower 48 or other countries. Less than 1% of the commercially harvested 2,800 metric tons of wild fish stays in our state’s food system, and Alaskan agriculture currently supplies 5% of our state's food needs. Furthermore, a rapidly warming climate is increasing our food insecurity by contributing to lower wild fish stocks, making a subsistence lifestyle more difficult, and changing our landscape.

**Youth empowerment:** In addition to exploring issues of climate change, environmental justice, and activism, participants also studied one of three art forms: spoken-word poetry, memoir writing, or muraling. In one week, they created art pieces in one of these forms, inspired by their personal connection to the land and fueled by the environmental education sessions at the training. Their pieces speak subtly to the difficulties of being a young Native Alaskan in a rapidly globalizing world, as well as the values of knowing where your food comes from, its connection to family, and how that contributes to who you are.

These are their stories. Enjoy!



*AYEA is a high school leadership and youth empowerment program of the National Wildlife Federation. AYEAs summer trainings incorporate the use of art and media to address social and environmental justice issues facing Alaskan teens and their communities.*



# Happiness

Victor Onalik Jr., Age 17

*My name is Victor T. Onalik Jr. I am from a small community called Noatak. It is 50 miles above the Arctic Circle. My favorite foods are Caribou Soup, Whale meat, and frozen fish w/seal oil. I decided after high school, I am going to attend the University of Alaska Southeast Juneau for Elementary Education.*

Happiness is like a drug that makes you want more and more of it. It's like catching fish; one is never enough.

We had never gone on a trip to the fish camp with the whole family before. It is summer. We prepare to leave on a hot, sunny evening. Dad is getting the radio read in the storage room while my brothers, Freddy and Harry, and I gather grub for the cooler—hot dogs, bread, ketchup and soda. My brother Darold is still young, so he just follows us. My mother gathers warm clothes for the trip.

I carry the battery to the boat, but I don't mind. Carrying so much weight on my shoulder reminds me that life can be hard, but I can make it.

We get into the boat. Harry lifts the anchor into the boat, heavy like a sack of rocks. We leave, headed up the river to the fish camp. The river is smooth, clear, bright blue. Mosquitoes smack against my skin, but I don't mind—I'm thinking about how much fish we're going to catch and the elders we are going to give them to. In my culture, the first catch is given to an elder, as with other animals.

As we approach the fish camp, I see the fish racks, cutting tables, and the buoys, floating like big balloons in the water.

"We're finally here," my mother says, with an expression of happiness that feels important.

As we reach the shallow spot, my brothers and I let down the anchor and bring the cooler to the shore. We return to the boat while my mother patiently waits on the shore.

My father, brothers, and I pull in the net. It is hard work, like a tug-of-war against a tough opponent. I feel like we are pirates looking for a treasure chest. We pull in the net, and it is filled with salmon, flipping and splashing. The slippery salmon is my treasure, filled with meat and eggs. It feels like a million bucks in my hands.

My father and brothers are laughing because my littlest brother, Darold, cannot lift a salmon out of the net.

"You're too little," laughs Harry.

We return to the shore and place the salmon into bright red tubs. We put the cutting table by the shore.

My mother is glad that we have caught a lot of fish. She prepares the cutting board and ulus. The air is still. I can hear mosquitoes buzzing, birds whistling and fish flapping on the cutting board. I am tired, but I am anxious to cut the fish.

First, we cut off the heads, then fillet the bodies. The ulus, cutting boards and our hands are bloody when we're done. We wash the fish in the river then bring the tubs to the fish racks.

My father lights cardboard in the smoke pit with a lighter. It hisses and smokes.

The whole family hangs the fish together. The fillets slap against the rungs of the fish racks as we hang them.

After we finish, I make a small fire while Freddy gets the grub. Harry collects wooden branches, and we use them as spokes to cook the hot dogs over the fire.

We eat the food, and although we overcooked them, we have a good time.

We pack everything up and get back into the boat. It's late, but it's still bright out. It is cold sitting on the boat to leave, and we're tired. But the boat is scraping against the gravel river bed, so Freddy and I go into the waist-deep water and push the boat to deeper waters. We jump back into the boat, shivering from the cold, and head home.

We approach the village slowly, turning into the creek that will lead us home. When we dock at Noatak, we load everything onto our four-wheeler and we are finally on our way home.

I am happy when I make it into my bed and can finally sleep. I listen to music to drown out the sounds of my house. The fish swim through my mind still.

# Coming Together

Sassa Williams, Age 14

*I like to bike, walk, be active, and hang out with friends. I like to watch my 10 year old triplet brothers and sisters; I look up to my sister who is 24 and going to grad school to become a doctor, and my brother Bobby, 26, who works on the slope. I am passionate about working on my leadership skills and it's important to me to learn how to lead and to take action so things get done. I also love volleyball, basketball, and track, which are my favorite sports. Real food to me is food that you provide for yourself, not that you get from the store.*



I see you. I see the sunset sky which looks like it has been set upon fire. The sweet smells of the wet grass, the sound of raindrops. It's like being back in my mom's kitchen getting ready for that one Christmas dinner. The smell of the ham cooking in the oven, the sound of spoons and forks clicking together. Hearing all the family chatter is like hearing a million crickets. The aroma carries the scent of barefoot beaches, so smooth and surreal, just like spending time with my dad on the boat. The feeling is unexplainable. Eating the food is spectacular; the taste makes my mouth water and my tongue tingle, almost like that feeling I get when I'm watching the stars dance around the moon.

When all is done and everyone is full, it is nice to wash the dishes and see everyone pitch in. Seeing those white little bubbles from the soap reminds me of the snow. How everyone likes those bubbles and everyone likes the snow. Just like everyone helps to clean, everyone helps to build a snowman. You could be in the kitchen cooking and cleaning, or outside building a snowman, or even on a boat. We all come together as one. If you look at all the rivers and streams, they eventually all end up in one big ocean. If you look at food that way and how it is prepared, it is the same way. Every person who helps to prepare the meal is a little river or stream, a contributor to the beauty that is one. It is like putting the pieces together for a puzzle—you get one big picture out of a bunch of little pictures.

# Nature's Pride

Chris Beans, Age 16

*My name is Christopher Beans, everyone calls me Chris. I am 16 years old and live in Pilot Station which is on the Yukon River. I have one younger brother and two sisters. My favorite food is dried fish.*



God pours his salt-shaker on the land:

we call it snow.

I see the sunrise coming up the hills  
like a beaver damn is just overflowing  
with orange juice. It's warmth can't reach  
us, it is March, I put on my sweater, coat,  
snowpants, socks, and boots like they were  
a pair of buoys. I open the door—  
and there's stale air, I break through  
like it's a wall of paper and do not think  
about the other side of it. Feeling all the glory  
that has hit me as the sun's glow reached  
for my face. Not wanting to think of anything,  
but what I see. As I look to my left, I see one choice.  
The southwest Coozel-Vack Mountain standing taller  
than the twin towers and the statue of liberty.  
Walking to my snow-machine looking all bundled  
up like a burrito. As I step I can hear the snow  
beneath my feet crunch, like my toes are eating  
Doritos. By the time I take off, my dreams appear  
just like the time my dad comes near. With the sun  
shining my way with glistening snow. I have reached  
the mountains with greatness and feeling. Getting  
prepared for the greatest adventure  
with no ceilings.



## Salmonberry Memories

Sandi Echuck, Age 17

*My name is Sandi Echuck from Togiak. My favorite activities are basketball, rod n' reeling, and spending time outside. One of my favorite foods is fish and the chef's salad. My dream is to become a nurse or doctor. Real food to me is food that is organically grown, without any chemicals or pesticides, and not grown in factories.*

I feel wind brushing through my hair, as it swiftly pushes the freely dancing hair onto my face. The rare smell of the tundra climbs up my nostrils, preserving that memory of the winter. Oh, how I will miss it.

I hear the voice of my mother being carried by the wind that graciously hits my face.

*Start picking, she says.*

So I go on, as I bend and pick that salmonberry, vibrant like the sun, as I feel that juice that slowly cools my fingertips. *Thump, thump, thump* is what I hear *when* I throw the few berries into that fiery red bucket.

"Why do I have to do this?" I say with a voice and face I know she recognizes. Then, I hear her voice say back, gentle and calmly, *When I was young, living Quinhagak, Apourlu and Mourlu would bring all of us to a camp for a week, just to pick berries.*

I look at her, surprised; I already feel that inspiration, to do the same as she did at my age.

*It was worth it later in the year, she says.*

I realize that what she has said after we return home, is true, and words that have probably been passed down by her mother. And the way that salmonberry akutak spreads across my tongue like wildfire. That flavor so rare and precious, none other made like hers, one that somehow mirrors my grandmother's loveable personality, the ways of doing things, passed down from generation to generation, those words, ways of living—things so precious that they will not be erased by time.

# My Cycle of Life: Flying Upstream

Heidi Kritz, Age 16

*I am Heidi Kritz and I am from Dillingham, AK. I like all kinds of activities especially the ones we do to make our community a better place. My favorite food is my mom's moose and rice, and my umma's rice akutaq (Eskimo ice-cream). I have a lot of dreams like becoming a pilot or flight attendant. I think real food is food that you can eat in your region close to home; for me it's fish, berries, moose and caribou.*



It's that time again, the fish are coming back  
to lay their eggs, and for us to catch.

The tiny red sacks with a black dot for an eye,  
it's turning into a little fry.

Only an inch long and headed to sea,  
some stay a year and possibly three

Out in the ocean swimming together,  
flying through the water their fins like feathers.

Coming back home fighting up the stream,  
we are both living the dream.

I watch my uppa bring the slippery salmon to the beach,  
where we cut them up and prepare for a feast.

Dry them, smoke them, bake them,  
smells so good makes you want to taste them.

We all rely on an environment that's clean  
seeing it healthy is what makes us beam.

## Strong Memories

Arlo Beans, Age 17

*I am from Pilot Station, Alaska. My favorite sports are basketball, football, and wrestling. My favorite foods are moose soup and BBQ moose rib. My dreams are to become a jet pilot in the Air Force. I have been living off of subsistence all my life. Real food is food that I go out hunting for, and all the things that I hunt for like moose, birds...seal. That is real food.*



Strong memories last a lifetime.

Love makes memories more,  
bright memories that glow in the dark  
night sky watching wishes zoom across  
the beautiful stars that God created. Wishing  
that you can relive those exciting moments  
that painted love all over my heart with finger-paint.

Strong, dirty, oily hands that helped  
my tiny hands grow knowledge  
that makes my fingertips tremble eagerly  
to learn more, until he knows that he taught  
us everything that we needed to know,  
and then it was time for him to move on  
to much more matured spirits that rolled  
beyond happiness like buying his first  
Toyota Tacoma to roam around in, exploring  
a tremendous life that one day I will also be riding  
with the whole family. But for now, I have to live  
my own life. Keep moving forward to where I want  
my life to end up, making the right choices and always  
protecting my heart from anyone that tries to

puncture my pounding drum.

Being strong helps me stand on my own two feet,  
and everyone will have a happy ending.

# Popcorn

Brittany Akaran, Age 14

*I am from Kotlik, Alaska. I've been living there practically my whole life. My favorite activities are hanging out with friends, playing basketball, and doing subsistence with my family. My favorite foods are akutaq, herring eggs, and my dreams are to be a coast guard, doctor, or a pilot.*



*Pop. Pop. Pop.*

Aygul and I smell the buttery saltiness of popcorn. As we open the microwave, a gust of popcorn smells rush at us. We open the bag and put it in a bowl. As we put it in the bowl, our mouths water for that buttery taste.

*Crunch, crunch, crunch—*

It runs down our throat, and it makes us want to have more. Aygul likes popcorn, and whenever we've finished a bowl, she opens another bag and puts it in the microwave.

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Aygul liked to wear boy clothes and caps. She would say hello to any stranger. Aygul always had a positive attitude and didn't get angry.

We met just two years ago, but we've been best friends since. We played basketball, cross country, and NYO together. We used to always stay together, and we listened to music together. Now that she has left to Mississippi, everything has just been a little bit harder for me.

When she left, I didn't want popcorn anymore, because it just made me think about her. I didn't want to walk around town for weeks, and only did because my other friends told me to go out.

She had wanted to stay at Kotlik, but her mother didn't want to be there—she thought Aygul would get into trouble. If her family had stayed just one more year, we could have gone to school together at Mt. Edgecumbe High School. I wish she was here for our high school years.

I miss her being with me; I miss having buttery popcorn at her house. When I see her house, I think about how much fun we used to have doing things together.

I only let myself think of her sometimes. I still have popcorn with my family these days, now that other things have gone into my mind, but having popcorn is not as enjoyable. It is not as enjoyable to me because we were best friends. I know now that why I loved it was because it was with her.

# My Mother's Garden

Nara McCray, Age 19

*Currently interning as the Media and Technology guru for Alaska Youth for Environmental Action, I will begin my sophomore year at Alabama A&M University in fall 2010. I am an AYEA Alumni of '09, former chair of the Anchorage chapter. I love the music, the sun and trying new foods.*



Fresh. A mesh of green flesh.  
A thriving, spiritually reviving serene nursery.  
The products of my mother's love; multifaceted  
manifestation of maternal-motherly motivation.  
Arduous work, prime relaxation, filthy hands,  
spotless kitchen. Many meals of malnutrition,  
but summers become increasingly raw: Organic.  
    Crunch, with a hint of gritty sand.  
    Picked by my mother's happy hand.  
As I began... to mature her lessons of independence  
and nature commence to stir.

Back then:     "Fresh greens in the stir fry!"  
                  I beg for French fries.  
Now:            I concur, why?

I have realized I decide  
my legs can be flimsy over processed potato guck  
standing in an unstable ever-moving truck labeled  
    FOOD DEPENDENCE  
    or....  
sturdy stalks of celery, standing in a secure  
cozy hut of ... FOOD INDEPENDENCE ... I decide.  
Food picked from my backyard, or petroleum coated  
mass monoculture that required miles to drive?

Fast food is an oxymoron, food takes time, seeds  
sewn take months to matriculate their own  
unique crisp flavor not comparable to any  
Vanilla Wafer. Then patiently awaits the time  
it takes to cook. Simmering, seasoning, sprinkled  
spices. Set to sequester savory flavor. Mixing,  
mashing, creating an eclectic montage. Although  
this mystic masterpiece made by mother nature  
didn't materialize in moments. It's worth the wait...  
    Steaming, sizzling, subsistence-like pride.

This meal exists thanks to my mom.  
Her fresh mesh of green flesh.

the garden.



## Know Where You Are

Kalen Kelly, Age 17

*My name is Kalen Kelly and I am from Pilot Station, Alaska. My favorite activity would have to be basketball if not wrestling. My favorite food would be roast moose or fish cooked in tinfoil over a fire. My dream in life would have to be a pilot for Alaska Airlines.*

Shhhhhhhhhhhhh...Flip. Shhhhhhhhhhhhh. A hot tasty liquid leaking, oozing out of the thin layers of fat like a sponge filled with water and the warm, tasty, mouth-watering juice, as thick as the cool milk that you drink from your bowl of cereal, drain onto the bottom of the tin foil wrapped around the meat. It's so hot right here, yet you smell so good.

Know where you are.

*Go ahead, lift your head and inhale heavily. For you will not smell me from 30 feet away. Instead, I will be on your mind and tongue. You imagine me, no, you're obsessed with me in your head.*

Know where you are.

Dark, brown, chewy, juicy, warm, tasty, strands filled with all kinds of important nutrients that I need to grow. A little black crisp on top of me and on the bottom of me. A little black crisp that tastes so good;

it's as if that darkened piece of meat was delivered to me straight from the fluffy, shining, bright, golden clouds of the everlasting heavens. A little black crisp that has passed through the human's mouth ever since the creation of fire, ever since the evolution of life. That chewy, crunchy, crispy meat that only fire can create is the key to this delicious miracle. You know why? Because if there is fire, then there is smoke. Smoke that is so tantalizing to your senses that it triggers your curiosity to dream of all the uses for which it could be used. Smoke that reveals the secret crispy taste from a pink and juicy piece of meat. Taste is immortality. The taste that is me will taste the same, even long after my life has ended.

Know where you are.

# A Holistic Meal

Andrea Sanders (AYEA Adult Mentor 2010)

*Born and raised in Bethel and currently lives in the coastal community of Quinhagak working as a land planner for the Tribe and City. She enjoys fishing for salmon and having cook-outs with her family upriver. Some of her favorite traditional foods include: Fish egg soup with beach greens, hard boiled wild goose eggs, and dried caribou meat.*



The package arrived tightly taped shut letting no time traveled air seep into the care-packaged bundle of love, sent this time in the form of frozen halibut, caught by dad.

When I opened it layers of newspaper, black trash bags, and wall insulation were protecting the Alaskan catch, keeping it nice and cold.

Putting the packing aside I quickly cut open the first freezer packed filet. No fishy stench clued me in that the packaging worked and the product remained fresh.

With no patience to run to the grocery store for cooking ingredients, I called mom for a quick and simple recipe.

We decided with what I had beer batter would be the best form of preparation. And so I began to splish and splash my list of ingredients together into a bowl:

2 cups Blue Moon

½ cup water

2 tablespoons salt

2 cups flour

“Wait Mom! I have no flour!” “Use biscuit.” She says. “No sign of that either.” “Use cereal,” she says.

So I crunched up in my busy hands: 2 cups of Honey Bunches of Oats and sprinkled them into the mixture with love. Next I cut the halibut into beautiful bite sized chunks, then dipped them into the batter, and finally into the frying pan full of oil and grease.

The resulting product: A main course for a feast!

So when 6:30 came and Anwar walked through the door, he dropped his belongings and said no more. Eager to see and taste what this other senses all ready mastered, a smile informed me that he was ready to eat.

We sat and dined, and ate in peace. Each bite somehow better then the last.

To my amazement no leftovers lasted! The two of us consumed the entire supply!

Completely content and full of thanks, I said a prayer to our Creator thanking him for allowing me to share a home cooked meal with *my* loved one, all the way in another state.

In my 21 years I’d never sat and had a meal with both parents present. But this meal, involving both Mom and Dad, was so holistic and spiritually complete.



## A Patchwork Quilt

Zoe Fuller, Age 17

*My name is Zoe Fuller, and I am from Palmer in Southcentral Alaska. I like to hike, ski, cook, read, and make art! My favorite foods are turnips, rice, and salmon.*

Dawn Days, the sky is white  
like the walls  
tacked with colors  
asleep, bright quilts  
with the feel of antiquity,  
patterns of a history,  
a lifestyle few still live

Quilts come from the hands of grandmothers who tended  
babies, gardens,  
baby gardens,  
we're bundled in sleep  
Warm, waking to wet water

out of a womb, into rain pants,  
climb from a cup of caffeine into the car.  
Its hard to drive a car so old,  
and I drive through fields, forests, Les Montagnes  
I leave behind tight jeans, digital screens,  
where we're at, none of that

time hands chime, and so do mine  
into the dirt, muddy shirts

farm fields make a quilt,  
rays of red, strips of green  
stitched by the hands of grandmothers  
who tended babies, gardens, baby gardens  
in farmer's fields we see a time bygone, and to come again  
where fertility came in turn,  
where calluses paired with creativity,  
and fertile fields covered our bodyminds  
a quilt to nourish, keep us alive, let us flourish.

***Quyana!***