

Trip to Alaska taught many lessons

ENCINITAS — Students from Grauer School, 1500 South El Camino Real, headed far north, as they took part in a cultural immersion expedition into the inner-most regions of Alaska in September to visit with the Sugpiaq Tribe on the Kenai Peninsula to the town of Nanwalek.

The expedition, led by Grauer School Headmaster Stuart Grauer, gave the students the opportunity to interact with Nanwalek high students and their elders and engaged in song, dance, dialog and meals. One goal of this journey was to teach the students the tribe's definition of "legacy" and the significance of sustaining legends, myths and the ways of life that have been passed down through generations. In a continuing education series at The Grauer School, the Alaskan Expedition is part of the "Legacy Project," developed to engage students in the importance of embracing heritage through interaction with senior citizens from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

Many of the Alaskan tribes the students encountered have become destitute and removed from their heritage; men are leaving remote towns and religions have been fragmented. Some believe that children in these villages are losing important survival skills and are growing up in a spiritual vacuum, as do any children who have little or no interaction with their elders. In the U.S., parents and grand-



LIFE LESSONS Back row from left, Grauer School teacher Christy Goodson; Guy, Nanwalek's top bear hunter; Chris Apodaca, Donna Ball, Kelianna Row, Dylan Larson, Audrey Grauer and Charlene Burton. Front row from left, Headmaster Stuart Grauer, Phillip Elster and Kierston, a Nanwalek cultural guide, gathered on the porch of a local dwelling during Grauer School's recent expedition to Alaska. *Courtesy photo*

parents are living far beyond the age of previous generations, and these extended family members rarely reside in households with their family members. In response, The Grauer School is engaging its students in outreach programs at assisted living senior centers. Grauer believes this provides students with the opportunity to interact with seniors who impart important life lessons and knowledge that comes with age.

"Even though we saw dra-

matic changes in the Alaskan lifestyle and many of the men are leaving the area, there are still those who work to keep their heritage alive through the teaching of their elders," Grauer said.

Nanwalek Chief Wally Kvasnikoff explained, "Our elders are very important and we want to take good care of them. This ties young people back to the stories of the old days. It keeps them busy and wakes them up to the real world. As a result, the

Nanwalek high school students we encountered at a village feast have remembered: the first catch of the year goes to the elders. The first cut of the bear meat goes to the elders. It is out of respect for the skills these elders share with the villagers every day that they are given preferential treatment."

The students saw how the Nanwalek work to rebalance their rational and spiritual

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worlds. They observed public art featuring tribal traditions and natural embellishments on buildings. They saw how berry picking and gathering again feeds the community, and elders show the young how

their grandparents made fruit jams. A local fisherman donates fish and then an elder gives lessons in the community hall kitchen on how to can salmon. The community garden is harvested and its produce is split among members of the village, the first-picked going to the elders. Villagers

are using furs again and members of the Grauer School Expedition received pillows made of sea otter and fox fur to take home with them, an example of a handicraft that will keep Nanwalek traditions alive.

High school junior Olivia Burdge from Rancho Santa Fe

observed, "While in Nanwalek, I found how sacred the land, culture and traditions were to them — it amazed me that they were able to keep the dance alive through all the years and still not be embarrassed to perform it to a group of outsiders they just met."

The visit to Alaska aimed

at teaching the students about subsistence living and their place among the generations of man. They encountered salmon, bears, bald eagles and the age-old question of "What do you want to be remembered for?" and "What does my heritage have to do with who I am today?"