

The Winter Bear Project 2014 Kenai Peninsula Tour Final Report



For Our Grantor

The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium

Thank you ANTHC for the opportunity to bring our message of hope to communities on the Kenai Peninsula.

Speaking for all of us involved with The Winter Bear Project, from our Board of Directors, our actors, producers and tour manager, we are happy to report we fulfilled our goals:

- **To broaden awareness about the causes of Alaska Native teen suicide**
- **To stimulate dialogue about these causes among elders, youth, community members**
- **To promote healing and healthy decision-making through our School Workshops**

We commend you for having the vision to see that a theatrical piece can be a valuable tool in Suicide Prevention.

Every community we visited was grappling with the aftermath of unexpected death and suicide in its own way. We learned so much from all of them. They have the knowledge, the experience, the expertise, the stories - and the will - not only to cope but also to change the climate of fear and hopelessness that leads to suicide.



Chalk art advertising at Nanwalek School

Tour Narrative

On April 23, 2014, after a year of planning, ten excited, nervous members of The Winter Bear Project stepped off a plane in Anchorage. Would our set arrive from Barrow intact? How would we face students in Seward who'd recently lost two of their peers to suicide? What about the infamous short runway flying in to Nanwalek? Would an Alutiq, predominantly Russian Orthodox audience "get" a play about a Koyukon Athabascan youth? Would our good humor last through ten days of travel by van and small plane? Could we stay focused for six performances in five communities?

We put all our worries on hold as we headed off down the Seward Highway in bright sunshine. We just had time to gasp at the glorious mountains ringing Resurrection Bay, before "checking in" to our floor accommodations at Seward High School. Deb Bond, Seward Boys & Girls Club Director and our local coordinator, immediately whisked us off to a dinner in our honor at the Teen Center where we had the opportunity to talk informally with school principals and counselors as well as members of the Suicide Prevention Coalition about the aftermath of the recent suicides in Seward.

Then we went back to SHS and began putting up our set. We had a lot of technical things to figure out about the theater space and then we had to rehearse for a school show the next day so we didn't get to crawl into our sleeping bags until 1:00 a.m.

School shows can bring out the pack mentality in teenagers who become more interested in how their peers are reacting to the show than in their own personal reactions. This did not happen in Seward, however. The combined High School and Junior High were our most attentive, engaged audience. The actors said they actually felt connected to the energy of the audience. SHS Principal Trevan Walker set the tone by talking about how helpless and confused he himself felt after the recent suicides and that he hoped our show would offer some insight into how such things can happen. Perhaps his openness is what allowed the energy to flow. In the class period after the performance, students and teachers had the opportunity to sit down and talk about the show and extra counselors were on hand for the rest of the school day. We felt good knowing that students had good support and time to process before boarding buses for home.



That evening, after an all-you-could-eat halibut potluck in the school cafeteria, we did the show for the Seward community. Deb Bond began the evening with a frank description of her own reaction to the suicide of her teenage son a few years earlier. It was helpful and hopeful but there were still a few tears before the show even started. We were also fortunate to have Barbara Franks, ANTHC's Suicide Prevention Specialist, in the audience that evening. She continued the dialogue with a number of community groups and individuals the day after the show.

After getting the set packed up, we fell into our sleeping bags exhausted after two shows in one day. We were looking forward to sleeping in until 7:30 a.m., but were awakened instead at 6:45 a.m. by drama students arriving for an early morning make-up rehearsal for *You Can't Take It With You*. Apparently the drama teacher never got the word that there would be 12 people asleep in various nooks and crannies in the theater. We packed up and got out of their way as quickly as possible.

Next stop: Ninilchik where the Ninilchik Traditional Council had arranged housing for us at Bluff House Bed & Breakfast. We had a stimulating afternoon playing theater games with kids at the Teen Center who, after some initial hesitation, proved to be “naturals” at improv. The actors all felt extremely lucky to have a real bed and delicious home-cooked breakfasts both days. We're grateful to the Ninilchik Traditional Council for providing us with this wonderful treat.



View from Bluff House, Ninilchik

We had an honored visitor at our Ninilchik show. Jim Rearden, who co-wrote *Shadows on the Koyukuk* with Sidney Huntington, came up from Homer with his wife, son and daughter. This came to pass because when we were pitching the show to Nancy Kleine, the principal at Nanwalek and Port Graham schools, she told us she knew the story of Sidney Huntington well since she was Jim Rearden's daughter. Since her father's health made it impossible for him to travel to Nanwalek for the show, Nancy arranged for him to see it in Ninilchik.

R. Greg Encewleski, President of the Ninilchik Tribal Council who gave the welcome speech before our show, was an old friend and admirer of Mr. Rearden's. Many others in the audience – and the cast – were thrilled to meet this legendary former editor of Alaska Magazine and author of so many important books about Alaska and Alaskan history. After the show, NTC Tribal Health Director Janet Mullen, BH Program Services Manager Donna Henry and BH Aide Maureen Todd were on hand for audience support and to continue the dialogue.



Sidney Huntington (actor Brian Wescott) greets Audrey and Jim Rearden after the Ninilchik show

*“I am so remiss in not writing earlier to tell you how much we enjoyed the play at Ninilchik. You all did a very fine job.”
– Jim Rearden, co-author “Shadows on the Koyukuk”*

The next day we backtracked up the road to the Ionia Community outside of Kasilof. We'd met members of this unique community at the 2013 Rural Cap meeting. One of their founders, Barry Creighton, is a board member of the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority and the community is very interested in all aspects of mental health, macrobiotic food, and group process. As a thank you to the community for their hospitality, we did a performance in their Great Room for Ionians and invited guests, including members of the Kasilof Native community. The next day we played theater games with Ionian children until we had to hit the road again.

Some of the cast would have been happy to stay at Ionia – perhaps forever, but we pressed on to Homer, where, after re-provisioning, doing our wash and having a decidedly un-macrobiotic lunch, we turned ourselves and our 1,000 pounds of stuff over to Homer Air Service for our flights to Nanwalek. To get to Nanwalek, pilots must cross Kachemak Bay, travel along the Kenai Peninsula coast to the southernmost tip, aim directly for a high hill then make a sharp left turn onto a beach runway. Our flights to Nanwalek were short, but thrilling or terrifying depending on which cast member you ask.

With its onion-domed St. Sergius & Herman of Valaam Russian Orthodox Church and its world-class views of Mts. Augustine, Iliamna and Spur across the Bay, the Alutiq village of Nanwalek has to be one of the most beautiful inhabited locations in Alaska. Nanwalek School Principal Nancy Kleine was on hand to truck our stuff up the hill to the school. We noticed people watching from their windows, but when we waved they disappeared.

As soon as we started assembling our set in the school gym, however, curious people greeting us with the traditional post-Easter “Christ is Risen” began showing up to watch and help. The next day we did workshops all day at the school. Gianna Drogheo, our Stage Manager and a former school music teacher, declared she'd never heard children sing with such enthusiasm. Dr. Steve Atwater, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District Superintendent, arrived to attend our April 28 evening performance. We were happy to meet him since we'd been enjoying KPSD hospitality for so much of our Tour.

The pre-show potluck was held at the Nanwalek Tribal Council Building. Father Sergie Active welcomed us with a homily on the causes of suicide. Then all the people sang Easter hymns tonally in Sugt'stun, the local Yup'ik-influenced language. After we'd eaten more than our fill of salmon, smoked halibut strips, seal and bidarkis, we all walked the short distance from the Tribal Building to the school for the show. Although 78 people doesn't seem like a large audience, when you consider that the total population of the village is only 177, it's a much more impressive number.

With lots of help from the School Bilingual teacher, WBP Producer Anne Hanley was able to offer a greeting in Sugt'stun to introduce the show. Another first: Chelsea Carpenter, an American Sign Language interpreter, signed the play for a deaf student in Nanwalek and then traveled to Port Graham to interpret for a deaf community member there.



Stage Manager Gianna interviews a new tech helper

The day after the show, we had the thrill of overhearing a fifth-grade teacher leading her students in a rousing rendition of “I’m Going Hunting,” one of the Theater Games we’d taught the class the day before. When we left Nanwalek, the whole town turned out to say goodbye, a far cry from the silent eyes staring out at us when we arrived.

Nanwalek and Port Graham are only five miles apart, but the only way to get over the mountains between them is to take a 15-minute flight. Although short, it was exciting since a huge Spartan 151 Jack-up rig was anchored in Port Graham Bay directly in front of the approach to the runway. Our pilots deftly skirted the rig and deposited us just outside the doors of Saint Herman of Alaska Russian Orthodox Church. We were all grateful to St. Herman and to our pilots for our safe arrival. The set traveled by truck the short distance from airstrip to school and the rest of us followed on foot schlepping our gear down the main street in kind of parade. Our main contact at the school was Bobby McMullen, the school secretary and a Port Graham native. Bobby had done her job well. Everybody in town knew about the show. We borrowed chairs for the elders from the Port Graham IRA Council and spent the rest of the day setting up and playing basketball with the kids in the school yard.



View of Kachemak Bay over the pilot's shoulder

The next day was so warm that we were able to do dance classes and theater games outside, saving our “Actor Prepares” and “Telling your Story” workshops for the classroom. We love socializing with community members at the pre-show potlucks. The potluck at Port Graham included not only every possible kind of seafood, but also bear meat, blueberries and many versions of Easter bread. We left with recipes.



Potluck at Nanwalek

The 52 souls at our evening show represented over one-third of Port Graham's total population of 171. Every show is special, but, if given a choice, we prefer to do community shows because we feel the mix of elders, young people, children (plus assorted pets) offers some protection to those who are vulnerable. The elders always get Sidney Huntington's jokes first and they laugh the loudest. It's exhilarating for the actors to feel the mix of generations all relating to the show in their own ways.

We left Port Graham and then the Kenai Peninsula with all our initial worries dissolved. All kinds of people responded to the show and were grateful to us – and to you, our sponsors – for taking the trouble to come, share our story and listen to their stories.

2014 ANTHC Kenai Peninsula Tour Schedule

April 10	Dress Rehearsal Show, Effie Kokrine Charter School, Fairbanks
April 23	Afternoon show for middle and high school students, Seward High School Evening Community show, Seward High School
April 24	Theater Games workshop, Ninilchik Teen Center
April 25	Ninilchik Community show, Carol Brock Hall, Kenai Peninsula Fairgrounds
April 26	Ionia show for community and invited guests at Ionia, Kasilof
April 27	Theater games with Ionia community children & adults
April 28	Workshops for Nanwalek School students Evening show for Nanwalek community
April 30	Workshops for Port Graham School students Evening show for Port Graham community



Cast & Seward audience display number of calls to National Suicide Prevention hotlines in one year - 1,130,192

*“The timing was perfect. (The Winter Bear Project’s Kenai Tour) surfaced when it needed to so that healing journey began for people I talked to after the performance. People left with the thought, “I AM NOT ALONE,” and in some fashion, those who lost a loved one to suicide, even though we just met, shared a bond. It was an honor to help sponsor The Winter Bear Project for a second year through our Methamphetamine Suicide Prevention Initiative.” – **Barbara J. Franks, ANTHC Suicide Prevention Specialist.***

Play Attendance

- 206 Effie Kokrine Charter School Dress Rehearsal, Fairbanks, April 10
- 285 Seward High School (260 students & 25 faculty), afternoon, April 23
- 50 Seward High School evening community performance
- 40 Ninilchik, April 25
- 38 Ionia Community at Kasilof, April 26
- 78 Nanwalek, April 28
- 52 Port Graham, April 30
- 749 Total Play Attendance

*"This is an important story to tell and you tell it well."
C. Greg Encewleski, President, Ninilchik Tribal Council*



Young audience members patiently wait for show to begin

"Sidney Huntington is a remarkable man – as a person, a Native leader, and an educator and the topic of suicide is on all our minds when we work with youth. I appreciate the value of your project." – Nancy Kleine, Principal, Nanwalek & Port Graham schools

Student Workshop Attendance

40	Effie Kokrine Charter School Fairbanks
9	Ninilchik Teen Center
12	Ionia
124	Nanwalek
70	Port Graham
255	Total Workshop Attendance

Instructor Contact Hours

8	Effie Kokrine Charter School
8	Ninilchik Teen Center
7	Ionia
20	Nanwalek
16	Port Graham



Young men in Nanwalek help with set

"I'm glad so many Kenai Peninsula Borough students have been able to see this play." Dr. Steve Atwater, Superintendent, Kenai Peninsula Borough School District

Evaluation Component

Evaluations, consisting of six questions plus space for comments, were either directly distributed to audience members or made available to them after every performance. Mark Erickson, MD, Southcentral Foundation Division of Behavioral Health, originally compiled our Evaluation Form in 2011. It was subsequently approved for distribution during this tour by Jessica Craig, ANTHC Program Evaluator.

Evaluations Forms Completed

Fairbanks:	27
Kenai Peninsula:	62
Total:	89



Wolf (actor Erick Robertson) with admirers after the show

"The feedback from our region has been overwhelmingly positive. I'm so happy I was able to attend two shows to see the response for myself."

- Michael Horton, Director of Behavioral Health, Chugachmuit

Behavioral Health Component

Trained Behavioral Health Specialists:

- Attended all performances
- Were introduced and thanked at every show
- Were available to connect with audience members as needed at Intermission and after performances

Thanks to all those BH specialists and counselors who provided this vital support link:



Janet Mullen (l) and Donna Henry (r) ready to pass out Prevention material in Ninilchik

Barbara Franks, ANTHC Suicide Prevention Specialist (Seward)
Deb Bond, Director, Boys & Girls Club, Seward
Maggie Wilkins, Director, Seward Teen Center
Katie Cornwall & Joseph Forscher, Seward Prevention Coalition
Trevan Walker, Principal, Seward High School
Jason Bickling, Principal, Seward Middle School
Martha Fleming, Counsellor, Seward High School
Janet Mullen, Tribal Health Director;
Donna Henry, Behavioral Health Services Manager;
Maureen Todd, Behavioral Health Aide, Ninilchik Traditional Council
Kathy & Barry Creighton, Ionia Community
Michael Horton & Nancy Radke, Chugachmuit Behavioral Health

“We were so honored to have you and your play come to Ninilchik. People are still talking! It was an absolute hit. The subject matter is incredibly important. Thank you for putting a voice to something that has affected us all.”

Donna Henry, Behavioral Health Services, Ninilchik Traditional Council

Elder Welcome/ Blessings

Fairbanks Nicki Guthrie, April 10
Seward Ellen Simpson, April 23
Ninilchik R. Greg Encewleski, President,
Ninilchik Tribal Council, April 25
Nanwalek Father Sergei Active, April 28
Pt. Graham Rev. Rick Richter, April 30



Elder Ellen Simpson and family members at Seward High School show

“I was a little worried about this play if it would be too much with the subject matter and all. But now that I’ve seen it, I think it’s good for people to hear this message and I pray it can be heard by more people all over the State. – ***Father Sergei Active, Russian Orthodox priest, Nanwalek and Port Graham***”

Other Partners

Fairbanks	Fairbanks North Star Borough School District Effie Kokrine Charter School PTA Fairbanks Native Association Johnson O'Malley Potlatch Dancers
Seward	Kenai Peninsula Borough School District Qutekcak Native Tribe of Seward Seward High School Seward Middle School Seward Suicide Prevention Coalition Seward Teen Center Seward Boys & Girls Club Seaview Community Services
Ninilchik	Ninilchik Traditional Council Behavioral Health Program Ninilchik Traditional Council Elders Outreach Program Kenai Peninsula Fair Bluff House B&B
Kasilof	Ionia Community
Nanwalek & Port Graham	Nanwalek Tribal Council Chugachmuit Behavioral Health Department Port Graham Tribal Council



*Natalie Kvasnikoff after
Nanwalek show*

"I am the mother of James Randall Kvasnikoff who died recently at age 46 of a heart ailment. He was Second Chief in this village (Nanwalek) and a custodian at the school. And he was my right hand. I came to this play (The Winter Bear) tonight because my son believed it would be a good thing for Nanwalek to see and he fought hard to get it here. Now I'm so proud that he was right." – Natalie Kvasnikoff, Nanwalek

2014 Publicity Kenai Peninsula Tour

Seward City News, April 17, 2014

<http://sewardcitynews.com/2014/04/the-winter-bear-project-april-23/>

*The Seward Phoenix LOG, April 17 2014

<http://www.theseawardphoenixlog.com/story/2014/04/17/arts/winter-bear-powerful-message-lifts-taboo-on-suicide/2539.html>

The Redoubt Reporter, April 23, 2014

<http://redoubtreporter.wordpress.com/2014/04/23/the-winter-bear-tackles-issues-of-suicide/>

Seward City News, April 24, 2014

<http://sewardcitynews.com/2014/04/winter-bear-a-powerful-play-on-suicide/>

The Seward Journal, April 30, 2014

<http://www.theseawardjournal.com/content.php?category=1&articleID=207>

Extreme Alaska, May 6, 2014

<http://uafjournalism.com/2014/05/06/from-kenai-to-barrow-fighting-suicide-in-alaska/>

The Winter Bear Project is a Domestic Nonprofit incorporated in the State of Alaska, Dec. 10, 2012.

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Fred Kopacz	Nadine Winters

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The North Star Community Foundation, a 501(c)3 corporation, is the fiscal agent for The Winter Bear Project.

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