

Mother FOR HER People

Elaine Abraham, health care pioneer,
organizes important naming ceremony

STORY AND PHOTOS BY LESLIE HSU OH
FOR FIRST ALASKANS

A few hours after I arrive in Yakutat, Elaine Elizabeth Abraham speeds down newly paved roads in pursuit of the sunset.

She is a Naa Tláa (clan mother) of the Yéil Naa (Raven Moiety), K'ineix kwáan (people of the Copper River Clan) from the Tsisk'w Hít (Owl House).

Although her grandson Kai Monture, 21, occupies the driver seat, Abraham is clearly the driver.

“Hurry, Kai. You are going to miss it,” she says. Sitting snugly between two other out-of-towners in the backseat, I can see only the top ringlets of her golden brown hair bobbing above the headrest. Her infectious laughter spills into our laps.

You would never know that she slept very little the past few days, planning tomorrow's *ku.éex'* (memorial potlatch) and *haayatx'í ku.éex'* (naming ceremony), which she claims will be her last.

The first Tlingit to become a registered nurse and a pioneer in creating health care delivery models across the state – such as the Alaska Native Medical Center – Abraham simply can't resist placing other's needs before her own.

In the past seven years that I have worked with her through the Alaska Native Science Commission (ANSC), which she chairs, I've watched Abraham run her meetings like a mother bear. She often checks in on each of us, from executive director to intern, privately or publicly, and offers a hug.

RIGHT: Elaine Abraham loves spending time with her grandchildren and great grandchildren. Jaime Snedden Junior, two years old, and Olaf Snedden, six months old, are her youngest great grandchildren. Their mother, Melody Snedden, is the daughter of David Ramos, Elaine's youngest son.







elaine3.png

Abraham graduated at the top of her class from the Sage Memorial School of Nursing in Arizona in 1952. COURTESY RAMOS FAMILY



When I stepped off the plane earlier, she wrapped her arms around me at the airport and whispered in my ear, "I'm so glad you made it." Then she squeezed my arm and said, "You look just like one of my own."

With two simple sentences, she brings me home.

My Navajo name means "Journey with Caring" or "Journey to Bring Out Gifts." I am indigenous by name but not blood. I was adopted into the Navajo Red Running into Water Clan, shortly after my brother and mother died of liver cancer. Serving the Amerian Indian and Alaska Native community has been my way of honoring my name.

Abraham has a special way of making me feel welcome, and I would not be surprised if Abraham has the same effect on the other 160 guests expected to attend tomorrow's *ku.éex'* and *haayatx'i ku.éex'*. Sixty of them are from out-of-town, some spending as much as \$6,000 to attend.

Abraham has a gift, perhaps inherited from her parents: an ability to be there at the right moment and deliver comforting words. Her father was Olaf Abraham, a Tlingit chief, and her mother, Susie Bremner Abraham, was also a pioneer in health care and education.

It is nearly 10 p.m. and the family still has to meet tonight to review the agenda, yet she insists on giving the three of us out-of-towners a private tour of Yakutat. Tonight, she is like a teenager looking for trouble on a lazy summer day.

First, she asks her grandson to pull into the driveway of a breathtaking ocean-view home, perched on a cliff. She encourages us to wander around the property since the owner is not home. We peek through the windows, lean against the glass railing, and imagine being lulled to sleep

by the gentle waters of Monti Bay.

Then, she sets us free on Sandy Beach and waits patiently while we mess around with our camera settings as the sky darkens into ribbons of maroon and gold. After piling back into the car, she introduces us to the rest of the town, pointing out the best store to buy souvenirs and the apartment where her second daughter, Judith Ramos, lives.

The car swells with giggles and stories. She makes us feel like an accomplice to her wild adventure. Someone jokes that Monture should floor the gas pedal while we fling open the passenger door and knock down some fat orange cones that line sections of the road. Abraham chuckles mischievously and says, "Yes, I'd have done that a long time ago if I knew they were plastic."

A love for life

Abraham once told me, "There are owls around the corner. Surprises! I think that's why I just love living. You never know the people you are going to meet. You meet people and all of a sudden you strike a spiritual connection because they've got interests like you do and you gather up these friends. Life is so good and you never know what's around the corner that's waiting for you."

She finds a way to relate to everyone. Judith Ramos says, "She is always able to see the good in people." In her community, Abraham is known as Chewshaa, which means "little grandma" in Tlingit and Eyak. True to this name, she goes beyond small talk and soothes with words that are like a Band-Aid on your heartaches. In her presence, you curl up on the





ABOVE: It's 6:30 a.m., the end of a 20-hour-long potlatch, and the exhausted hosts, listed from left to right, Judy Ramos, Kai Monture, Maka Monture, Alison Breamner, Nirvana Ramos, Elaine Abraham, and Mike Travis bid the guests farewell. Photo by Leslie Hsu Oh for First Alaskans. OPPOSITE PAGE: Nearly 2 a.m. the day of the ceremony, Abraham is reviewing every detail of the agenda with her daughters Charmaine Ramos and Judy Ramos, and her grandchildren Nirvana Ramos, Melody Ramos Snedden, Kai Monture, and Maka Monture. Her dog, Wishbone, is asleep beneath the binder. PHOTOS BY LESLIE HSU OH FOR / FIRST ALASKANS.

couch and collapse in her arms.

She takes special interest in the ailing. Every time we drive past the Yakutat clinic where an ambulance light is flashing, Abraham cranes her neck against the car window trying to figure out who needs emergency care.

"Kai, do you recognize the truck? I wonder who's in trouble?" she worries.

Earlier, on the plane ride from Anchorage to Yakutat, her oldest child, Charmaine Ramos, confides in me that what she admires most about her mother is her ability to know how and when to do things. "She's like a homing pigeon," Ramos says as we hit an air pocket and she clings to the armrests of her airplane seat. "She's very smart. She has the courage to be the first at things. She has the courage to be different."

George Ramos, Abraham's ex-husband, says that Abraham intimidated him even though they grew up together in Yakutat when there was only a population of 300.

One afternoon decades ago, she waved to him while he was fishing on the banks of Situk River. Something about the way the sun shone on her hair gave him the courage to sweep her off her feet and dangle her over the river. "Are you a strong woman?" he had asked her. She responded by holding on tight.

They married in 1953. Now, they are two of the five remaining fluent speakers of Yakutat Tlingit. Together, they had four children: Charmaine, George, Judith, and David. Abraham pushed them all to succeed in higher education. She proudly tells me, "We have about 15 degrees between my four kids and myself." Abraham earned an RN, bachelor of arts in Human

Resources Development, associate in arts in Anthropology of Northwest Coast Indians, and a master of arts in Teaching Multi-Ethnic Education. She is currently completing a PhD in natural health.

Her grandchildren also excel in education and leadership. Charmaine Ramos' daughter, 31-year-old Nirvana, is currently working full-time with the City of Anchorage and is pursuing a finance degree. Judith Ramos' son, Kai Monture, is studying journalism and public communications at the University of Alaska Anchorage. He has won many awards, such as first place in the 2007 Young Native Writers Essay Contest and first place in UAA's 2009 Alaska Native Oratory Statewide Competition's Native Language and Oratory category. David Ramos' daughter, 29-year-old Melody Ramos Snedden, juggles a full-time job at the Alaska Native Heritage Center with online business management courses and raising four children. And yet, she always seems to have time to volunteer in her community. Judith Ramos' daughter, 18-year-old Maka Monture, former head of Yakutat's chapter of the Alaska Youth for Environmental Action, recently received the Gates Millennium Scholars 2011 Scholarship and is the first high school student to win first place in UAA's 2011 Alaska Native Oratory Statewide Competition's Oratory category.

They have a continuously high-achieving grandma as a role model. This year, Abraham was inducted into the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame and honored as the 2010/2011 Professional Woman of the Year in Science by National Association of Professional Women.

Charmaine Ramos told me that her mother used to begin each day with an announcement of whether she felt like an Elaine or an Elizabeth. Abraham's older sister by 11 years was named Elizabeth. "My sister

had to be strict with us while my mother worked," Abraham explains. "So when I deal with my family the way she did with us, I call myself Elizabeth."

Ramos cautions, "Most people never get to meet Elizabeth."

Behind-the-Scenes

That evening after the tour, I do get a chance to meet Elizabeth. Ringed by what I call her inner circle (Charmaine, Judith, Nirvana, Kai, Maka, Melody and her six-month-old baby Olaf), Elizabeth combs through a nearly 10-page-long agenda and scares us every so often with the words, "You need to know how to do this when I'm gone."

Nobody talks back or complains to Elizabeth. Respect and patience weigh heavily in the room. To break the tension, sometimes Elaine would smile at me and say, "Not many people get to see behind-the-scenes."

A thick three-ring-binder rests upon her lap. It contains handwritten notes, some from more than 12 years ago, when her sister, Mary Ann Paquette, died. At her feet, she has another binder dedicated to the *haayatx'í k̄u.éex'* (the naming ceremony). Piles of blankets that need to be labeled with "To" and "In Memory Of" and "From" crowd the remaining floor space between our feet.

Abraham is going to break some rules tomorrow and the family is anxious. For example, she is naming 52 people: Eleven names are validated, 23 names are announced for validation at a later time, 13 are adoptions, three are special honor names, and two are potlatch names. Usually, only a few individuals are named at a *haayatx'í k̄u.éex'*.

"I'm going to do something different," she says on nearly every page of the agenda.

"Don't write that down," Charmaine Ramos jokingly tells me.

Politics run deep in the Tlingit community, and it's nearly impossible to avoid offending someone. Nevertheless, every item on the agenda is carefully weighed and balanced. Every sad song, story, or dance must be followed by a happy one. Every contribution must be repaid. Three courses of family recipes prepared from traditional foods gathered in the area: seafood chowder, boiled salmon eggs, fry bread, baked salmon and hooligan, turkey with trimmings and potatoes, and Yakutat fruit cocktail. These meals will have to sustain guests from 3:30 p.m. to sunrise.

At 2 a.m., only her dog, Wishbone, dares to succumb to sleep. Abraham shows no sign of weariness. She makes sure we understand the reasons behind each agenda item. She asks Kai and Maka to sing the songs or beat the rhythm of the dances on the wood floor of her trailer.

Then, Abraham discusses the names that she carefully selected for each newborn and adoptee. Since names are considered *at.óow* (owned by the clan), Abraham must carefully negotiate the name a person can receive, the name she has rights to give, and who has the right to reserve a name.

Abraham explains, "When a person dies, their spirit usually returns to the nearest relative in the same lineage and clan. The Tlingit call



Abraham names 37 newborns and 12 adoptees. Her six-month old great grandchild, Olaf Snedden, was the youngest to receive a name that night.

PHOTO BY LESLIE HSU OH / FOR FIRST ALASKANS

them 'haa ee ti' aahas' meaning 'one who replaces.' Every baby that is born whose mother is from the Owl House is believed to be a reincarnation of a maternal whom has died. A person's 'real name' is very important in the Tlingit society because that is his/her identity in the clan. Besides a 'real name,' Tlingits also receive potlatch names or more."

Abraham, as the Naa Tláa (clan mother), is responsible for taking care of members of the Yéil Naa (Raven Moiety), K'ineix K̄wáan (people of the Copper River Clan) from the Tsisk'w Hít (Owl House) and therefore guards and distributes the "real names" of the members. The guests that witness a *k̄u.éex'* validates the host's claim of hereditary rank or privilege received through a name.

I can hardly keep up with the intricacies of the ancestors that will be reincarnated by a name and the namesakes that a newborn or adoptee will be bound to, a tie that could be closer than that of siblings.

At the close of the meeting, Elizabeth retires. Elaine gives us hugs and smiles and says, "I'm so excited about this. I can hardly wait!"

Honoring spirits in shadows

In "Haa Tuwunáagu Yís, for Healing Our Spirit," Nora Marks and Richard Dauenhauer explain: "According to traditional Tlingit

belief, prolonged grieving is physically and spiritually unhealthy for the community and the individual ... Cries loosen the hold on life of a kin, making him or her vulnerable."

Besides offering Tlingits a chance to teach and preserve their songs, their storytelling, names, history, traditional foods, and values, the *k̄u.éex'* (potlatch) also allows the living to honor the spirits in shadows (those waiting to be born) and expel grief from the body through the singing of mourning songs and the telling of a condolence oratory.

To acknowledge 10 deaths that occurred in Yakutat this summer, Kai and Maka deliver several "removal of grief" orations that *toowú latseen kaa jeex atee* (gives strength to the spirit). Many guests begin to cry.

In their book, Dauenhauer explains that the "orator is compared in Tlingit to someone who brings a very long pole into a house. In handling words, as in handling a pole, a speaker must be careful not to strike or hit anyone's face, or to break anything by accident. Delivered carelessly, words can be dangerous and detrimental. But when delivered carefully, oratory can be a soothing medicine, a healing power and balm to one who is in pain. It can give spiritual strength."

Abraham is thoughtful enough to "remove" my grief during the *k̄u.éex'*. She asked me to write down my late mother and brother's name so that she can invoke their names along with a long list of ancestors. Only the dead whose names are called can receive the gifts that are being offered at the *k̄u.éex'*. When the seagulls begin to stir in the darkness, the *k̄u.éex'* and *haayatx'í k̄u.éex'* wind down. I am blessed and surprised with gifts: A blanket, toys for my kids, and several *ganka six'* ("fire dishes"), bowls and pans packed with homemade jam, pilot bread, cookies, candy, and trinkets that represented the deceased.

Looking at the stage stacked high with boxes, gift bags, framed prints, and fire dishes, I thought about the tremendous pressure Abraham and the host clan endured during the planning stages of this *ku.éex'* and *haayatx'í ku.éex'*, worrying about whether every guest present would receive enough gifts and whether the gifts honored their deceased ancestors. Some of the guests receive sea otter blankets, vests, or blankets that had taken years to sew. In fact, the mothers of the 23 names announced but not validated elected to wait for a later *haayatx'í ku.éex'* so they could finish making vests, drums, dance aprons, or blankets for their kids.

Even more impressive to me is the symbolism behind this act of giving. The food and blankets distributed represent the physical and spiritual warmth of the opposite moiety.

The philosophy of Tlingit tradition and social structure rests in this dance between “balance” and “reciprocity,” where everyone is connected. The Raven and Eagle moieties form host-guest relationships where one mourns, while the other removes grief.

Abraham says, “We don’t go by biological families. We go by clan families. You can have a clan of 100 and we all get together to mourn. It’s appreciated and stronger than biological relationships. It’s our clan system that sustains each individual, so one person out of 100 is supported by 99 people with no blood relationships. It really keeps us together because our celebrations and deaths, we have to get together. You might’ve been mad at each other last month. Then something happens in the village. Everything is left at the door when you enter the community hall. You are coming in as one unit with one goal: to heal each other. It’s something that goes on daily with us. We don’t even notice it.”

For those of us who have experienced the loss of a loved one, I especially like the idea that the gifts and *ganka six'* are symbolically fed to the spirits of the departed.

When I lament about how I wish I had a support system like hers, Abraham suggests, “Why not trace your genealogy line and go and walk on the land that your ancestors walked on. That’s the most important thing for us. If you go into the woods and just sit there and rub your hands up and down on a tree or you put your hand on the soil, there’s warmth. The spirit of the land is warm.”

Belonging

On my first night in Yakutat, Abraham introduced me to Mike Travis. In 1972, Travis taught at the University of Alaska Fairbanks while Abraham served as vice president of Rural Education Affairs of the University of Alaska statewide system and founded the Alaska Native Language Center. Abraham became Travis’ mentor, when he traveled all over the state as program manager of Bilingual Multicultural Education for the State of Alaska. He said he used to call her nearly every evening and cry on her shoulder, “What should I do?”

Abraham’s mother, Susie, felt this 5-foot-10-inch man of German, Swiss, English descent was a reincarnation of her son. He had to wait nearly 20 years before he received Abraham’s brother’s name and all the rights and responsibilities of that name in a naming ceremony.

Now, he proudly introduces himself: “I was adopted into the Tlingit nation in October 1994. My Tlingit name is *Wats’dul*. I’m a Raven and a member of the Copper River People clan of Yakutat. I am from the Owl House.” He wants you to know that he is not a blood relative, but a relative by name.

During the *ku.éex'* and *haayatx'í ku.éex'*, Travis sat quietly behind Abraham, towering above her small frame, dressed in the vest Abraham beaded, stitched, and gifted to him as a promissory note for his naming ceremony, which he said was more important than his wedding.

When I ask him to elaborate, he tells me that he gained an understanding of “how a person relates to other people, how a person relates to the natural world, how a person relates to the supernatural world, and how a person relates to himself. After I was adopted, I was in Anchorage telling some co-workers in the Alaska Department of Education about

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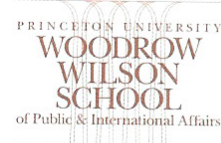
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Abraham lives in Anchorage where she can spend quality time with her grandchildren Kai Monture, Melody Snedden and her boys, Olaf and Jaime, and Nirvana Ramos.
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my adoption and we were at a restaurant in Anchorage and a man came up to me and said, 'I want to introduce myself. I am your brother.' He was from a different village and a different clan, but he was Raven, so we were brothers. I gained a whole society."

Belonging to a place or society is something that vexes me quite a bit after becoming a mother in this increasingly mobile and virtual world. My greatest fear is that my kids might grow up untethered to a place or people they can call home.

Mingling among the guests at the *ku.éex'* and *haayax'í ku.éex'*, I realized how many people this woman has tethered. During the naming ceremony, one-by-one, each adoptee wrapped their arms around Abraham and cried as soon as their name was repeated three times and stomped into the ground to endow and breathe life into the name.

The adoptees shed tears of gratitude and I can only imagine the multiple ways she has healed them. Patricia Cochran, executive director of the ANSC, says that Abraham was the grandmother and mother to many Native students and faculty at the University of Alaska Anchorage because she started the Native Student Services Program and the Alaska Native Studies Program in the 1970s. Cochran calls it "a place to talk and share our stories, especially since a lot of us were young women who grew up in villages and ended up in Anchorage. And being in a big city and losing touch with folks at home. Just sort of not having that touchstone, an elder person to be with. My mom wasn't here when I first came here. I

didn't have anyone to go to, to talk about life or Native affairs. She was a leader, a mentor, a mother and everything melded into one. She's just one of the most active, energetic, lively 'youngsters' I've ever known."

No matter how much she "mothers" others, Abraham still devotes much of her energy to raising her children and grandchildren. She encourages all of them to see the world. Her daughters studied in Germany and Spain. Her grandchildren have accompanied her to conferences in Tonga, New Zealand, and Fiji.

Once, Maka Monture fasted for eight days with her cousin, Alison Bremner, and Grandma, who revived the "Behind the Blanket Ceremony," an ancient coming-of-age ceremony for young Tlingit women.

Maka Monture says, "When I was 15, Alison and I underwent the women coming of age ceremony that hasn't been done for over 100 years. Grandma was our teacher. We stayed in a cabin next to the water. We fasted for eight days and in those eight days we learned the genealogy of our ancestors, beliefs, strength in mind, body, and physical strength. You fast to make your body weak and your spirit strong. It was an enlightening time in my life. I learned to shut off pain. Your mind is able to be so clear. Many things happened that helped me to be strong."

She points at three words that she inked in black on the fleshy part of her thumb: I AM STRONG! "I started writing this on my hand every day just because this [*ku.éex'*] has been so stressful, so many things we have to do, that I can look down at this and know I can get through it."

Above this hand, she taps an owl tattoo on her forearm, "This stays. This is permanent. This was a result of the [Behind the Blanket] ceremony. This is what I earned for the eight days of fasting. Afterwards, it felt so strange to join the real world. Falling asleep to ocean waves and waking up, my body not waking, just my mind going and going and analyzing."

The most important lesson she says that her grandma taught her: "You are stronger than you think. You are capable of things that will surprise you. Don't underestimate the strength of the mind, body, and spirit."

At the naming ceremony, Abraham gave 21-year-old Bremner and Maka Monture several more names to recognize their achievements and elevate them. Maka Monture's powerful voice thunders above the drum she beats and strikes you like lightning. Bremner and her mother, Cheryl Easterwood, stun the audience by replacing an old yellow curtain on the Alaska Native Brotherhood Hall stage with a 22-by-8 foot red fabric painted in black acrylic with the Tsisk'w Hít crest. Bremner calls it the K'ineix kwáan Tsisk'w Hít "screen" because her design was inspired by the traditional wood screens that divided living quarters within a house.

Bremner says, "The K'ineix kwáan Tsisk'w Hít screen was actually my dad's idea. He thought it would be a nice surprise. Then one screen turned into nine. Screens for the Galyáx Kaagwaantaan (Beaver Clan), the L'uknax.ádi (Silver Salmon Clan), and the Shangukeidí (Thunderbird Clan) were gifted, in that order, by a member of the Tsisk'w Hít who has ties to the clan receiving their screen. I gave my word to the K'ineix kwáan (Copper River Clan), Teikweidí (Brown Bear Clan), the Wooshkeetaan (Shark Clan), the Cheeshkweidi (Wolf Clan) and the Klukwan Kaagwaantaan (Klukwan Kaagwaantaan Clan) that they would receive their house screen within the next ten years."

Bremner is now attending a competitive art school to fine tune her traditional and contemporary Tlingit painting abilities. She says, "Elaine has made all the difference in my life. The school also holds drum making, carving, and weaving workshops. I hope to bring the knowledge I gain home with me to Yakutat to share with people who would like to learn. Through passing on their knowledge, Elaine and the rest of my family have embedded in me a great love of our Tlingit culture that is reflected in my artwork."

Abraham's investment in these girls is paying off. At the end of the *ku.éex'* and *haayatx'í ku.éex'*, the girls were honored in the traditional way, with a story, an *at.óow*. The Naa káanni (in-law of the clan or moiety) gifts Bremner and Maka Monture a *jāxanāt'* (knife) traditionally made for men and told them that they are the young warriors of their people.

With a few hours before I had to board a flight back to Anchorage, I walk and walk as far as my legs could carry me across Yakutat. Abraham has been whisked off to bed and her inner circle finally allows fatigue to claim them. The rest of the community has also retired to their homes. So, I take advantage of this quiet time to interview Yakutat, the place that raised Abraham, her ancestors, and descendants.

I brush my fingers over fireweed and pink plumes. Was'eitu Shaa (Mount Saint Elias) materializes for just a few minutes before the clouds set in and the sky opens. Yakutat soaks me down to the bones. She renders my glasses useless and forces me to rely upon my senses. I start to panic about the task before me: How can I honor Abraham and her long life carefully with words? How do I write about the *ku.éex'* to heal and give spiritual strength to a tradition misunderstood and discouraged for nearly a hundred years?

Thinking about the wealth of knowledge Abraham has imparted to all whom she loves, I write the words "I am strong" on my thumb with a blue pen. I write them again, even though my sight is blurry. I write them until I hear the seagulls laugh and the ocean wake. ■

Leslie Hsu Oh (www.lesliehsuoh.com) received a MFA in creative nonfiction. Her essays and stories have appeared in Cirque, KidsTheseDays.org, Rosebud Magazine, and Under the Sun ("Between the Lines" was listed as a Notable Essay in The Best American Essays 2010).

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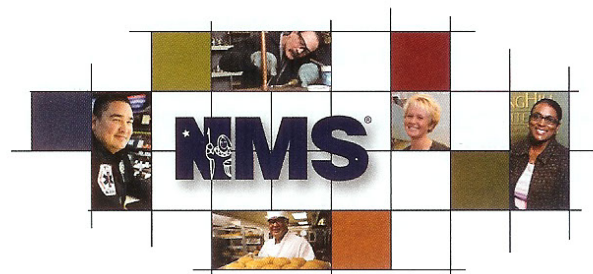


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