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TAIL END CLEARING

of the Pathway to the Light

The first certified tribal doctor in Alaska

BY LESLIE HSU OH
PHOTOS BY WAYDE CARROL
FOR FIRST ALASKANS

In the years that I have had the honor of calling Rita Pitka Blumenstein “Auntie,” I have felt privileged every time this renowned healer has invited me into her home. I can stroll from the high-tech-wired campus of the University of Alaska Anchorage or the Alaska Native Medical Center and step through her front door into another dimension bursting with photographs, handwritten letters, feathers, plants and treasures from patients and indigenous peoples around the world.

In baby blue pajamas, she rocks back and forth in her lounge chair. She stares at the television, where Jeopardy is in full swing. Even though her face is creased in a permanent smile accented by two rosy cheeks, which the Dalai Lama pinched the first time he met her, I can tell she needs to rest.

Blumenstein was born in a fishing boat in the village of Tununak on the northeast coast of Nelson Island. She found her healing ability at age 4, when her mother was moaning in bed from a dog attack. She said she placed her hands on the wounds and felt a tired feeling creep up her arms. She repeatedly shook off that tired feeling and placed her hands on the wounds until her mother got better.

Her Yup'ik name, Pamiovan, means "Tail End Clearing of the Pathway to the Light." Blumenstein explains, "I caught the tail end of the old ways." On the Internet, you'll find examples of how she navigates modern technologies and tradition. She has her own Wikipedia page, numerous YouTube videos of her speaking, and sites with important teachings she has imparted.

In 2006, Feb. 18 was declared Blumenstein Day. In 2009, she was inducted into the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame. To all this acclaim, Blumenstein shrugs and says that that is what other people want.

Before I settle onto her couch between a stack of magazines and jars of herbs, the house phone starts to ring. A patient calls to say she needs her house cleansed of bad spirits. Blumenstein sighs and says, "You know, you can talk to the spirits yourself. Just be good to them. Tell them to move on, that they are safe."

I am a dandelion

Even when she worked full-time at Southcentral Foundation's Traditional Healing Clinic as the first certified tribal doctor of Alaska, Blumenstein saw patients at her home. Now in her late 70s, she divides her time between the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) and the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers.

As soon as she hangs up the house phone, her iPhone rings. She fields questions from her colleagues at ANTHC. As program manager of Native Ways of Knowing for the Division of Community Health Services Behavioral Health Department, she meets individually with staff to provide guidance and advice and "keep us grounded in traditional ways," according to Dabney Van Lier, senior office specialist. Laura Báez, the director of this department, calls Blumenstein their MVP. She learned from Blumenstein how to "trust yourself and remember how your actions and decision impact the people we serve."

Blumenstein also works with other departments, including Wellness and Prevention headed by Dr. Gary Ferguson, who says she "knows how to play and to enjoy the moment, seeing the world through her eyes is always an adventure. The most important lesson that she taught me is her re-phrasing of Dr. Seuss: 'Be who you are, say what you feel ... those mind don't matter, and those matter don't mind.'"

She ends the call and tells me she hasn't even had a chance to unpack and soon she had to leave the country. She presses her fingers to her temples and closes her eyes.

"Auntie Rita, maybe I should come back another time. You should rest." I repeat what she often told her colleague Barbara Franks at ANTHC, "stop" – not completely, but just long enough to practice self-care."

She sighs. "Yes, today, I don't feel so good." She gestures to her living room and says, "I am never here."



I offer to help her pack. She glares at me, as annoyed as when I try to open a door or extend an arm for her. As I got ready to leave, she asked, "Is something wrong?"

Last time I had visited her home, she had worked on a golf-ball-sized benign tumor that a surgeon wanted to remove from my right breast. While her hands barely touched me, I could feel the energy that radiated from them. It was warm and sometimes hot to the point of burning and it moved, especially when she flung her hands away as if there was something sticky clinging to them.

A few weeks later, a surgeon had performed an ultrasound and said, "Wow, your traditional

healer certainly did something. The tumor looks different. Smaller. Maybe melted?"

Blumenstein walks over and rests a hand on my shoulder. I reassure her that everything is fine and that she had invited me to talk about plants. She doesn't always remember why she agreed to meet you, but if you want to talk about plants, she transforms into a child excited to share her favorite toy.

She motions for me to follow her into the kitchen. Gallon-sized glass jars weigh down a shelf where I spot a photo of Blumenstein kissing my daughter's cheek. That was the first time she met Kyra. She had bounced the lively 4-month-old on her lap and explained that she gave Kyra her mother's name, which means something strong like penetrating rock.

When I was pregnant with my daughter, Blumenstein had touched my belly and predicted "a boy."

Her head bounced on her neck when I told her the ultrasound confirmed the baby was a girl. She said, "I am never wrong. This is boy energy." She kept her hand on my swollen belly and patted it thoughtfully. "A girl with lots and lots of boy energy!"

"Tomboy, just like me," Blumenstein says proudly.

Next to the photo, Blumenstein brushes her hand across three jars, "My favorite is chamomile. It healed me." She leans down to pick up a jar then changes her mind, "No, my favorite is raspberry. I use for everything. Both very good for babies, pregnant women. Good for colds."

She opens a jar and gives me a whiff. The contents smell like the kind of raspberries I buy at grocery stores, but looks like nesting material for birds. Then, she grabs a handful to make a pot of tea while she tells me how she harvests and prepares the raspberries for storage. I wonder when she has time to collect, harvest and store plants with the demands of her travel schedule.

While the tea brews, she rummages through a closet and takes out a box full of Ziploc bags labeled in permanent marker: wormwood, sage, cedar, mint, devil's club, rock sage, tobacco.

As Blumenstein shares memories of where and when she picked each of these plants and their medicinal purposes, the Western-trained part of my brain fires in panic. I want to stop her and ask if I could take notes or turn on my digital voice recorder.

"You know, you don't just go out like to a pantry and get plants. You have to talk to them. You have to ask permission. Have respect. You have to learn the stories and how everything is connected."

"How did you learn about plants? Did someone teach you?"

"No," she chuckles. "I was born with it."

"How do other people learn then?"

She shrugs. "I don't know. I know what I do."

Pulling Janice Schofield's "Alaska's Wild Plants: A Guide to Alaska's Edible Harvest" out of my backpack, I ask, "Is this one a good



source?"

She opens the book to the page on dandelions. Then, she looks at me as if she can see through me, "I am a dandelion. People try to kill me, get rid of me, but I pop up here and there."

I laugh nervously as I think about all the weed killer we use on the dandelions in our yard.

"I want to show you something." She winks at me and disappears into the garage.

Returning with a two-gallon frozen bag of herring eggs, she tosses a small round container onto the table. I try to help her with defrosting the eggs, but she shoos me away. The eggs are for a funeral she has to attend in an hour.

When we finally sit down again, she pops open the container and waves it under my nose. "These are Eskimo potatoes. Roots. You can garnish your fish or eat like this," she grabs a handful and munches on them like peanuts.

While I savor the sweet crunchy flavor, Blumenstein digs out a worn purple journal with a heart embossed on the cover. She's read from this journal to me before, so I know that I'm about to receive a gift.

Brushing her fingers over a page, she starts to read: "This is how you got to become. Learning to be here and now. The journey begins when you are born."

She beams at me. Then finds her place on the page and continues, "We instinctively knew how to do this when we were children and we were busy watching a beautiful butterfly or examining any interesting new aspects of the world. We were completely absorbed by what we are doing. Like you are concentrating on plants. We have the capacity to be aware of only that butterfly, that patch of ground or that toy.

"The animal that many have used to symbolize this capacity is the mouse. Our little mouse sister that's what she does with her all her tiny being. Many people can't do this. They are always looking to the future or the past. Or inside or outside or faraway. But seldom to the activity of the present moment."

Patting my hand, she says, "See, that's what I'm trying to teach ... The point of power is in the present moment. It doesn't matter how long we have negative patterns or an illness or a rotten relationship or lack of finances or self-hate. We can begin to make a change today. Stop for a moment and catch your thoughts. What are you thinking right now? Would you want this thought to become true for you? If it is a thought of worry, anger, or hurt or revenge, how do we think this thought will come back to you? If we want joyous life, then we must think joyous thoughts. Whatever we send out mentally or verbally will come back to us in like forms."

In 1995, Blumenstein beat cancer. She learned that the only way to heal was to



resolve the anger, resentment and sadness from growing up without a father. Her father died a month after she was born.

Blumenstein's daughter, Sandra Palmer, arrives at that moment to take her to the funeral. She motions for her daughter to sit down, then continues, "It is time to listen to the words you say. If you hear yourself saying something three times, then write it down. It has become a pattern for you. At the end of the week, look at the list you have made and you will see how your words fit your experiences. Be willing to change your words and thoughts and watch your life change. The way to control your life is to control your choice of words and have no one think in your mind but you. That's the first lesson for healing."

Even though she is late for her next engagement, she is patient. Her eyes well with love while she grasps my hand until she feels that I understand what she is trying to teach me. As I exit her front door, she says to me, "You are finally ready."

I'm unsure exactly what she means but her words make me feel weightless, as if I am walking on the moon. I imagine what it was like for Bernard Blumenstein to have enjoyed 45 years of marriage to this woman and how lucky their children and grandchildren and great grandchildren are to learn from her on a daily basis. Palmer says, "Mom has taught me to forgive people for what they have done ... got to let things go."

Healing the spirit from the light within

For four days in May 2011, Blumenstein hosted the ninth gathering of the International Council of Thirteen Indigenous Grandmothers, held in Anchorage. She beamed royalty, draped in a gorgeous knee-length squirrel parka with red tassels fluttering in the wind. Necklaces and leis from different parts of the world and a white scarf embroidered with "Indigenous" on the left and "Grandmothers" on the right adorned her neck. Alaska residents and visitors from around the world gathered at her feet as she lit a sacred fire that would burn for seven days and nights on the Delaney Park Strip.

Her voice was soft but powerful enough to be heard above the wind whipping in from Cook Inlet. "If you come for the first time to Alaska, stepping onto our land, when you go home, just like when you step onto our land, do the same thing to your home." Then, she blessed everyone with water heated by the sacred fire.

I relaxed upon the grass, enjoying this rare opportunity to see how she is adored as "Grandmother Rita." Chances are slim for me to attend other gatherings, which are usually in expensive-to-travel-to locations such as Qaxaca, Mexico; Dharamsala, India; Kirishima, Japan; Brasilia, Brazil; and most recently, Nepal.

When Blumenstein turned 9, her great grandmother gifted her 13 eagle feathers and stones, and told her that one day she would give these gifts to 13 grandmothers. Blumenstein had to wait until 2004, when 13 grandmothers responded to the prophecy that "we are now at a critical time in human history. If we do not change our ways of relating to each other and to our Mother Earth, we will face cataclysmic consequences."

Blumenstein had presented the feathers and stones at that first gathering and said, "Thirteen stones in honor of the 13 Grandmothers, the 13 planets in our universe, and the 13 full moons of the year. We're late, but we're here!"

Grandmother Mona Polacca, a Hopi/Havasupai/Tewa Elder who is also president/CEO of Turtle Island Project, says, "This is a memory, I will always carry with me – it was a visceral experience and even now, I feel the chill sweep over me, just as it did the moment she opened the bundle, came around the table and placed in each of the grandmother's hands one of the sacred stones. She is so strong of mind, heart and spirit. She is always so loving to me, hugs me, and will hold my hand whenever I sit next to her."

On the last day of the gathering after many tears were shed over the theme "Healing the Spirit from the Light Within," Allison Warden, an Iñupiaq Eskimo inter-disciplinary artist, cheered up the audience with a rap song. Blumenstein surprised everyone by throwing out some hip dance moves. She laughed so hard that she doubled over, embracing herself. Soon, everyone on the top floor of the Dena'ina Convention and Civic Center was inspired to surrender to their inner child.

This is what impresses me most: Blumenstein's constant reminders to remember what it's like to be a child. She autographs her chapter in the "Grandmothers Counsel the World" with a cartoon heart and a pulsating light bulb and repeats to each conference attendee "learn to love yourself, then treat everybody like you want to be treated."

Jyoti (Jeneane Prevatt, PhD), the spiritual director of the Center for Sacred Studies,

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a nonprofit that convened the council and organizes the gatherings, says, “The most important lesson Grandmother Rita ever taught me was when she sang that song about her magic penny. If you hold on tight to love, then you won’t have any. But if you let it go, like a magic penny and lend it and spend it and give it away, it will come right back to you.”

Recently, as Jyoti and the other grandmothers prepared for their gathering in Nepal, Blumenstein broke her hip. Jyoti says that as soon as “she came out of surgery, Grandmother Rita said, ‘I’m going to Nepal.’ This speaks to the spirit of who Grandmother Rita is and her ability to walk into challenge, embrace it, transform it, and inspire all those around her as she shows us how to work with obstacles and difficult moments in her life. She greets them with her love.”

Harvesting petrushki

On Mother’s Day, my kids and I drive Blumenstein down Turnagain Arm to a secret spot where she likes to harvest petrushki. My 5-year-old daughter Kyra and 2-year-old son Ethan pepper Blumenstein with questions on the long drive. She blows them kisses and tells me exactly what I need to hear, that I am a good mother.

With sprinkles of water from gray skies cooling my cheeks, I follow in Blumenstein’s footsteps along the shore. Over a decade of being part of her life, I am still in awe that this

internationally revered woman makes time in her packed schedule for me.

Tightening her bright blue hood around her face, she breaks out into a mischievous smile and beckons me close. She stretches out both hands, leans down toward a round low shrub, and closes her eyes. Her lips move and I wish I could have heard what she said.

She pulls out a plastic bag from her backpack and says to me, “Take just a little from each.”

Then, she snaps off several stems and whispers to the plant, “Thank you.” She brushes the leaflets against my nose. I inhale a cilantro-like fragrance. “Petrushki!” she hollers happily and hurries off to the next shrub with the speed of a child collecting candy that scattered from a piñata.

As we harvest, Blumenstein teaches me about some of the other plants growing in the area. She points out the ones to avoid. She keeps saying to me, “I just love you so much,” filling the emptiness that my mother’s death had left within.

We snack on crisp petrushki and pause frequently to inhale the icy ocean breeze.

When my kids tire of digging in the sand, they each drift toward me on their own time. I repeat what Blumenstein taught me. To respect the plants. Talk to them. Say thank you. Leave some for other animals and people.

Kyra approaches each shrub with all her masculine energy. I warn her not to step on the plants, to be gentle. Blumenstein watches

in the distance as I instruct Kyra not to grab fistfuls of petrushki but just a stem at a time.

“Like this Mommee?” she asks, waving three stems bristling with leaflets in my face. Her cheeks flush pink from the past hour on the beach.

“That’s better. Now, what do you do?” I ask.

Kyra grabs the plastic bag out of my hands and stuffs some leaflets roughly in. Then, she punctuates two pats on each shrub with “Thank You.”

“Ethan, your turn,” she grabs her brother’s arm. Both Blumenstein and I watch proudly as she repeats my instructions.

Before we leave the beach, I ask both kids to give Blumenstein what they harvested. Blumenstein tells us that she can’t think of a better Mother’s Day gift.

There is so much I want to say to her. What an honor it is to know her. How unworthy I am to receive her gems of wisdom because I’m not very good about putting them into practice. That I wish I could heal others like she does. But the only words that escape my lips are “me too.” ■

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