

# TILTING POINT

## The resilience of Arctic Youth

BY LESLIE HSU OH

**I**N THIN FLIP-FLOPS, 14-year-old Dunia Sleptsova (Eveny) lassoes a baby reindeer by the leg.

The wind whips her black hair. She deftly closes the distance between herself and the reindeer by climbing cross-through style down the rope.

Sleptsova is from Topolinoye, a village in Siberia that is cut off from the outside world by a history of violent and oppressive policies, collapse of the social welfare system, and the utter disappearance of aviation and road systems. She was born and raised in a reindeer herder community where salaries are unpaid, and dreams are often unfulfilled.

And yet, at this moment upon the taiga rolling out endlessly in the backdrop, Sleptsova is in control.

She places her left hand on the reindeer's rump and brings it down.

In one smooth motion, she grabs an antler with her right hand and transitions to a two-hand hold on both antlers. The reindeer twists beneath her body and soon they are face-to-face.

The two tangle. Without reindeer, the Eveny cannot survive.

One flip-flop flies loose.

Sleptsova can hear her Elders telling her to stay strong, patient, and endure exhaustion.

The reindeer bucks spectacularly to the left, spinning itself and Sleptsova clockwise.

It is a powerful dance with the thunder of the herd echoing upon one of the most isolated and remote areas of the world.





It is customary among the Eveny people in Siberia to leave behind a ritual marking as a way of thanking the Master of the Forest, the spirits of the land and animals for allowing safe harbor and passage.



### KHINEM: BECOMING RESILIENT

Sleptsova's co-researcher, seventeen-year-old Spiridon Keymetinov (Eveny), and their Principal Investigator, Dr. Olga Ulturgasheva (Eveny), currently a research fellow at University of Cambridge, also grew up riding and herding reindeers.



Dunia Sleptsova (Eveny) must exhibit endurance, patience, and emotional and moral stability in order to stay on her reindeer.

Their role in the National Science Foundation-funded Circumpolar Indigenous Pathways to Adulthood Project (CIPA) is a testament to how they attained khinem, a term in Eveny that means the ability to be strong and resilient despite all odds. Khinem also means the process of coping with adversity and becoming resilient, which is ultimately what Ulturgasheva and Dr. Stacy Rasmus (Center for Alaska Native Health Research and Principal Investigator) hope to offer Arctic youth.

CIPA is a study of youth stressors and resilience strategies experienced through growing-up in five different arctic indigenous communities. The study involves researchers and indigenous community collaborators from Alaska, Canada, Siberia and Norway.

Life histories recorded from a hundred young people between the ages of 11 to 18, like Sleptsova, Keymetinov, and two teens from Alakanuk, Travis Isidore (Yup'ik) and Freddie Edmond (Yup'ik), prove that there are shared social resources that "tilt" a youth towards resilience: the value of movement and the role of being on the land, kinship ties, subsistence, and sharing resources such as food, materials, or living space.

For example, Ulturgasheva interviewed adolescents who grew up in the forest and those who grew up in the village. Some village children never experienced life in a reindeer-herding camp. Siberian forest children like Sleptsova and Keymetinov are separated from their parents at age six or seven for schooling and are required to stay in the village during the school year until the age of 16 or 17.

Through pseudonyms, a 15-year-old forest boy named Stepa describes how much he misses his family when he is at school. He says, "When I am in the forest I am always busy and never bored," since there are so many tasks and chores associated with hunting and herding. Many of the forest children spoke about the first reindeer they ever trained and rode and how they learned endurance, patience, emotional and moral stability, all of which they can apply in school when they are bullied.

Life-threatening situations like crossing a flooded river also taught the teens about suppression of fear, braveness, and fast decision-making. Fourteen-year-old Tina describes, "Last summer, the river Tompo rose... There were four kids in our caravan, me, and three younger cousins – the reindeer they rode were tied to my reindeer. I had to lead them and make sure they did not fall in water."

Ulturgasheva points out that resilience depends not only on mastering coping strategies, but also whether a youth's social setting is nurturing.





### SIBERIA-ALASKA EXCHANGE

Isidore posts on Keymetinov's Facebook page this message from a Yup'ik teen to his Eveny friend: "Я скучаю по нашей тусовке (I miss hanging out with you)."

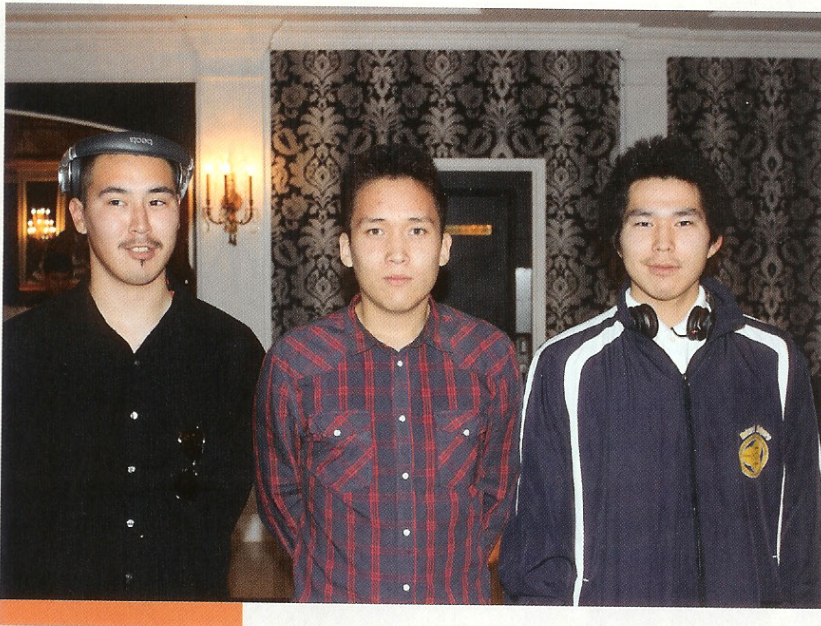
The boys met for the first time the year before in Washington, D.C. when preliminary findings from the Circumpolar Indigenous Pathways to Adulthood Project were shared in a workshop. They formed an instant friendship, astounded that they had so much in common. Rasmus says, "One of the goals of the workshop was for the youth to become even more aware of how cool it is to be an indigenous person today."

Ulturgasheva's proudest moment was seeing Sleptsova blossom through CIPA, from quiet and shy to proud and

Following a ceremony, Dr. Olga Ulturgasheva in her ceremonial headdress observes the reindeer herding camp.

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Freddie Edmund (Yup'ik), Spiridon Keymetinov (Eveny), and Travis Isidore (Yup'ik) discover they have a lot in common.

confident. Recently, she was admitted to a special school in Siberia designed for academically and creatively gifted youth.

Keymetinov, whose father died before he was born, is now in college. He says, "I really want to visit Alaska in the future and see my Alaskan friends. I wish the same event [workshop] can happen sometime in the future. It gave me lots of hope."

"For youth, it is absolutely crucial to go and meet other youth from different international centers. It becomes such a milestone in their imagination," says Ulturgasheva.

Her advice to arctic indigenous youth: "Always have a beginner's mind. Go and learn about the world, and that way you learn more about yourself."

She also has advice for communities: "Listen to your kids. Give them as much emotional and moral support and love from the start. Give them support and guidance."

Rasmus and Ulturgasheva plan to bring Eveny youth and elders to Alaskan and vice versa in order to share survival skills. They were inspired after observing Isidore and Edmund sitting attentively beside a Siberian Elder and listening because they could sense he was saying something important even though they couldn't understand his language. Rasmus and Ulturgasheva hope to foster the sharing of cultural knowledge, survival skills, and social and environmental change strategies.

For example, Alaskan visitors could walk upon the abandoned Topolinoye airport, witness how the forest has eaten away at the runways, and learn from the Eveny how to survive when infrastructure like air travel collapses.

Rasmus and Ulturgasheva, both Native researchers, are also spending some time in each other's study sites. They question the effectiveness of community-based participatory learning research where community

participants are usually on the sidelines supplying, rather than analyzing, the data.

Ulturgasheva says, "My story of growing up in a reindeer herding community can be involved in the research process not as complimentary information but an essential component. Being an indigenous researcher is difficult. You are, from the start, seen as unreliable, uncomprehensive, aboriginal, and subjective. We want to support Native researchers from marginalization."

Sleptsova and Keymetinov filmed their auto-ethnographic footage for CIPA from the back of a reindeer. This was Ulturgasheva's artistic direction, "the idea of Native land experienced through animal movement...something so profound for understanding how someone becomes a person there."

Through their young eyes, we taste for a brief moment the things that activate resilience: the embrace of green taiga and purple mountains, comforting strokes of velvet antlers, the wagging tail of an East Siberian Laika, a younger sibling falling asleep on a reindeer, and the dependable lullaby gait of a reindeer mixed with a techno beat, hip and indigenous. ◀

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