Silent Storm

Sexual violence in the Last Frontier.

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One night a few years ago, when Geneva was thirteen, a man she’d grown up with stumbled into the room she shared with her two sisters in Tanana, Alaska, a tiny village northwest of Fairbanks, and climbed on top of her. He was blackout drunk and aggressive.

“He tried getting into my clothes,” she recalls. “He tried putting his hands under my shorts and inside my shirt.” She struggled and pushed, but he was years her senior and made of muscle; he pulled her on top of him. She kept pushing and yanking until she suddenly shot backwards and tumbled off the bed. “He was so blacked out, he was like still asleep; his eyes were closed,” she says. “I was watching his face, but his face didn’t move at all. His breathing was normal, but his hands...” She pauses, and the word hangs thickly in the air. “His hands felt like he was awake.”

Afterward, she ran into the living room and burst into tears, stuffing her face into a pillow so her parents wouldn’t hear. She didn’t tell them, then; she was scared and ashamed. “I guess I just felt like I was dirty. I guess that’s what victims feel like. They feel dirty and just want to clean everything off.”

The following summer, Geneva was fast asleep at her family’s fish camp downriver, while a group of adults drank and caroused in the next room. She awoke to someone tugging down her pants, reaching between her legs; she struggled and kicked, and he lumbered out of the room, pulling up his own.

In fact, Geneva says, she’s been grabbed, chased, followed, and molested so much in her short life that she’s now made it a habit to lock the bedroom door at night and shove a chair under the knob so no one can come in; she’ll wait up, trembling, until everyone at a party is passed out cold before she can comfortably fall asleep. She’s learned to avoid being alone with friends’ dads, or with grandpas at village potlatches, or with boys at basketball games, who’ve repeatedly groped her breasts and buttocks. “It’s just random, like, you’ll think everything’s all normal and then you’ll feel something on your backside,” she says. “You just freeze.”

Geneva is a tall, big-boned basketball team captain with bright eyes, rectangular black-framed glasses, and a wide, eager smile. She laughs easily, and has no trouble listing accomplishments and affinities: she’s ambidextrous by choice, grew up doing all the rugged outdoor chores men do, raves gleefully over beloved local foods like fried moose heart and walrus in seal oil.

But for years, she felt scared, hypersensitive, and depressed. She never told her parents about the incident; she was too afraid of what would happen, and anyway, when she told one of her sisters, the only response she received was a dry laugh. “It happened to all of us,” her sister had said. “Just leave it alone.”

Growing up in Tanana, this kind of thing was common knowledge, but rarely discussed. Everyone knew the local elder who’d molested and raped his daughters and granddaughters for decades until he was arrested for touching another family’s girls; after four years in jail and another half dozen or so at a cabin downriver, he was back on the village tribal council. One of Geneva’s great aunts was molested and raped by an uncle for years; recently, the aunt’s grown daughter told her that the same uncle had molested her, too. Sometimes people pressed charges; most of the time, though, nothing
happened. "These perverts travel from village to village, from potlatches to dances," Geneva says. "And then they get drunk and you don't know what they're going to do."

Then, last year, Geneva joined the Tanana 4-H club, a newly-minted outlet for local youth of all ages to gather and play games and craft things like blueberry jam and beaver hats. It's run by Cynthia Erickson, owner of Tanana's general store and native of Ruby, a village 100 miles downriver. Erickson says she started the program because of suicide: three years ago, there were six in Tanana. At first, she just wanted to give Tanana's kids a place to do things with their hands, to go on field trips, to feel supported. But what began as a diversion quickly became a safe place for kids to share all kinds of traumas they were witnessing and experiencing: sexual and domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, death after brutal death. The discussions they'd have were rarely pre-arranged, Erickson says, and never formal. Instead, the kids would say, "Did you hear what happened?"

Last fall, the group was asked to give a presentation at a statewide conference held by the First Alaskans Institute in Fairbanks. And instead of explaining how they'd come up with their anti-suicide pledge, the kids wanted to share the reasons they'd needed one in the first place.

Geneva spoke about her own abuse, and described in detail what has been, for herself and the people around her, horrifyingly typical: a local woman who was gang raped until she could "barely walk." A young boy who was sexually assaulted by an older man and later killed himself. Tribal elders who commanded respect, but whose behavior didn't. "I'm still young and I'm already sick of it," she said. "It's happening in his house, in her house, even in your own bed."

The presentation was met with so many standing ovations that it took the kids nearly two hours to make it from the stage to the back of the conference center, thanks to so many members of the audience hugging them, weeping, piling up cash donations on a scarf on the stage, telling them how proud they were. In some cases, it inspired others to come out about their own abuse. (One grandmother told Erickson she'd been raped and abused for so many years, and she'd held it in for so long, that that was the reason that she'd been so harsh to her children. After the presentation, she called her children and apologized to them.)

The splash that Geneva and her peers made at the conference marked a new era of transparency in Alaska about domestic and sexual violence. But a few months later, when Erickson asked the kids if they thought their presentation had made a difference in Tanana, they all shrugged and made "zero" signs with their hands. The presentation rocked the community, but the fresh feeling “didn't really stick,” Geneva admits. "It went back like the old way."

In its short history as a state, Alaska has earned an unnerving epithet: it is the rape capital of the U.S. At nearly 80 rapes per 100,000, according to the FBI Uniform Crime Report, Alaska’s rate of forcible rape is almost three times the national average; for child sexual assault, it’s nearly six times. And, according to the 2010 Alaska Victimization Survey, the most comprehensive data to date, 59 percent of Alaskan women have been victims of sexual violence, intimate partner violence, or both.

But those numbers, say researchers, just skim the surface. Since sex crimes are generally underreported, and may be particularly underreported in Alaska, “Those numbers are conservative,” says Ann Rausch, a program coordinator at Alaska’s Council on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault. “They’re still staggering.”

The causes of the violence are complex and entrenched. Government officials, law enforcement personnel, and victim advocates note the state’s surfeit of risk factors, from an abundance of male-dominated industries, like oil drilling and the military, to the state’s vast geography, with many communities that have no roads and little law enforcement. “There are so many factors that tip the
scale for Alaska,” says Linda Chamberlain, executive director of the Alaska Family Violence Prevention Project. Not the least among them: its sheer remoteness. Without a strong law enforcement presence, with limited access to support services of any kind, “It’s easier for perpetrators to isolate their victims and not get caught. And for people not to get help.”

Some believe that this fact both encourages and attracts criminals. The suspect for a recent rape in southwest hub community of Dillingham, for instance, was a white man who’d just arrived from somewhere in the Lower 48 to take a job at the Wells Fargo in town. “Because it happens in rural Alaska,” one victim advocate cautions, “doesn’t mean it’s only rural Alaskans who are a part of it.”

It happens at alarming rates in urban Alaska, too. In 2010, Anchorage and Fairbanks held the highest rape rates of all cities in the U.S. Some bars in Anchorage and Fairbanks are known for a prevalence of date rape drugs; others, in Fairbanks, are known for shunning members of the military after too many brutally violent nights. (Investigations of sexual assault in the U.S. Armed Forces reveal rates almost as high as Alaska’s; in late 2013, the Alaska National Guard also launched an investigation of widespread sexual assault allegations within its ranks). John Vandervalk, a sex crime detective in the Anchorage Police Department, claims that the city’s numbers are high partly because of attrition from villages with few or no services to address or heal from these kinds of crimes. But while rates of victimization are much higher among Alaska Natives – a survey from 2006 that analyzed law enforcement data in Anchorage found Alaska Native women 9.7 times more likely to be victims of sexual assault – anyone who works in Alaska’s cities consistently confirms, like Vandervalk, that “this is not an Alaska Native problem. It’s a problem that affects all demographics.”

Lawmakers aren’t blind to the issue. In 2009, Alaska governor Sean Parnell launched Alaska Men Choose Respect, a statewide prevention initiative that combines pervasive public service announcements and annual rallies with a slew of other incentives, including increased sentencing for sex offenses and mini-grants for violence prevention projects.

But some argue that focusing on a centralized criminal justice system and government-led initiatives can only go so far. In a state where hundreds of roadless communities are scattered across hundreds of thousands of miles, and where the storied rates of violence against women can hit 100 percent, silence is the norm, and violence is almost expected. (In some villages, says detective Vandervalk, “you’ll get a Native girl who says, ‘My mom always tells me to wear two pairs of jeans at night to slow him down.’”)

It’s only in recent years that Alaskans have begun to speak publicly about all this. In many places, silence still endures. But Cynthia Erickson hopes that the “old way” will, eventually, fade, and that speech, above all else, will empower victims, shame perpetrators, and interrupt the cycle of trauma where it starts: in childhood. “This story of Tanana is absolutely no different than every single one of these villages,” she says. “This is our world. And this is the fight we’re fighting – for the children. I don’t have time for adults.”

Tanana, population 254, is nestled at the intersection of the Tanana and Yukon Rivers, about 130 miles northwest of Fairbanks, and is one of 165 Alaskan villages off the road system. In good weather, three nine-seater plane flights a day land at Tanana’s airport, a slim snowfield with a few blinking lights. In January, temperatures can plunge to sixty or seventy degrees below zero, and the life-giving river is frozen solid. The sky gradually pales around 11 a.m. and darkens again by 3 in a splash of peach and hot pink. Beat-up trucks hibernate under feet of snow in people’s yards. To get around, most residents drive open-air snow machines, staving off the wind chill with the wide earflaps of homemade marten-fur hats (or, in one instance I observed, strips of cardboard and duct tape).
The regular flights are packed with freight, so things like toilet paper and Doritos don't usually have a problem making it in to the Ericksons' general store, though sometimes weather can keep groceries off the shelves for weeks. The day I arrive, it's "warmed up," as locals like to say, to five degrees below zero. 5 pm marks the start of rush hour, and half the town stops in the store to pick up tomato sauce, frozen dinners, Gatorade, candy. They ask each other about the day's work, comment on the weather, and drop their items one by one on the counter, gruffly, cheeks red from the cold. A petite teenaged girl with long dark hair and spindly legs waltzes through the ping pong entryway wearing only basketball shorts and zebra slippers. (This far north, cold is relative: the previous few days, at forty below, with powdered-sugar snow so dry and cold it squeaked underfoot, Alaskans called it "chilly.")

I first met Erickson and her husband, Dale, at a high school basketball game in Fairbanks, followed by steak salads at Denny's – or, as it's known: "the northernmost Denny's in the world." In the middle of the game, packed onto narrow bleachers, Erickson launched directly into the litany of abuses she'd witnessed and heard of in Tanana, and precisely what she thinks of those who see violence and do nothing. An older woman a few rungs above us tapped her on the shoulder, and as she turned, her face lit up, recognizing an old friend; they spoke eagerly for most of the rest of the game. On our way out, Erickson ran into a young woman, a teenager. She put her hand on her shoulder and exclaimed, "Who's the molester. Who's the abuser."

Erickson has a cap of frosted curls, high cheekbones, and gem-like blue eyes. She exudes a fiercely protective, maternal energy, and has no qualms about the public way she's been going about shifting things in Tanana. "I'm sleeping pretty damn good at night," she says. "I just started voicing my opinion in the last couple of years. I don't give a shit anymore," she says. "I really don't."

She'd told the 4-H kids to be on guard for backlash, since their statewide presentation had angered some residents. Most of the kids hadn’t told their families about the content of their speeches beforehand, and then, thanks to the media blitz that followed, the state of Alaska got an earful. For many families, the sudden publicity felt threatening. Geneva’s parents, in particular, resented that she hadn’t come to them first; her father called her a few hours afterward, and left a dismissive voicemail message, as if speaking to someone else in the room. "She’s overreacting," he’d said. "She just got touched by a couple of drunk people." When he did reach her, he said he felt betrayed: why hadn't she told him? Why had she waited so long to talk about it, and why to the entire state?

The Alaska Federation of Natives asked the Tanana 4-H group to repeat their first presentation a few days later, at a second, larger conference. Geneva’s father demanded that she change her speech for the second round, offering less detail, and less of her personal experience, because people would be jumping to conclusions, wondering who she meant when she’d said "it's happening in his house, in her house, even in your own bed." He feared her words could implicate him.

“Everybody knows who’s doing what,” Erickson had told me, over the phone. “It’s common river knowledge. Who’s the molester. Who’s the abuser.” But in a village, everyone is related – either by blood, or by a lifelong relationship just as binding – which often gets in the way of what little law enforcement there is. Families struggle to protect one another and their lives going forward, knowing that anyone they offend will be at the post office the next day, and the day after, and the day after that. Even the raffle the 4-H group had organized to help fund the trip to Fairbanks for the conference sold very few tickets, one Tanana resident claims, "because it was dealing with hard issues."
A teacher told me he’d known the presentation was going to “stir the pot” before it happened, and that it probably was still “ruffling feathers”; some residents avoided the general store for weeks, and some still avoid speaking to Erickson. While most adults were very supportive of the kids’ courage, a lack of outright retaliation didn’t necessarily indicate a truce. For Erickson, evasion can cut as deep. “You can be a bully without saying a word.”

One woman, who briefly described her own experience with sexual abuse – and her daughters’, and her sisters’, and her friends’ – as a matter of course, shook her head and looked away, hands folded, at the mention of Cynthia Erickson. “You say Cynthia Erickson and my guard goes up,” she said.

When Cynthia Erickson was growing up in Ruby, population 172, her father was a bush pilot and the whole family lived largely off the land. There was no electricity, no running water. They fished all summer and trapped all winter, and she and her siblings wore homemade boots and parkas made of hide and fur. Work meant survival, and from dawn until dusk (and far beyond, in the winter) the whole family was chopping wood, hauling water, skinning and roasting the evening meal. She recalls a moment from her childhood, in the early 1970s, when her father sat at the kitchen table, looking defeated by a piece of paper he held in his hands. “It’s a letter from the government,” he’d said. “They want us to take this thing called ‘food stamps.’” He explained what that meant, and told her, “You know, scoogha,” – a nickname, Erickson says, that “means ‘my baby’ in Indian” – “It’s going to take people from their homes and off the land and it’s going to destroy us.”

Erickson believes that’s precisely what happened. “You almost immediately saw your world starting to fall apart,” she says. “There never used to be suicides, there never used to be beer, wine, booze. You very rarely saw that because people couldn’t afford it.” Her cousin, Sabrenia Jervsjo, who also grew up in Ruby and now works as a rural advocate for the Interior Alaska Center for Nonviolent Living, a shelter and advocacy organization in Fairbanks, credits the dissolution of the old way of life with the rise in substance abuse and violence, too. “People have so much free time on their hands,” she says. “It gives their brains time to think. There could be bad thoughts.”

For one thing, despite food stamps, it costs a lot to live – a gallon of gas in Tanana is $6.25, a bottle of laundry detergent is $12 – but villages have few jobs, and few incentives to fill them, if it means losing government assistance. Winters are long, brutal, and dark, and in a tight-knit, tiny community, connected to most of its income, medical care, and law enforcement only by airplane, conflicts often simmer in silence. Flights aren’t cheap; when tensions build, Jervsjo says, “you can’t get out.”

While few victims deny that sexual assault and domestic violence are punishable crimes, to destabilize a community of a few hundred people with the loss of an elder or father or brother is a big deal. Family members will often blame the victims, or the friends of victims, who attempt to report a crime, out of fear of losing material support, or a vital link in a precarious web of familial structure. When a young man from Tanana was accused of sexually abusing several village children a few years ago, some of his relatives verbally attacked the woman who turned him in, saying, “Shame on you. He had his whole life in front of him and you’re going to ruin it.”

Often, when state troopers – the only police force available for a quarter of Alaska’s villages – are called in for a brutal assault case, they’ll get on the next available flight, but when they arrive on the scene, no one will talk. Lieutenant Andrew Merrill, a state trooper who lived and worked in Bush Alaska for a dozen years, notes that in many cases, a perpetrator is also “the one that chops wood, hauls the water, hunts the caribou so there’s food in the house. So, it’s like, ‘Yeah, he punched me, and yeah, I want this to stop, but I also need to survive.’”

It took one woman thirty years to begin speaking about the time she was gang raped in Tanana. She claims that the main perpetrator apologized to her the following summer, and that she “was in no
place to accept that. I had a gun and was going to kill him.” But she did nothing. She feared for her children, her family’s reputation, its affiliation with the local church. “It was so shameful to me that I didn’t dare tell anyone but the doctor,” she says. “I told the doctor and I got an abortion. I thought if I told the cops, then everybody would know. What would people think? So I just suffered with it.”

A friend of Cynthia Erickson’s who grew up in Ruby endured brutal beatings by her husband for several decades before she uprooted her life and moved with her children to Fairbanks. She wasn’t able to go back to Ruby to visit for many years because “she ‘broke up the family’,” says Erickson. “I’m like, ‘broke up the family’? He beat the shit out of her! But she was looked down on for a long time.”

Geneva, too, has no intention of sending someone who she grew up with to jail – someone she’d trusted, and who she says she now hates, but still, on some level, loves. After the Tanana 4-H group gave their second presentation, the Office of Children’s Services was ready, this time, to whisk her offstage. Geneva told investigators what the man had done and they urged her to press charges. “But my first thought was, I can’t do that,” she says. Geneva felt she’d already done enough damage by making a public presentation and mentioning the molestation, even in vague terms; her family began shunning the accused and she felt she’d already, to some degree, destroyed his life. She looked up at the state trooper and said, “You do realize that I grew up with him?” He handed her his card; as soon as they left the room, she tore it up and threw it in the trash.

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The word for “trooper,” according to Lieutenant Andrew Merrill, translates in nearly every Native language in Western Alaska as “‘he who comes and takes away.’ That’s what we’re seen as,” he says, citing both the structure of rural Alaskan law enforcement, and the perception of it: “You call us, we fly in, we do an investigation, we put somebody in handcuffs and we fly away.”

Merrill is now Deputy Director for C Detachment, a state division that’s four-fifths the size of Texas, spanning hundreds of thousands of miles between Anchorage and Alaska’s western coast. It employs roughly 30 troopers.

Because the area they patrol is so large, and staffing so slim, the amount of time it takes for state troopers to arrive on the scene is anywhere from several hours to several days. And since effectively prosecuting a sexual assault often requires a forensic examination to collect DNA evidence – an exam that typically can only be conducted in full in urban hubs – by the time a victim gets one, if she gets one at all, the 72-hour collection window may have passed. “In a worst case scenario,” Merrill says, “we have people collect their own undergarments, use their cell phones to take pictures of the room, talk to a local health aide about collecting urine in a cup.” Troopers will go forward with the investigation, regardless, if the victim wants to press charges, but it’s often tougher for district attorneys to build a case. That, and the high numbers of victims who recant their testimony – or refuse to give it in the first place – are a large part of the reason more than half of the reports that reach state troopers never make it to the DA’s office.

While the state has made a concerted effort to improve training in sexual assault and domestic violence investigations, Merrill points out that young, inexperienced troopers who’ve been “chasing broken tail lights” in Anchorage often struggle when sent into Bush Alaska and are tasked with pursuing far more serious crimes. To provide more boots on the ground, governor Parnell’s administration has more than doubled the number of Village Public Safety Officers, or unarmed first responders, since 2008, with the official goal, says Choose Respect coordinator Katie TePas, of providing some form of local law enforcement for every community that wants one. (A bill is now moving through the state legislature that would allow VPSOs to carry firearms.) But the job is difficult to fill. Hiring someone from outside a village or its surrounding communities can present all kinds of challenges, from housing shortages to high rates of attrition, but hiring someone from within often forces a cop to choose between his job and his family. “We have VPSOs who quit because they
don’t want to arrest their uncles, their brothers and sisters,” says Merrill, adding that recently, one VPSO was tasked with arresting her own son.

Law enforcement in rural Alaska has garnered national attention. At least 75 of Alaska’s communities have no local police or Village Public Safety Officers, according to an October 2013 report by the Indian Law & Order Commission. The group devoted 60 pages of its nationwide survey to Alaska, calling the state's centralized law enforcement system “unconscionable,” and citing, in particular, the rates of domestic and sexual violence.

But to rely solely on criminal law, says Ginger Baim, former executive director of SAFE, a shelter in Dillingham, is “like going to the emergency room and saying, ‘What have you done to stop accidents?’” The manifestations of sexual and domestic violence in Alaska “are all symptoms of the problem,” she says. “They’re not the problem.”

When Americans and Russians began showing up in Alaska, they brought with them – as settlers did in the rest of the U.S. – an explosion of disease. In the late 1830s, small pox wiped out a third of the Native population in southern and western Alaska. In 1900, a flu and measles epidemic did the same – or worse, by some estimates. Some villages were decimated; in others, there weren’t enough left alive to bury the dead.

Then, shortly after the second pandemic, many Native Alaskan children were shipped off to boarding schools – some as young as six years old – and many were beaten, sexually abused, and urged to forget their languages and cultures. In a few villages, Catholic priests and church workers molested almost an entire generation of Alaska Native children, resulting in multimillion-dollar lawsuits, settled in 2007 and 2011.

Public health nurse Paula Ciniero has worked in ten villages in the Fort Yukon subregion of the Interior, a vast swath of land north of Fairbanks, for the past decade. She says roughly three quarters of her time these days, divided among various public health needs such as immunizations and tuberculosis testing at local clinics, involves sexual or intimate partner violence. "People get mad at me when I say it's become tradition, but it has," she says. "We're talking about third-generation violence. That's tradition."

This is further exacerbated by the fact that traumatic experiences can lead to alcohol and drug abuse; and alcohol and drug abuse can lead to further traumatization. ("It's like a circle, you can't take just one; they're all linked together," says Cynthia Erickson. "You're born, you're molested – kick another domino down.") Detective Vandervalk, in Anchorage, notes that the average blood alcohol level for a victim at the time of a rape exam is .21 – two and a half times the legal limit. "And that's average. We routinely deal with people in the high threes, fours, fives – both on the suspect's side of the house, and on the victim's." No one's blaming the victims, he insists, but still: "If you make yourself vulnerable by drinking too much and passing out, something bad is going to happen to you sooner or later."

Ginger Baim claims that almost all sexual assaults that have taken place in Bristol Bay region for the past 25 years are not only facilitated by alcohol, but happen when a victim is passed out cold. Her own assault, when she was a teenager, happened that way – and the man who raped her may also have been affected by fetal alcohol syndrome. "His mother drank every single day she carried him," she says. "He was born pickled."

Experts and locals often link Alaska's high rates of suicide with sexual assault, too. Many men were abused as young boys – something that’s also, slowly, surfacing. "It's putting a Band-Aid on the hurt," says Erickson. "That's why there's so much alcohol and drugs. That's why there's so much rape. They don't feel good, they black out, and alcohol and drugs cover the pain. That's why we're so dysfunctional. Nobody's dealing with it."
Tanana’s counseling center is a low-slung ranch-style house painted sea green. It lies steps from the village medical clinic, which is steps from the school. Inside, it’s warm and comfortable, with two soft brown couches and several armchairs. Someone’s always offering tea or coffee, and one morning, for an AA meeting, there was a pot of moose soup: hunks of shredded meat and carrots suspended in a thick broth.

In the winter, when night falls early, the town’s health director, Theresa Marks, hosts a weekly sewing group here. A handful of women drink tea and chat over the dark-season projects they’re working on: beaver and marten fur mittens and slippers, crocheted scarves, and elaborate “suncatchers” crafted with multicolored hollow beads so tiny they have to be picked up with a needle. If the animals aren’t trapped here, they can be purchased wholesale; polar bear, wolverine, moose. One woman boasts that she snagged an entire moose hide for $100. They dish the latest gossip, and share jokes of the day, cackling over the reliable antics of two-year-olds, the “badass granny” bumper stickers on an older woman’s snow machine.

One woman told me that, historically, the kind of sexual abuse and assault so many people were experiencing was huklani, or bad luck, so no one spoke openly. “It was taboo,” she said, “Like, bad, you don’t talk like that, you don’t say that.” When she tried to say something to her grandmother, once, she was hushed. “You learn not to talk when you’re a kid.” But over the last few years, women’s groups and regional meetings have increasingly turned into spontaneous talking circles. Sabrenia Jervsjo, whose job with the Interior Alaska Center for Nonviolent Living is to encourage just that, says that each time she turns up in another village, more people come, and more people talk – more adults, and more men. Public health nurse Paula Ciniero is part of a grant-funded collaborative team that travels statewide, leading workshops on identifying and healing from domestic violence and sexual assault. "We get so much positive feedback," she says, "Women say to me, ‘Now I know why my parents don’t talk. Now I know why my parents have said what they’ve said.’ It’s like the light bulb goes on.”

While Cynthia Erickson claims with a weary laugh that her general store has served as a talking circle for 28 years, health aides from the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium did organize a healing workshop in Tanana shortly after the 4-H presentations. And many Tanana residents appreciate the idea, at least, of speaking out. One woman, also a survivor, organized a welcome home pizza lunch immediately after the talks; the adults who attended stood and read the kids’ own words back to them, and said, “We hear you.”

Erickson gets emails and phone calls every day now, and is constantly fielding requests to bring the 4-H kids to other conferences and gatherings. When visiting Allakaket, population 109, about a hundred miles to the north, a woman dashed across the town hall, cornered her and begged, almost in tears, “Please, could your kids please come talk to my kids?”

In March, she took a few of the 4-H kids to the Cama-i Dance Festival in Bethel, a southwest hub community halfway across the state, scrugging together the funds through donations of airline miles. The girls who attended gave a short speech, showed the video from their first presentation, and met dozens of other kids who had identical stories to theirs. (Geneva had family obligations and couldn’t go.) The week before, Erickson had won the Doyon Corporation’s 2014 Daaga’ Community Service Award, and she wept – from embarrassment. “My parents, my grandparents, they didn’t get awards. They were just called good people.” She looked at the certificate, and said it was a nice frame; she’d rather put a family picture in it.
“I’m not gonna sugar coat shit, we’ve been doing that too long,” she says. It’s taken decades to create all this violence, and the kids’ “zero” signs reflect real feeling. Patterns continue, and when it comes to talking circles and workshops and counseling sessions, “the people who really need to be at that aren’t at it.”

Geneva says her parents stopped drinking since the presentations – a huge shift, although she claims it was for health reasons. She also believes there are fewer people stumbling around the streets intoxicated, and fewer parties in the middle of town on weekdays. “I feel like the adults know that the kids are watching them now,” she says. “Kids are little, but they still have smart minds, and know what’s going on at all times.”

Geneva used to be painfully shy, but since joining 4-H has become more outgoing; she only recently became captain of the basketball team, and this spring, she won a medal. She wants to be a state trooper, a teacher, or a chef, and plans to go to college in Fairbanks.

But being a celebrity now, thanks to the presentations, requires some adjustment. So many people dashing up to her at basketball games, telling her how brave she is – it’s gratifying, but also a little unsettling. At a recent tournament in Huslia, a village 130 miles to the northwest, a local woman brought her elderly mother up to Geneva, saying, “Mommy, remember? She was one of the 4-H kids from Tanana.”

It’s a lot of pressure. Every time she’s pegged as a hero, she’s reminded of the story she told to the world, a story that on most days she’d rather forget. “They come up to me and say they’re so proud of me, and I should keep doing what I’m doing,” she says. “But I always have second thoughts.”

A few weeks ago, Geneva received an email from a national 4-H director, in Washington, DC, asking her to put in an application to be a Healthy Living Youth Ambassador, one of five teens who’d work alongside 4-H staffers to build and promote wellness programs. Though she says she’s not sure whether she’ll apply, she appreciates the offer; it means the world is listening, whether or not she’s the one who keeps talking. “I want kids to know that they don’t have to follow the path of our parents,” she says. For this, there are no second thoughts. “I don’t want us to be the victims anymore.”
SOURCE LIST

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Statistics and numbers:

Alaska Victimization Survey
http://justice.uaa.alaska.edu/avs/index.html

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http://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=tp&tid=31

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