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### ARCHAEOLOGY FOR THE LIVING: HOW STUDYING THE PAST IS HELPING NATIVE ALASKANS' FUTURE

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ARCHAEOLOGY FOR THE LIVING: HOW STUDYING THE PAST IS HELPING  
NATIVE ALASKANS' FUTURE.

By

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Archaeology for the Living: How studying the past is helping Native Alaskans' future

Lee Banville

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This professional paper highlights a project in southcentral Alaska in collaboration with the Cook Inlet Tribal Council, the US Forest Service, Kenaitze Indian Tribe, Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and Applied Archaeology International. The area is a case study in a relatively new lens of looking at archaeology – a collaborative, community-based approach that helps to better inform the science and benefit affected communities.

At the Crescent Creek Complex near Cooper Landing, Alaska the team discovered various evidences of an ancient Denai'na village complex. What makes this project unique, however, is the collaboration between field school students and Kenaitze interns to bring a full-rounded approach.

This professional paper informs about the benefits of collaborative archaeological methods.

# Archaeology for the Living

How studying the past is helping Native Alaskans' future

## TITENQ'A SUSTEN NAGH NDUNINYA: WELCOME TO SUSTEN CAMP

The dirt road leading to Susten Camp is lined with Alaskan birch trees and Sitka Spruce, giving the path an evergreen year-round. A meticulously cared for garden sits next to the main farmhouse. The 15 teenagers fidgeted in the early light, both hesitant and excited. Some were there by choice, but most were here because they didn't have anywhere else to go.

Raven Willoya stood at the fire circle, situated between the farmhouse and walled tents of the Alaska Horsemen Trail Adventures Ranch. Although short, her stance and square shoulders exude an air of authority. Her smile wrinkles betray the intimidation given off by her throaty, hoarse voice.

"Gather 'round, campers!" she called through camp.

A group of young girls emerged from the stables – most of them have never seen a horse in person. Four boys in the group grudgingly left the camp teepee, where they were blasting Kendrick Lamar on the portable Bluetooth speaker.

"Grab your Xtratuffs, rain jackets and bug spray," the black-haired 20-year-old said. The plan was to load up the two vans belonging to the Kenaitze Indian Tribe and Cook Inlet Tribal Council to ferry the teens to the nearby Crescent Creek Campground.

There they would spend a week being trained to excavate an ancient Denai'na village complex on public lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"The point is to guide and teach high school teens in methods of archaeology, understandings of cultural heritage and give them an exposure to job opportunities within state and federal agencies managing ancestral lands," said Gen Carey, a field assistant with Applied Archaeology International (AAI). AAI has made this idea of collaborative archaeology its business. Director and founder David Guilfoyle and his team conduct archaeological heritage surveys and develop cultural heritage management projects around the world. In Alaska, AAI worked under the direction of the Forest Service and Fish and Wildlife Service to lead the teens in archaeological methods and training.

Nearly all the teenagers come from Anchorage, Alaska, about two hours away. All were Native. Most have never spent the night in a tent, despite growing up in The Last Frontier. The camp is free, and offers a place to sleep and food to kids who otherwise might not know where their next meal is coming from.

Each camper had to load one piece of equipment into the van. Hands grabbed sifters, levels, survey tripods, augers, and coolers filled with sandwiches.

The potholed dirt road made the ten-mile drive to Crescent Creek a more than half-an-hour affair, but the noise in the van inched louder the closer they got to the campground. As soon as the vans parked, doors slid open and the mosquitos descended on the campers, who ran out screeching into the woods.

The kids split up into several different groups to introduce them to the different tasks they would be working for over the next couple of weeks. The first group joined Willoya as she led them through the campground on a traditional plant tour, helping them understand how their ancestors interacted with the environment around them and what native plants were used in everyday life. Walking through rows of spruce and birch trees, cranberry bushes and fireweed, students were introduced to plant lore.

Carey took her group to learn survey skills by measuring and taking GPS points for the various archaeological features found within the campground. Guilfoyle, head archaeologist, began to help the teens think about effective ways to protect and manage archaeological remains. The archaeological excavation will be used to help produce a heritage management plan to balance the recreational use with the cultural history of the site. Guilfoyle will also use the teens' input to create signs for visitors to the location. Andy Rogers, an archaeology intern, instructed the campers on how to use typical archaeological tools such as augers, soil sampling and field tests that help determine the types of sediment found about the site.

In the land of the midnight sun, the days were long and the work even longer. The teenagers were put to work first thing in the morning and worked until dinner time, but for a quick lunch break.

Near Kenai Lake, Alaska, the Crescent Creek Cultural Heritage Complex is home to a multi-year cultural heritage training program developed by elders, youth and archaeologists. The project looks to combine the science of archaeological research with the historical lore and knowledge of the tribes to manage an area for both recreational and cultural uses.

“The archaeology and oral traditions are different kinds of knowledge. They’re conveyed and told in different ways,” said Dr. George Nicholas, Professor of Archaeology at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. “For archaeologists, you must have material culture, physical evidence to really have faith in your work. For Native Americans, that evidence is conveyed in stories, in song and relations. The people are responsible for their place and their history.”

For years, the U.S. Forest Service and Kenai Fish and Wildlife have been assisting the Kenaitze Indian Tribe’s summer youth programs at the site. The Susten Camp is an early intervention program for teenagers, offering them the opportunity to develop life and professional development skills while allowing them a chance to just be a kid.

“The kids go out there and work with professionals to see how professional archaeology is done. That’s part of learning the skills, being exposed to potential careers in the future,” said Michael Bernard, youth coordinator for the Kenaitze Indian Tribe. “It’s building a sense that [they] can do this, go on to college or higher education or a trade. You can do it, it’s within your grasp.”

The teens at Crescent Creek wanted real projects and AAI has worked with partners to develop archaeological components to these camps, as well as paid summer internships.

“We are trying to instill within [the campers] a sense of pride in their culture, whether they are Kenaitze or any other Alaska Native group, or any Native group, period,” said Bernard. “They’re learning that the stuff that happened a long time ago is still important and valuable and definitely worth preserving.”

This camp is part of a larger trend in modern anthropology and archaeology. Many researchers have made working with Native communities a centerpiece of their science, mixing carbon-dating and excavations with traditional oral histories and elder knowledge. Archaeologists now often work collaboratively with tribes to ensure that their research directly touches those descendants of the ancient peoples they seek to understand. The modern face of archaeological projects represents a shift in the science, its focus and how it’s done.

## A SHIFT IN UNDERSTANDING

When Nicholas started his career in archaeology he had no intention of working directly with tribes. His first day as a professor at the British Columbia Simon Fraser University started to change his mind.

“I walked in to teach my first class, Introduction to Archaeology, and there were 13 Native students sitting in the front row. I could feel them glaring at me and one said, ‘What are you going to teach us about our heritage, you white guy?’” said Nicholas.

That’s when Nicholas realized his usual approach wasn’t going to work.

“I put my notes aside and I began to have a conversation about archaeology. I came to get a fuller, more nuanced perspective on what heritage, what archaeology meant to them,” said Nicholas. “I began to realize there were a host of much bigger questions regarding the value of archaeology: Why do we do it, how best can we do it and for whom do we do it?”

Founder of the project Intellectual Property Issues in Cultural Heritage (IPinCH), Nicholas said he’s been wrestling with those questions for the last 20 years and has dedicated much of his life’s work to them. IPinCH was a seven-year international research initiative that brought together scholars, students, heritage professionals, community members, policy makers and indigenous organizations to create a network of

support for communities and researchers engaged in heritage work. Like the work in Alaska, IPinCH looks to directly cycle its research into the community.

IPinCH funded a series of community-based projects across the world where complete control of the project was given to the community. Leaders in each location identified what the project was, how they were going to do it, and what they were going to do with the research results.

“This provided a way to ensure the primary beneficiary of the research was the community itself. The research wasn’t being filtered to them from the outside, but they were the ones who could make decisions about who benefitted,” he said.

## THE NEW FACE OF ARCHAEOLOGY

The respected anthropologist has worked for 20 years in the field, but has also brought her own Native background into the science.

“Elders, spiritual leaders and community members hold the traditional knowledge of how to care for sacred sites, traditional landscapes, and ancestral remains. They also maintain the traditional responsibilities of what archaeologists refer to as ‘stewardship,’” said Atalay, Ojibwa Native and professor of Anthropology at University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Atalay said several developments have helped deepen the connection between scientist and tribes. Some have been legislative, like the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act of 1990, that requires federal agencies to inventory and return Native American sacred materials and human remains to their respective tribes.

“A lot of native ways of understanding the world are about relationality, so how do you be a good relative? That’s what I teach my students,” said Atalay. In her book, *Community-Based Archaeology*, she argued that archaeologists did not understand the unique tradition that Native Americans protect knowledge of their sacred lands.

While scholars were weighing the role of the culture they were studying in their work, Native American activists increasingly questioned the motivation of archaeologists, many saying the benefit was to the researchers and did nothing to address important issues to their communities.

In their statement before the World Archaeological Congress, the American Indians Against Desecration gave voice to this view of archaeology, saying in 1989, “as the most studied peoples on the face of the earth, the American Indian is well acquainted with the ‘Indian Expert’ as found in the anthropological, archaeological... associations.”

This growing Native rights movement also manifested itself in legislation. The 1966 National Historic Preservation Act was the first piece of legislation intended to preserve historic and archaeological sites. Additional changes in 1992 mandate Native Americans

be consulted about digs. By law, Native peoples must be included in discussions involving their heritage.

But as legislation wound its way through the Congress, Native American activists continued to demand immediate change. Tactics such as occupying archaeological field camps forced scientists to listen. Archaeologists began focusing on subjectivity and ethics with a newly revised role of responsibility to public education and outreach.

“The Native people of the world were upset and offended. These stories, those translations might be true and might not. That isn’t the point. The grounds that we even have to think about these questions has to be based on something else,” said Atalay.

She added that new laws did not provide provisions for non-federally recognized tribes and it did not require museums or federal entities to follow advice. Perhaps most crucial, no piece of legislation addressed the issue of providing funding for how archaeologists ought to involve tribes.

“There are multiple ways of viewing things and interpreting the past,” said Atalay. “Archaeologists were thinking about interpretations rather than facts. At that same time, Native activism was pushing for things to be different. Those two things coming together really allowed for people to rethink what was possible.”

This new thinking opened the door for Native Americans to join the conversation. Through legal mandates, tribes were encouraged to work with scientists and be a part of the decision-making process. This incorporation of traditional knowledge gives archaeology an understanding of Native American’s relationship to the past and their felt responsibility to the future. Heritage management became a social issue.

While there is more collaboration than ever before, conflicts continue to arise. Since 2014, the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, a tribe of around 10,000 people, opposed development of the 1,200-mile Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). Known as “Water Protectors,” protestors believed the plans to run the pipeline under the Missouri River from South Dakota to Illinois has the potential for disaster. They also claim the pipeline would run through a sacred burial ground. Even though the pipeline is not expected to cross into tribal lands, the tribe contests that the federal government did not adequately consult with the tribe during the permitting process – a requirement legally mandated. Tensions rose in the summer of 2016 and for several months, thousands of protestors camped on the reservation and the U.S. National Guard was deployed.

Atalay said there are hundreds of DAPLs around the world every day, but this put heritage management on the front page.

“Archaeology intersects with so many parts of our lives. Things like pipelines and energy projects take us to issues of social justice and issues of human rights and Native Americans’ heritage,” said Atalay.

As recent as 2007, The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP) was adopted by the General Assembly to codify Indigenous historical grievances and address modern challenges. UNDRIP is a “culmination of generations-long efforts by Indigenous organizations to get international attention” to support their agendas and get international recognition.

The United States is one of three countries that currently oppose it.

In September 2016, the American Cultural Resource association released a statement on the DAPL controversy. In it, they describe the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) application of Section 106 under the NHPA is at the heart of the issue as it “creates needless uncertainty in the Section 106 process and heightens the potential for conflict, resulting in potentially costly project delays and expensive litigation – as the Dakota Access Pipeline situation illustrates.”

It’s the kind of conflict that continues to make the truly collaborative approach to projects difficult to pull off, said some experts. Nicholas argued that the projects remain “few and far between.”

“Organizations are still relatively conservative, and by changing the type of relation with tribal groups that is challenging the status quo and a lot of folks are hesitant to go in that direction,” he said.

Nicholas added that projects equally shared between Native community and archaeologists often suffer from uncertainty over who manages the project, who holds the financial obligation and what is done with the information and data after the project is complete.

He said that this means that although stated intentions are inclined towards working together, that partnership only exists as long as the scientist gets what they want out of it.

“Indigenous traditional knowledge is being accepted by the sciences primarily only when it agrees with scientific expectations in terms of what the conclusions are going to be,” said Nicholas. “When it doesn’t agree then it tends to be dismissed as myth and as an unreliable source of knowledge.”

## THE MANY USES OF THE CRESCENT CREEK COMPLEX

So far, that hasn’t happened at Crescent Creek.

Here science and lore agree. For centuries Crescent Creek has been used as a fishing camp.

Guilfoyle speculates that around 1,200 years ago Dena’ina tribes started using the area in the summer and fall months when salmon populations were spawning. They would harvest, process and store the fish for consumption in the winter. Today, people still fish

the area for its pristine king, coho and sockeye spawning grounds. For Alaskans throughout the centuries, fishing has and continues to be a way of life.

Alaska's Native population is an anthropological mystery that scientists are just starting to understand. With 1.2 people per square mile, Alaska has the lowest population density of any U.S. state, leaving its vast land nearly untapped and underexplored.

The Crescent Creek Complex is an ancient Dena'ina village complex at the confluence of Crescent Creek and Quartz Creek, flowing into the Kenai River. The Dena'ina are an Alaska Athabascan indigenous group that arrive in the southcentral part of the state around 1,500 years ago – one of only a few indigenous group to live on the coast. A U.S. Forest Service campground, parking lot and informal trails crisscross this archaeological site.

The Kenai Peninsula had been home to Dena'ina Athabascans, along with neighboring Alutiiqs to the south and Chugaches to the east. Researchers note there exists an “ethnic frontier” at Kachemak Bay that divides the territory of Dena'ina Athabascan and Alutiiq populations. Practicing a subsistence lifestyle, the Dena'ina thrived in the area by pulling fish from the area's bountiful waterways, hunting migrating game and gathering berries and other endemic vegetation.

Without proper signs or other protections, users are unknowingly trampling over archaeological features, accidentally damaging a sacred historical cultural site.

The team, including the teen campers, carried out a detailed assessment and mapping of each feature for on-the-ground protection action with the intention of equally balancing the cultural significance and annual \$2 billion recreation industry that the land is primarily used for today.

The stream is home to Native-run salmon species including sockeye, chum, coho, pink and chinook. Meandering through a valley of glacially deposited soil and rock, the waterway cuts across a landscape as diverse as the species that inhabit it. The vegetation is dominated by large spruce and birch trees with a few larger cottonwood trees looming above a dense undergrowth of alder thickets and devil's club.

Strategically located between the Chugach Mountains and Kenai River Valley, researchers believe the corridor was a massive trading, hunting and gathering area for the region's first people. During the summer, individual families would travel to fish camps where they would catch fish and game and grow some crops for use throughout the year - a practice still maintained today.

The communities lived in semi-permanent villages scattered throughout the region to follow prey. These villages were comprised of anywhere from one to ten semi-

subterranean, multi-family log houses. The most significant aspect of this area is the configuration of the natural and cultural features that capture the essence of the heritage values that so distinctly defined the prehistoric Dena'ina culture.

The 1700s brought Russian explorers and traders through the region. The first permanent U.S. settlement in Kenai came in 1830. At the time a smallpox epidemic was rife through Alaska Native communities, devastating the population.

Still, the area has continued to be used by descendants throughout the post-contact period. In the earliest days of settlement, areas like Crescent Creek provided a “refuge” for accessing traditional resources and maintaining traditions in a context of increasing segmentation of the landscape as populations of settlers of European descent increased and restricted patterns of traditional movement and settlement.

## A SURPRISING DISCOVERY

A 2016 grant by the Kenai Mountains - Turnagain Arm National Heritage Area allowed the team to focus on a prehistoric village exposed along the banks of Crescent Creek. The study was done with the full collaboration of the tribe.

The excavation was carried out by Susten campers and tribe interns.

“I call these sites special areas,” said 16-year-old camper Stefanie Martinez. “Being aware of how our past ancestors were here and creating a respect for that is what this is about.”

The findings will help shape a wider plan for cultural heritage management planning purposes used by the U.S. Forest Service. During this process, the team identified and recorded several archaeological features, including the remnants of a house pit where groups as large as 15 would live. Several storage pits were also found where fish, caribou, moose and other meats would be stored through the winter. A fire cracked rock midden was found at the site, where inhabitants would toss rocks that had been cracked by the use of a sauna. Upon further excavation, the campers found salmon bones, a larger mammal bone and the remains of berries.

The first set of radiocarbon dating results of the fire-cracked rock midden feature excavated at the Dena'ina Village at Crescent Creek shed light on the Denai'na people and their lifestyle – one that little is known about and lack of cultural evidence continues to keep it hidden.

The profile shows two cultural layers separated by a thick layer of loam/clay. Archaeologists agree this likely indicates a flood that forced people from the region, and assume the Denai'na abandoned the low terraces along the creek line at that time, and the

Crescent Creek village complex would likely have been abandoned between 600 and 800 years.

According to lead archaeologist Dave Guilfoyle, this area demonstrates how ancient societies moved in response to environmental changes in the Kenai Peninsula.

The team still hopes to uncover more of this history, though. In collaboration with the University of Illinois, the team is doing DNA analysis of fish bone recovered in the midden. This is of interest as Denai'na culture stresses the importance of returning salmon remains to the river rather than into a midden. The team is hoping this analysis will better speak to the relationship between the people and the salmon, as well as understanding the evolutionary processes salmon have undergone.

Because of the way salmon return to the same stream where they were born, distinctive DNA strands emerge in the fish. Scientists hope to use the DNA analysis to determine how and when they separated genetically. Soil, sediment and charcoal samples taken from the FCR midden were sent to a lab in Australia for further research.

Chemical analysis will determine what animals and plants were being processed in the cold-storage cache pit and during what seasons.

## THE FUTURE OF CRESCENT CREEK

Two weeks into the excavation the team encountered an unexpected visitor.

One morning a tent appeared away from the designated camping site. The camper inadvertently pitched his tent directly in the middle of the ancient village complex.

“It’s not their fault,” said Guilfoyle. “These recreationists have no idea what this place means because, well, how could they? They’re not from here. They don’t know what to look for. To them, this flattened area of earth looks like the perfect camping spot.”

His tent was placed directly over the house depression, and while these intrusions may be subtle at first, over time the impact will destroy the features.

As bad as the accidental tent can be, sometimes visitors knowingly alter these sites.

“One morning we walked into the campground and found a man and his buddies taking photos inside the excavation unit,” said Carey. “They were throwing their ‘thumbs-up’ and throwing back cheap beer. They knew they shouldn’t be there, but they were and they were imposing on a very delicate process that could have ruined everything.”

When the campground was first established, developers failed to appropriately consult archaeologists or conduct a full survey. A footpath leading to the river – a prime fishing spot – cuts directly through the fire-cracked rock midden.

“Some users are following all of the rules and staying to the path just as they’re told, but they are still negatively impacting the sites without even knowing it,” said Carey.

With the help of the youth campers, the team developed a plan that was put forth to the U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This management plan mimics a previously established successful interpretation center just 30 miles down the road, the K’Beq Interpretive Site.

The team mapped the site features through GPS pinpointing and creating a blueprint for a boardwalk to encourage visitors to stop and appreciate the features rather than unknowingly trample through them. The campers also developed language for interpretive signage that will be used along the boardwalk path:

*These places and salmon streams are important living sites to the Dena’ina people, as they are to all the people that continue to visit this area each year. They are protected by state and federal laws. The work we are doing is to protect the salmon habitat, the archaeological record, and the cultural values. With your help!*

“It’s [the teenagers’] history and it’s their story to tell,” said Carey. “When they’re excited and involved and a part of the process, the whole dynamic changes. They become protectors of their heritage, and it gives them a sense of pride and background.”

The project plan requires a formally sanctioned heritage management and interpretation plan that archaeologists hope will serve as a model and case study for managing cultural heritage complexes in other areas. As defined by the Kenaitze Indian Tribe, the plan integrates natural and cultural heritage management actions for the protection of the landscape. This includes addressing and protecting salmon stream values, environmental and ecological impact analysis and archaeological and cultural mapping research.

“My ancestors lived here and they did their part to keep it beautiful, so we have to do our part,” said 16-year-old intern Julianne Wilson.

## INFORMING THE FIELD

This link between science of the past and the cultural respect of the present is the core to collaborative archaeology.

Alan Boraas is a professor of anthropology at Kenai Peninsula College, and has spent his career working alongside Alaskan tribes in collaborative approaches to archaeology.

To him, there wasn’t an alternative. This was the only way to study ancient sites.

“I wasn’t smart enough to give a name to it,” laughed Boraas. “It’s just what I’ve done my whole career because, for me, it is the right way to do it.”

For more than 40 years Boraas has been an influential leader research on the Dena’ina and Cook Inlet Athabascan people of Alaska. While he believes the only way to do his work is in collaboration with the people involved, he acknowledged not all his colleagues feel the same way.

“A lot of archaeologists are still stuck in the idea that you can’t say anything that is not derived from the artifacts themselves. That’s not the case. There can be symbolic meaning to artifacts – or lack thereof,” said Boraas.

And while there may be progress in moving the field to a more collaborative, community-based approach, Nicholas said there still can be tension between science and the knowledge of the tribe.

“Archaeology is so strongly valued that in a sense it trumps local knowledge and local beliefs,” said Nicholas. “In a sense, the old way of doing archaeology is scientific colonialism, where you’re simply taking the information and heritage from the community and they’re getting little or nothing back.”

But as concerned as Nicholas remains, many archaeologists argue it doesn’t have to be a battle between science and traditional knowledge. The two can complement each other.

“Archaeology is a process by which we discover what happened in the past in terms of finding artifacts. Heritage is how those things and places are valued by people today,” said Nicholas.

Anthropologist Atalay said she is hopeful.

“I don’t think it’s the norm right now. I do think that we’re seeing a complete and utter shift towards this [approach]. In the future this is just how archaeology is going to be. We’re just not there yet,” said Atalay.

Susten Camp is one example of culture-based learning opportunities that have been taking place in Alaska, and around the country, for more than two decades. At the heart of many of these camps are archaeologists, who have shifted the discipline from a top-down approach to a more collaborative, community-based approach.

Guilfoyle believes his role in the community comes from necessity because those who study ancient cultures are, in his word, “guests on land.”

“We have an obligation to work in partnership and explore the ways cultural and Western science can work together and undo some of the shackles of colonial subjugation,” said Guilfoyle. “By so doing, we are getting better and protecting the

dual, entwined values of ecology and heritage that is fundamental, and urgent, to all of us - then we share, understand, and become one, in a common goal.”

Projects like the Crescent Creek Heritage Complex, IPinCH and Atalay’s international community-based projects are providing guidance and building the boardwalk to an approach that many believe is necessary, but ultimately challenging.

“It makes sense to have all of the pieces; the tribal piece, the archaeology and the people involved. It makes sense to have the collaboration because you get a holistic management of the land and of the culture,” said Willoya.

However, the tensions are still there.

“The bulk of archaeology takes place at in cultural resource management and that’s where we need to focus our interests. Think about Standing Rock; if it’s about money and resources you’re going to have a much bigger problem,” said Atalay.

Atalay advises that for those moving into a more integrated approach, it’s not going to be easy. But, it will be worthwhile.

“My work is about teaching people to be human beings. Go in, talk to a council, ask respectfully for a few minutes. Have patience. These are the kinds of things scientists need to learn. It might take a long time to build the necessary trust, but that’s okay.”

## COMING FULL CIRCLE

Everyone knows Raven Willoya.

In the small Alaskan town of Kenai, where she spent much of her young adult life, she can’t go anywhere without bumping into a neighbor or cousin. They want to know how her internship is, or what archaeological excavation she’s working on these days. She answers with a certain spark behind her eyes that reminds one of her clever namesake.

Her life before working in the camps hadn’t been easy. Alaska remains one of the states with the highest rates of substance abuse and domestic violence and Willoya’s early life experience was riddled with the same troubles that affect at least a quarter of the population.

“I had a rough childhood. My parents weren’t involved in my life. When I came to the program, I suddenly had an entire support system,” said Willoya. “It makes you feel like it’s a safe place to be. Once I started, I never left.”

But she found something in the past.

When Willoya was 12-years-old she began attending Susten Camp. It was here that she found a safe harbor in her teenage years, and an avenue to reconnect with her heritage.

In the ten years since first attending Susten Camp, Willoya has developed into a leader within her community. As a head counselor at the summer camps and a social services assistant with the Kenaitze Indian Tribal Council, Willoya has proven is the another of the successful finds from the archaeological work along the Kenai peninsula. She has also made archaeology a core aspect of her life, and works as an archaeological intern for AAI during the summer months in Alaska, and has participated in cultural exchanges with aboriginal leaders in Australia.

“It was a positive place to be. You can always find someone to talk to if you’re going through a hard time,” said Willoya. “We’re connecting with the country. If I’ve ever learned anything about my culture it’s been based around spending times at the camps, spending time with the youth and the elders that know the history. A lot of the knowledge is lost but a lot of what I know has been from these camps.”