An Indigenous Leader

Evon Peter

Alaska

Evon Peter lived in a one-room cabin with his uncle and grandfather, in Vashrąįį K'ǫǫ (Arctic Village), an Alaskan village located in the Gwazhal (Brooks) mountain range, about 100 miles above the Arctic Circle. In this community of around 100 people there was no electricity or running water, but you could walk for nearly 100 miles in any direction and be surrounded by nature. The Gwich'in nation villages, some located in Alaska, and some in Canada, are along the migratory route of the porcupine caribou herd, a primary food source for the Gwich'in people. Whitefish, grayling, pike, and salmon migrate through the river systems, and ducks and geese migrate in the spring and fall. As a child, Evon's job was to haul water from the river, where they kept a hole in the ice throughout the winter. He carried five-gallon buckets of water on a wooden yoke over his shoulders. His family kept a fire going day and night.

Despite what seems like a storied childhood steeped in natural beauty, Evon faced challenges early in his life. The public education offered in his village was sub-par, with just one teacher for grades 6-12. Evon's mother moved them to Fairbanks for junior high school so he could receive a better western education. It was during this time that Evon remembers being brought into a room with 14 other Alaska Native boys, where a counselor told them that they were more likely to end up dead or in jail by the time they were 25 than they were to graduate high school. Sadly, his words proved true. Of the 14 boys, one committed suicide and only one or two finished high school.

When he was 16 years old, Evon had an epiphany about the profound inequities between the Native and non-Native peoples in Alaska. "We are not taught in our schools about the history of colonization and the assimilation of Indigenous peoples; and the trauma and social challenges that persist in many Indigenous communities as a reflection of those experiences," he says. "And there is a continued colonization of Indigenous peoples that persists to this day as well."

He had learned about the boarding schools his mother had been sent to, where they were not allowed to speak their language, and told that their spiritual practices and traditions were wrong, and that they must be forgotten if they wanted to fit into society. This deeply affected his mother, who demonstrated symptoms of a "heart wound," Evon says. When Evon was growing up, his mother would sometimes lock herself in her room and cry.

Evon had dropped out of high school, but later he argued for admission into the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), where he received his BA in Alaska Native Studies, with a minor in Political Science. As a college student, he became active in student government, where he organized and co-led a Native student organization. These experiences launched him on his lifelong quest to learn about the history and laws that have contributed to the suffering of Alaskan Indigenous communities. "I learned that my grandparents weren't citizens of the United States when they were young," says Evon. "They didn't have the right to own land or own a business. They were explicitly discriminated against in our own homelands." So it was with great pride, and deeply personal, that Evon testified in February 2020 in a state legislative hearing on behalf of his people, for the passing of HB 221, a bill which formally recognizes the tribal sovereignty of 229 Alaska Native tribes.

In his early 20's Evon became the youngest chief in the Alaskan interior. He attributes this honor to being raised with strong roots in his Gwich'in identity, and a drive to acquire western education as well. "I spent the next three years struggling to lead my people and learning the realities of being an Indigenous leader, subject to the powers of the state and federal governments," he says.

Because to a great extent Alaskan people live off the land, Evon is greatly concerned about how his people will survive. "When I was younger, it was not uncommon to face 65 degree below zero weather for a week at a time," he says. Over the years, there has been a shift upward of approximately 13 degrees in winter, and the change has had an undeniable impact on the people living in the Arctic. Lakes are either drying up or are flooded, depending upon where they are, and on how the thawing permafrost is affecting local geography. This leads to increased erosion, especially in coastal areas, and also in the river systems.

"We're seeing a shift in the types of animals and species that are showing up, or no longer showing up, in our lands," Evon says. "We had a major die-off in the Koyukuk River just this last summer. They're speculating that the thousands of salmon that died in that river died because the water was too warm. They overheated and couldn't make it up to their spawning grounds." Evon also believes that agricultural pollutants used in other parts of the world are migrating into the Arctic. "It's impacting the health and well-being of our people," he says.

In 2014 Evon was appointed Vice Chancellor for Rural, Community, and Native Education at UAF, which is the largest producer of Arctic research worldwide. The chancellor of UAF is committed to strengthening global leadership in Indigenous programs, including the preservation and documenting of Native languages that are at risk of disappearing. "I never in my wildest dreams imagined I would ever be a vice chancellor at a university," says Evon, who quickly realized the position gave him the opportunity to reshape education in Alaska, by modifying both the curriculum and the teaching methods. He was responsible for managing six community campuses across the state, serving students with 14 different Indigenous languages, coming from 140 tribal governments, and 160 communities. "I've been able to engage with so many young people," he says, a note of gratitude in his voice.

Central to the career path that led him to his role as vice chancellor was Evon's work as executive director of Native Movement, a nonprofit organization he and his wife, Enei Begaye, cofounded in 2004. "Native Movement is a collective of around 15 organizers. We work on a range of projects that focus on youth leadership development, sustainability, protection of sacred sites, and social, political, economic, and environmental justice," he says. They have hosted a variety of events, including vigils, marches, youth summits, concerts, and workshops. The organization was created while Evon was chief of his village and was encountering limitations even within his own tribal governance system. Today they have offices in Fairbanks and Anchorage; and they have expanded into the area of missing and murdered Indigenous women.

Evon focuses on issues related to healing and trauma, and the integration of Indigenous cultural practices with behavioral health interventions. "Our major goal is to prevent suicide, which is at epidemic levels in some of our communities," he says. (It is a leading cause of death for Alaska Natives between the ages of 15 and 24.) We Breathe Again, a documentary film that explores the impact of suicide on the lives of four Alaskans, premiered in 2017 on the PBS World Channel's America ReFramed; and being one of the film's producers offered Evon the opportunity to cast a wider net.

Native comedian and traditional Yup'ik teacher Keggulluk Earl Polk is featured in the film. "Sing. Go back to your roots. Dig deep," he urges. "Hit your knees, become humble. Realize that you're stronger than what is trying to take you away. And the only reason you're strong is because you're humble enough to ask for help." Evon hopes that the film will continue to be a useful tool to help build bridges of communication and healing for healthcare workers and patients alike.

Evon will be stepping down from his role as vice chancellor in June 2021 to deepen his work at the community level, as well as in international global advocacy. He plans to continue his work with suicide prevention and immerse himself in his passion for the preservation of Indigenous languages. “We have 20 Alaska Native languages, and one of them has already lost its last speaker,” he says. “I want to be part of helping to revitalize my language–the Gwich'in language. We're down to less than 800 speakers worldwide. Now is the moment for us to work with our elders to document the language as best we can, and create a curriculum, and lesson plans.” His dream is to create a Gwich’in language immersion school or “nest,” where, starting at three years old, children would speak only in Gwich’in.

“I know some people in higher education expect me to go on to be a chancellor, or president of a university. But my path has never been about career advancement,” Evon says. “It's been about finding the place where my heart and my passion are calling me to make a difference. I feel like language intersects with so many of the themes that are reflected in my human rights work: the healing, self-determination, and leadership development of Alaska Native and other Indigenous peoples.”

Treat the earth well: it was not given to you by your parents,

it was loaned to you by your children.

We do not inherit the Earth from our Ancestors,

we borrow it from our Children.

We are more than the sum of our knowledge,

we are the products of our imagination.

Ancient Proverb

Call to Action: Support Gwich’in language revitalization; visit www.tananchatoh.com
Follow Evon https://twitter.com/evonpeter?s=20 and visit https://www.nativemovement.org/

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