‘Apparently, I am a leader. I didn’t know I was. I was just saying what I feel about things and speaking my language.’

Tatiana Ticknor

Architectural rendering of what the indigenous studies center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks would look like. RENDERING COURTESY OF IMF

Between the Lines

Initiative seeks to establish Indigenous studies center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks

BY SAM BISHOP

CHIEF PETER JOHN had an idea, but, in the traditional way of an Athabaskan elder, he explained it indirectly.

"Read between the lines," the chief from Minto said, as he concluded a speech at the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 1994. "John’s speech focused on Troth Yeddha’ – the Dene name for the east-west ridge on which the Fairbanks campus sits. His idea was that the university’s creation had fulfilled a destiny for the place. Alaska Native people should embrace that destiny by seeking education there, John said.

Two decades later, the university and supporters are ramping up a campaign based on that vision.

Called the ‘Troth Yeddha’ Legacy initiative, the campaign seeks to raise $25 million for an Indigenous studies center set in a park designed to honor Alaska Native peoples. The goal is to make the campus more welcoming and academically rewarding for Alaska Native people and all who are interested in their culture, history and future.

In his speech to students, faculty members and others gathered in Wood Center for the Rural Student Services’ 25th Annual Native Summit, John described how earlier generations had picked “troth,” the wild potato root, near the ridge, “yeddha’.

“What do they do here?” the 94-year-old chief asked.

“The thing that your great, great-grandfather and
grandmother did is what you see — big building here."

That hinted at a greater purpose than picking troth. John then elaborated.

"Our great-grandfather plant that eagle feather on this hill here so that the younger people today could go to school and try to learn the true meaning what the Athabascan Indians were. That's not written in history, but you young people is there to accomplish that goal," he said.

According to anthropologist David Krupa, who spent a decade studying the Minto chief's teachings, the eagle feather represented sociol integration to John. The feather symbol came from a story that John often told about two Tribes that reconciled.


"I im making story, he hopes to script a world that, once made, can be stepped into and lived as a proactive experience," Krupa wrote.

John's script for Troth Yeddha' — reading between the lines — would make it a place for Alaska Native people to find success in their educational endeavors.

For decades, UAF has offered programs on Alaska Native languages, culture, art and government, as well as summer sessions to introduce village students to campus.

In a recent promotional pamphlet produced for the Troth Yeddha' Legacy Initiative, former students testified about the value of those programs.

Rhonda Pika, who is now the first chief of the Beaver Village Council, met President Barack Obama in 2015 when he visited Alaska. She shared with him her thoughts about the importance of Tribal rights.

"I owe this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to meet the president to the tribal management program, which has opened doors and given me the chance to network with people that I wouldn't have had as the chief of a small village," Pika said.

Despite such praise, the percentage of Alaska Native students who complete a degree is still far too low, university officials say. The Fairbanks campus has not always felt welcoming, according to some students.

The university and supporters hope to change that and strengthen the overall academic program with the help of the Troth Yeddha' Legacy initiative. Evidence from other institutions shows that creating a welcoming, scholarly center can help.

During the past decade, some of the grass roots effort surrounding Troth Yeddha' went into restoring its rightful name.

Above a bluff on the easternmost point of the ridge, archaeological excavations from the 1930s through the 1950s found more than 9,000 artifacts. Many of these artifacts are thousands of years old, testifying to ar occupancy that offers a source for the stories passed down by Elders and told by Chief Peter John.

Robert Charlie, also a fluent Dene speaker from Minto, first suggested the idea of formally adopting the traditional name for the full ridge. Charlie, Professor Emeritus James Kari and Rural Student Services Director Annette Freiburger campaigned for the name change.

The UA Board of Regents and the Alaska Historic Commission authorized this request and, in 2003, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names agreed.

In 2008, the UA Board of Regents also approved the creation of Troth Yeddha' Park between the University of Alaska Museum of the North and the Reichardt Building. In 2010, the architectural firm Jones and Jones, working with a park planning committee, completed a development plan designed to recognize and honor Alaska Native peoples.

With advocacy from the late Bernice Joseph, vice chancellor of rural, Native and community education, the committee's concept then grew to include the Indigenous studies center — a statewide academic hub for the study of Alaska Native cultures.

In 2014, the committee launched the fundraising campaign to build the park and center.

As a ridge where Dene people gathered and watched the landscape, Troth Yeddha' offers a natural metaphor for UAF. The university, after all, also brings people together to study the surrounding world for insight. The institution's role is rooted in the legacy of the place — just read between the lines. 4

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