

“Tuxedos, women wearing dresses worth more than most pick-up trucks in Fairbanks — it’s just a different world.”

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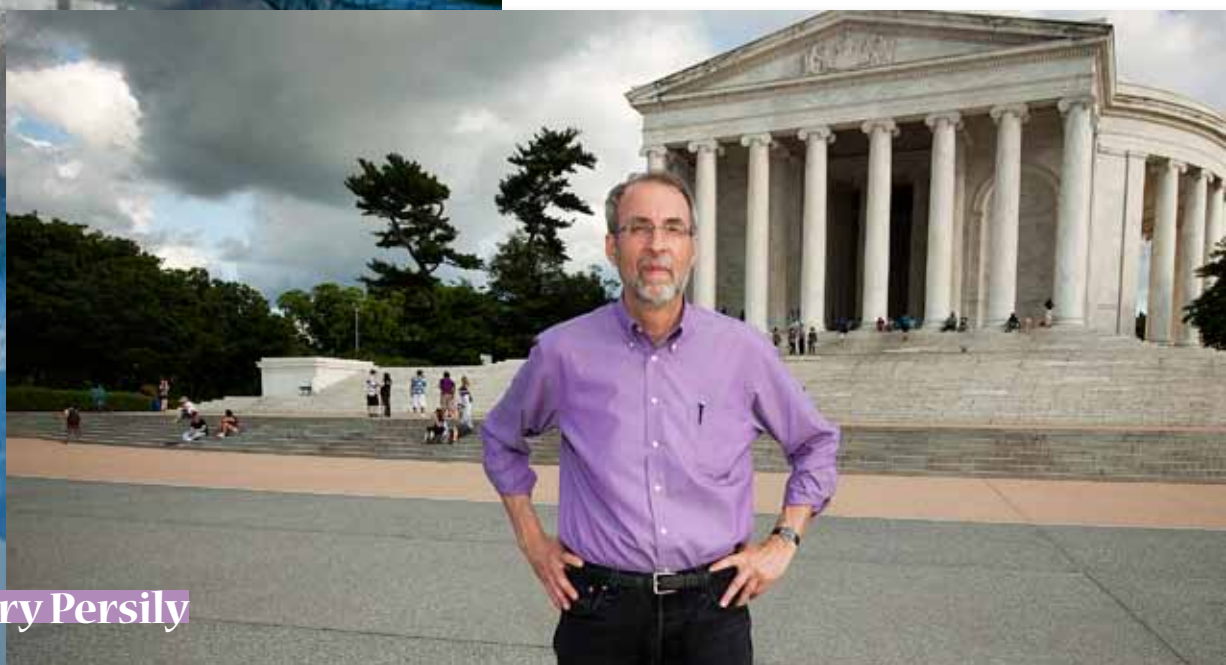
n wishes and salmon roe dreams

Story by Libby Casey
People photos by Sanjay Suchak

It's happy hour in Washington, D.C., and hip 9-to-5'ers spill out onto the sidewalk in the warm evening air. I'm at a crowded table celebrating the Alaska Public Radio Network's new D.C. correspondent. It's a job I held for three years after living in Fairbanks for more than a decade, but now I'm passing the torch to a guy who's never even been to the 49th State. He's never experienced square tires at 40 below or the crisp chill of Prince William Sound from a kayak. As the new guy's friends congratulate him, I hear how impressed they are with the adventure in store, and suddenly I feel a pang of jealousy.

I've just switched to a new job in D.C. with a national network, and while I have spent the last few years living in Washington, working for Alaska Public Radio meant Alaska was still a huge part of my life. My job was to send stories home from the nation's capital, the place that decides the federal dollars and policies affecting communities big and small. Alaska may be dependent on Washington but it's also mistrustful, and some of my Alaska radio colleagues acted like I'd volunteered to serve a life sentence in Gomorrah.

At the same time I was trying to dispel myths of D.C. through my dispatches home, my job became interpreting Alaska for Washington. One month into my move Gov. Sarah Palin was a national sensation, and suddenly I was trying to explain Palin — and Alaska — to cable networks in 15-second sound bites. I discovered that many Washingtonians had less interest in really knowing Alaska than finding ammunition for another political battle.



Larry Persily

Even though I was overwhelmed, years of covering the Yukon Quest Sled Dog Race for public radio in Fairbanks had already taught me everything a journalist needs to know. I learned compassion from experiences like interviewing a musher whose fight with cancer has left him too tired to finish his dream. I learned not to be intimidated by a stinky grump who hasn't slept in three days — an attitude similar to a congressman embarrassed about earmarks. I knew not to give up when your plane strands you on the frozen Yukon. Above all, file the story, even if the small town's Internet dies and you find yourself banging on the hotel room door of drunk Japanese businessmen who look on astounded — in their underwear — as you file over their phone.

And I learned to find my people, namely, Alaskans.

Carhartts and cocktails

Larry Persily, the Obama Administration's gas pipeline coordinator, says he can don a coat and tie but a D.C. socialite he is not.

"Tuxedos, women wearing dresses worth more than most pick-up trucks in Fairbanks — it's just a different world," says Persily.

It's not like he wears animal skins and Carhartts, but like many Alaskans, Persily has his own style. The lanky 60-year-old cuts a sharp figure in saddle shoes and the type of casual slacks you see in Juneau state offices. It's Persily's job to both coax along and muscle through an Alaska natural gas pipeline, a project that just a couple of years ago looked promising until federal funding to his office was slashed by 75 percent this year, forcing him to

shrink his D.C. staff to an army of two. It's an example of the constant tension between Washington and Alaska.

Persily is one of many Alaskans in D.C. pushing for what he believes will help the state, sometimes against long odds. For those in exile there's a group called the Alaska State Society. Its president is 31-year-old **Michael Tubman**, originally from Anchorage. He describes the group as a nonpartisan social club of 350 members, with a touch of the classic Washington survival tool: networking.

Tubman says despite Alaska's size, its politics and people are intimate.

"You learn everything from retail politics and door knocking to the high-level stuff," he says, recalling his first break in Washington as an intern in the Alaska governor's D.C. office. Now he has a prestigious job at the Center for Climate and Energy Solutions.

"If you grow up in California, to work for a governor's office when you're 18 would be darn near impossible unless your parents are major donors, but in Alaska you can pretty much just walk in and ask," he says.

That accessibility helped 29-year-old **Megan Alvanna-Stimpfle**, who grew up in Nome but worked for years in D.C. for Sen. Lisa Murkowski and on the Senate Indian Affairs Committee.

She says a summer before college spent at UAF's Rural Alaska Honors Institute helped prepare her for the rigors outside Alaska. Alvanna-Stimpfle is soft-spoken but projects a calm confidence. She was under the microscope when she first came to D.C. because she's Inuit and was many Washingtonians' first glimpse



Don Young

of “an Eskimo.” But she didn’t mind being an Alaska ambassador.

The curiosity went both ways. Alvanna-Stimpfle describes her amazement at sitting in college classes next to Muslims in headscarves. “Going from a small town on the Bering Strait to the nation’s capital, I was in culture shock,” she says.

I experienced my own shock when I moved to Washington four years ago. Despite growing up on the East Coast, I’d lived in Fairbanks a long time and was comfortable there. And I looked like it. My first week in D.C., a friend nominated me for the TV makeover show *What Not To Wear*. I owned one wool suit and a jacket from Fred Meyer, and all my pants were roomy enough for at least one layer of long underwear, maybe two. I grudgingly packed away my award for Best Hairy Legs in the Yukon and started shaving. I bought *Congress for Dummies* and plunged in.

Megan Alvanna-Stimpfle may have stood out more than I did, with her Alaska Native features and childhood stories of sea ice and trips to Russia, but she adapted faster, finding friends who worked at high-flying places like the World Bank and Goldman Sachs. Despite that, she decided two years ago to leave D.C. for Anchorage. She loved Washington’s heady energy, but ultimately the workaholic lifestyle wasn’t what she wanted.

“In D.C. there aren’t mountains to climb and an ocean to boat, and so you find yourself working nonstop until a happy hour rolls around and then going back to work or doing the same thing the next day,” she says.

Alvanna-Stimpfle’s Facebook page now shows her grinning after a 20-mile Friday-night bike ride, holding her arms up in delight in front of the Girdwood mountains as if to say, “See? This is living.”

The real Alaskans of D.C.

For some Alaskans, their homespun qualities shine brightest when contrasted against a backdrop such as Washington. Like Alaska’s at-large **Rep. Don Young**.

As regular as the cherry blossoms, springtime in D.C. means a flurry of black-tie dinners where journalists mix with the political elite and build relationships by hobnobbing with officials. When I had tickets a couple of years ago, I invited Rep. Young, and even though his staff said he hadn’t been to a Washington gala in a dozen years, he was game.

I had no idea where to start the conversation as the congressman and I awkwardly milled among the cocktail set, but I’d heard he carries a knife with him everywhere, and figured it was as good an icebreaker as any.

“That’s right,” he says, “because Washington won’t let you pack a gun!” And before I knew it, the 79-year-old congressman was wagging a closed-blade knife in the air. He used my gown-clad back to teach me how to disarm a man with just the handle — a skill, he said, every woman should know.

Rep. Young uses the Alaska brand to seem larger than life. A 10-foot grizzly pelt greets visitors to his congressional office; he’s waved an oosik, or walrus penis bone, at federal officials to make a point, and he relishes fighting with anyone who disagrees with him. He gets away with it because his colleagues treat him like he’s an irascible old bear himself. Sometimes it backfires when his audience fights back, like last year’s shouting match in a House hearing with presidential historian Douglas Brinkley.

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Clayton Hanson

Brinkley dished it back rather than being cowed, leading to a YouTube video that went viral and made the *NBC Nightly News*.

It's not just Alaska toughness that helps us here in Washington. Larry Persily says decades in small Alaska towns graced him with skills like patience.

"We learn in Alaska there's always tomorrow. The plane didn't arrive and you run out of milk — you can use powdered," he says. "When snow comes to D.C., they all panic. The world is coming to an end. They will never have another drop of fresh milk in their entire life. You're afraid they might start feeding on each other!"

When the storm dubbed "Snowmageddon" shut down D.C. in February 2010, **Sen. Lisa Murkowski** kept her office open, walking to work in boots and a warm coat and carrying a backpack. "Nobody would guess you're a senator, but that's the way it is," she tells me.

Murkowski grins as she talks about her husband's display of Alaska virility rescuing their neighborhood from trees felled by the storm.

"He revs up the chainsaw and all the neighbors come out, and it's a big block party as he bucks up the tree and chops it into fireplace-size pieces for everybody. He felt like the real Alaska man," she says.

There are ways to find quiet moments of man-meets-nature, too. Persily loves bicycling on the area's extensive trail system, even when Washingtonians' tendencies toward self-absorption strike.

"In Alaska you have to be worried about running into a moose on the trail. In Washington you're going to run into some guy with a Bluetooth up his ear and a Blackberry in his hand ... and he's more dangerous because the moose is looking where it's going," Persily jokes.

But he admits that strolling through the free Smithsonian museums, the archives and the monuments on the National Mall is spectacular.

"It's pretty hard not to get choked up when you go to the Lincoln or Jefferson memorials and think about what they mean, what they should still mean today," says Persily.

The beckoning land

Just because you're drawn to the Big City doesn't mean you really let go of Alaska. Sometimes the distance crystallizes what it means to you. **Clayton Hanson**, 34, grew up in Eagle River and now works in Washington as an editor. He just finished writing his second novel. *Ms. Remorse* is set in the Aleutians, where he spent some time, so Hanson used his memories to conjure up scenes.

"I know what it's like in my head, and my heart in a way,"

he says. "I think there's a lot of fertile ground in Alaska. It's so astounding to people who haven't been there, and it's amazing and beautiful for me, too."

Perhaps the tension of loving the place you live and longing for the place you left can create a rich life. If he hadn't left Alaska, Hanson might not be able to see it through the lens of memory. And it's easier to romanticize from far away.

We're not the first to do that. A hundred years ago poet Robert Service wrote about missing the frontier in "The Spell of the Yukon."

*There's a land — oh, it beckons and beckons,
And I want to go back — and I will.
They're making my money diminish;
I'm sick of the taste of champagne.
Thank God! when I'm skinned to a finish
I'll pike to the Yukon again.*

Maybe that's the best thing Alaska gives those who leave: a place to go home to.

Hanson has a constant reminder of his upbringing in a forearm tattoo of the Big Dipper with the North Star.

"It's so that I could find my way home," he says.

And does he think about it?

"Absolutely. All the time."

But just like me, Hanson is choosing to live here.



Back in the Washington bar, a friend of the new Alaska Public Radio reporter breathlessly asks me, "Have you ever seen the northern lights?" I try not to look at her like she has snow for brains.

"Yes. It is beautiful," I admit, as she leans forward to hear me over the bar's din, lost in the idea of Alaska. "No matter how many times you see it, it takes your breath away."



Libby Casey is a host and producer of C-SPAN's morning TV show Washington Journal. She credits living on a Nenana potato farm for her green thumb, and though she lives in Washington she clings on to her Alaska driver's license and homemade wool hats, and still calls Fairbanks home.

Photo by John Wallace.