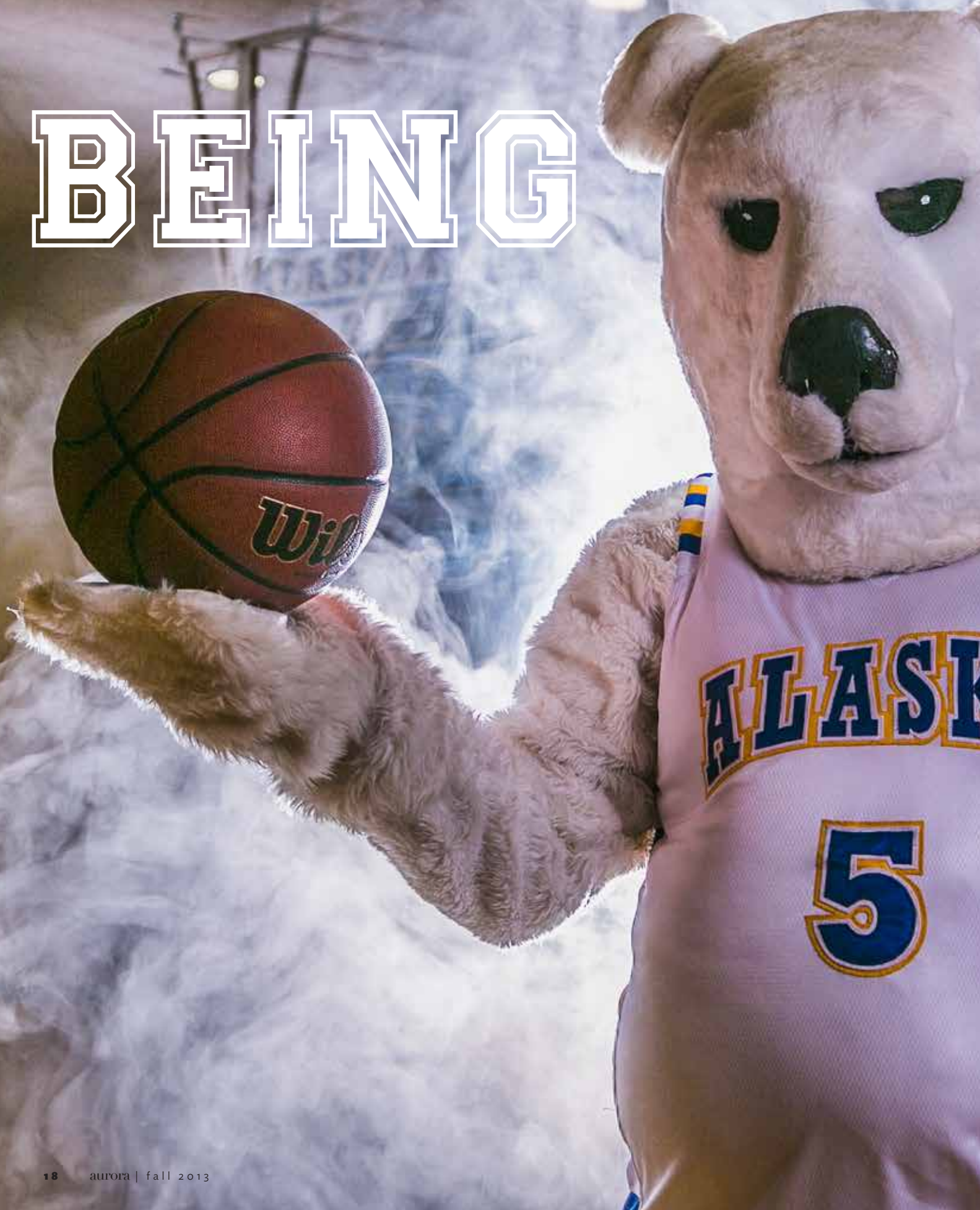


# BEING





# NANOOK

By LJ Evans

## **IT STARTED WITH A GARBAGE TRUCK. AT LEAST THAT'S HOW DARRIN "BEAR" EDSON AND TED HETRICK EXPLAIN HOW THEY BEGAN BEING NANOOK.**

They drove the garbage truck in the mid-1990s as part of their jobs with Facilities Services. The longtime co-workers and friends are huge UAF hockey fans, so they decked the truck out with school insignia and wired a giant stuffed polar bear with crossed hockey sticks on the front. To promote the hockey theme on the days of a home game, they hooked up speakers and played loud rock 'n' roll as they made their rounds. They carried this zeal right into the Carlson Center.

"I was going to all the hockey games with my family, and I noticed there was no mascot anymore," Edson says. The student who had worn a white bear costume to fire up the crowd had graduated and moved on. Edson and Hetrick asked then athletic director Randy Pitney, '72, and equipment manager Ken Larimore, '79, '85, '97, if they could play dual mascots. Edson thinks they suited up as Nanook and Hat Trick for their first game in fall 1996. Edson was the friendly Nanook, the one the kids all loved, and Hat Trick was the one with attitude — his costume head had teeth, and he growled.

"The original suits weren't very polar-bear-looking," Edson says. Larimore remembers them bearing more resemblance to another species altogether.

"Most of the first ones we had looked like white wolves," he says.

The fans got it, though. Edson and Hetrick had fun goofing around with the crowd at the hockey games, so they also started going to basketball and volleyball games. They were a hit every time they showed up.





**Nook can be spotted at any number of UAF events. He even supervised the arrival of a Bombardier Dash-8 airplane in Fairbanks in June. Era Alaska painted one side of the plane for the Nanooks, the other for the Seawolves. Nook, of course, picked the best side for his photo opp.**

They also appeared in the Fairbanks Golden Days parade with the other UAF participants and floats. The first year they walked the whole way, on a typical hot July day, in full costume.

“Never again,” they both groan.

“Wearing that suit is like sitting in a sauna and breathing through a straw,” Edson says.

Now they ride in a three-wheeled cart that they’ve decorated, of course, in UAF colors and insignia. Edson drives and Hetrick stands up in the back, wearing the bear suit, tossing out candy for kids all along the parade route.

### Multiple personality bear

Over the years, long before Edson and Hetrick took on the role, a number of students, staff and fans — female as well as male — have played the bear. The UAF sports mascot has been the polar bear since the 1930s, and in 1963 the Polar Bears became the Nanooks, from the Inupiaq word for polar bear. There isn’t a record of when the first polar bear suit appeared, nor of all the people who’ve played the role, but there have been many.

Even Larimore recalls being pressed into service a few times. Once in the 1980s the coach asked him to be the bear for a women’s volleyball game. Most of the time Nanook wears a hockey jersey, but that

night Larimore wore a pair of basketball trunks over the bear suit. A former student was at the game with her newborn baby.

“She handed me the baby to hold, which was cute, great, no problem.”

But the young mom had arranged for a couple of guys to come up behind Larimore and yank the basketball shorts down around the bear’s feet. The crowd howled with laughter, but Larimore was totally unfazed. He just shuffled off toward the Patty Center lobby with the baby cradled safely and firmly in his arms.

### Now we have the Nook

The main man in the mascot suit for the last seven years has been Geoff Stahl. He, like his brother-in-law Bear Edson, he is a big hockey fan and passionate about being “Nook,” the mascot’s nickname.

Stahl got started in the mascot business when he was 16, helping out his mom by suiting up as Fred the Bear at a family program. He had so much fun he got a job playing Popeye Chicken at UAF hockey games. When Popeye’s closed he inquired about being Nook.

“The best part about it is making the little kids happy and getting to know the student-athletes,” Stahl says. “The Nook gets everyone into the game.”

Some nights Nook does that at three different games. Stahl dresses for doubleheader basketball games at the Patty Center, then he and the bear suit travel across town to the Carlson Center for a hockey game.

“It was all a little overwhelming at first, but now I just flow with it,” he says.

Like his forebears, Stahl brings the Nanook spirit to a lot of other activities associated with UAF. At a recent Admissions event that fell on his birthday, the staff made him a Nook cake and had all the prospective students and their parents sing “Happy Birthday.”

“Geoff is a brilliant representative of the warmth and welcoming environment of UAF,” says Mary Kreta, ’03, director of recruitment. “No one seems to be immune to his charm and hugs — parents and students alike jump right in and always walk away smiling.”

Stahl says he thinks his presence is especially reassuring to new students who are a bit nervous about this big college adventure when they first move into the dorms.

“I think it makes it more of a fun atmosphere. They’re not so overwhelmed.”

His favorite event last year was Starvation Gulch.

“I must have been in a thousand pictures that day — by the Cornerstone, by the bonfire or anywhere the kids wanted,” Stahl says. “You could see the spirit of UAF was just all there. It was cool!”

**“A lot of things go into being the mascot — it’s not just putting on a suit,” says Gary Gray, director of athletics. “The person playing the role of the mascot has to know what to do, when to do it, how to behave and what’s appropriate.”**

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**The costume is heavy, so Nook stays fit with a regular exercise program that includes waving to fans and hugging small children.**

**FACT: In 1963 the Polar Bears became the Nanooks.**

**FACT: Nanook is the Inupiaq word for polar bear.**

**FACT: The UAF mascot’s nickname is Nook.**



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## Mascot code of behavior

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“Though it always has to be in good taste, the mascot can do a lot of things that are fun as well as funny. Timing is everything!” Gray says.

Edson and Hetrick were always well aware of the rules.

“When you put on the head, it’s time to get serious,” Edson says.

The rules include don’t talk, don’t take the head off in public, don’t make any mean or rude gestures and leave the other team alone — no taunting.

And even since the earliest mascot days, being the bear has been a job for a special person.

“Someone who put on the bear suit had to be a bit of an extrovert, a bit of a ham,” says Al Svenningson, UAF’s basketball coach from 1967 – 1985. “You couldn’t take Bear Entertaining 101.”

“You gotta have that love for kids!” says Stahl. “At UAF I work with little kids but I also need to be wild and crazy for the students to rev up the UAF spirit. When I put the suit on, I can act as crazy as I want and people eat it up. I can be a whole other person!” 🐻

LJ Evans has been a writer and editor with Marketing and Communications since 2003. She retired July 1 to pursue a new career guiding visitors up the Dalton Highway. *Ice Road Truckers*, watch out!

LJ’s favorite anecdote about the Nanook mascot was that three times over the years, someone tried to clean the bear costume heads in front-loading washing machines. They didn’t survive.

Catch Nook in action at [www.uaf.edu/aurora/](http://www.uaf.edu/aurora/).

## SUITED UP

I attended UAF from 1966 to 1971. In 1968, when I was a student senator from Moore Hall, I proposed that ASUA purchase a mascot costume to be worn at sporting events and other university activities. A sum of \$350 was appropriated to buy a costume.

The costume was ordered from a costume maker in San Francisco. The suit was in two parts — the head and the body. In order to wear the costume, I had to be dressed in cut-offs with a belt. The head would go on first where four straps would be tied to my belt. The suit would go on next and be zipped up the front. Lastly I put on the paw mittens.

There were several glaring drawbacks to wearing the costume. First, I could only see outside through the nostrils or through the mouth. Second, the suit was extremely hot. I would sweat tons during a basketball game or a parade. Not so much in a hockey game which was held in the bubble in those days. Third, once you were in, you were in until you disrobed later. I never had a real emergency but I came close. Fourth, it was white!

I believe the first time we used the costume was in the fall of 1968. I usually made all the basketball games and a few of the hockey games. I even tried to skate but I spent most of my time on my butt. I had gotten money appropriated to go with the cheer squad to Anchorage for a basketball game. Another event I attended was the Fur Rendezvous in Anchorage (where this picture was taken by Chuck Clutts, ’67, ’70). I drove all

night from Fairbanks to Anchorage in a VW Beetle (no Parks Highway then.)

Since the suit was very hot, my activity level was limited. I mostly danced with the pep band and at half-time would go to center court and dance to “The Stripper.” My little tail would be twirling around and around. By the time I was finished, I would be sweating profusely. I wear glasses and I found out early that I could not wear them because they would fog up so basically I would be blind out there. I was criticized a lot about my lack of activity and cavorting with the crowd.

One of my detractors was Jane Haycraft, ’73, Miss Alaska, from Fairbanks. She asked if she could wear the suit. I told her how hot it was but she still wanted to wear the costume. So at a basketball game, I got her all suited up. She danced around and cavorted with the crowd but by the end of the first half, she pleaded with me to take the costume off. After that she was more empathetic with me. Other people would wear the suit but only for one outing. So I kept wearing it.

One of my supporters was athletic director John Gilmore. He encouraged me to attend all the sporting events. When I graduated from UAF in 1971 he presented me with a U of A letterman’s jacket, which I still have.

*Phil Richardson, ’71*

