

SOUND

AFFECTS



Story and photos by Todd Paris

Canadian Mike Stevens is one of the most sought-after harmonica players in the world, but the residents of Akiak don't care much about that. They care about the music. During a break at a dance and concert performance with a local band in the village's community center last July, Stevens invited the kids to follow him into the attached laundry room, where he handed out free harmonicas, followed immediately by an impromptu lesson on how to play. For most of the kids, it was their first experience with the instrument, and the smiles that resulted were topped only by the variety of weird and wonderful sounds that ensued.

Stevens and fellow musician Raymond McLain made the trip to the Kuskokwim River community through an outreach effort by Terese Kaptur, director of the Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival. Sally Russell, assistant director at UAF's Kuskokwim Campus in Bethel, jumped at the chance to host the event.

Stevens has devoted a good part of the past decade to fighting substance abuse, primarily huffing, in remote northern villages of his native Canada. (Huffing is the debilitating and sometimes deadly practice of sniffing toxic fumes from small bags to get high.) In 2012, Stevens was awarded the Queen's Diamond Jubilee award for founding ArtsCan, a nonprofit organization that brings together artists and indigenous Canadian youths in creative expression.

Stevens said the harmonica is a perfect avenue for his work with substance abusers. Not only are they small and easily transportable, they connect in a more practical way with kids who are into huffing.

"Harmonicas are the gateway since it's all about breathing," he said. "I've seen kids pick up a harmonica for the very first time and be able to use it instantly to express their feelings and emotions in a way they've never experienced before. It can make them feel better by being able to say something on the instrument that is genuinely theirs and instantly valid."

After visiting Akiak, Stevens and McLain stayed an extra day in Bethel, where they again performed



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before an appreciative local audience, but not before visiting with residents of the state's only huffing treatment center. Stevens again passed out free harmonicas to the dozen or so residents, all young men between the ages of 13 and 18. He shared a quick lesson, but more importantly, he listened to their stories with compassion and without judgment.

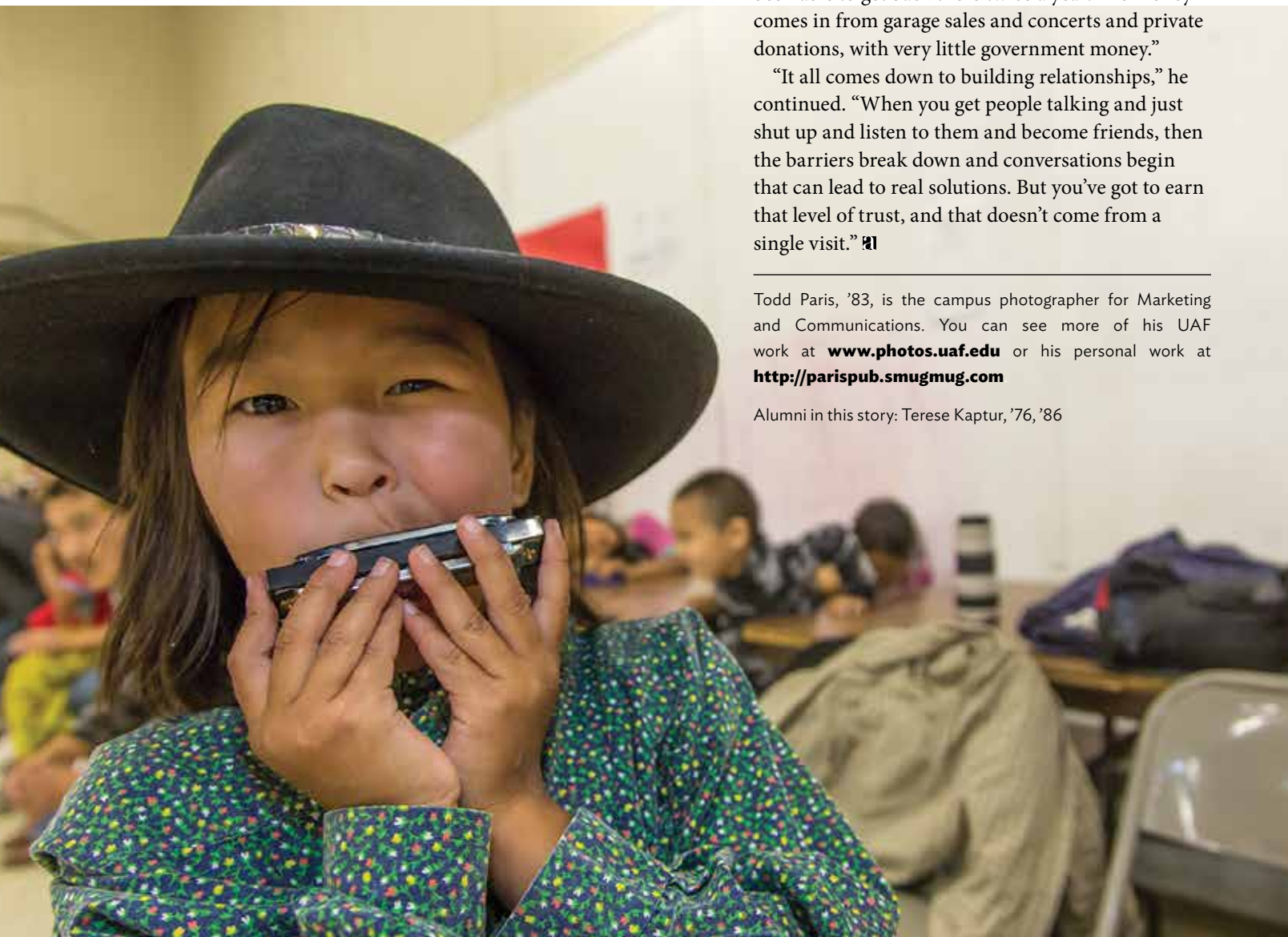
Stevens and McLain returned to Bethel and Akiak in March, which Mike Williams, Akiak's village chief, was glad to see. "It was an event that had lasting influence about positive self-esteem," he said. If funding allows, they hope to return for a third visit during their arts festival stint in July. Stevens believes in maintaining a relationship with people he meets during his travels, and that follow-up is crucial to providing a positive influence on young people.

"It's been close to 14 years since I first saw kids huffing in Sheshatshiu [an Innu community in northern Labrador]," Stevens said. "Since then I've been able to get back there twice a year. The money comes in from garage sales and concerts and private donations, with very little government money."

"It all comes down to building relationships," he continued. "When you get people talking and just shut up and listen to them and become friends, then the barriers break down and conversations begin that can lead to real solutions. But you've got to earn that level of trust, and that doesn't come from a single visit." ❧


Todd Paris, '83, is the campus photographer for Marketing and Communications. You can see more of his UAF work at www.photos.uaf.edu or his personal work at <http://parispub.smugmug.com>

Alumni in this story: Terese Kaptur, '76, '86



“Some of the kids are still playing along with some adults,” Chief Williams said. “They have been asking about when the next visit would be because they really enjoyed the jam session.”



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Web extra: Read more about Mike Stevens and his youth outreach program at www.mikestevensmusic.com/artscan/. Warning: The accompanying video includes scenes of drug use by children.