

Shaping Tomorrow's Leaders: Yakutat Youth Career Development

By Susan Oehlers, Wildlife Biologist, Yakutat Ranger District

Thanks in part to the Alaska Region Diversity Matching Funds Program, Yakutat area students are well on their way to discovering their future career paths. Six high school students recently traveled to Fairbanks to attend the Alaska Association of Student Governments (AASG) Spring Youth Leadership Conference. The purpose of AASG is to provide leadership training, communication, and a student voice of issues at the local, state, and national levels. AASG creates young leaders in communities and schools by teaching them leadership skills and increasing their awareness of political issues and the political process (see www.aasg.org for more information).



Yakutat student Savannah Beckstrom (foreground) learns the value of community service.

During the conferences, students attended general business meetings where issue-related resolutions were introduced, debated, and voted on by the delegation. They also attended leadership workshops and other presentations, and elected new officers. Students volunteered for community service events, including helping out at the local animal shelter, Salvation Army, and cleaning up a local skate park. The students also took the opportunity to tour the University of Alaska Fairbanks campus, including the Far North Museum.

Yakutat student Maka Monture summarized her experience: "I met many other students from all over Alaska who are making a difference for their schools through student council. It was cool that Yakutat's student council was able to contribute to those differences by voting



Ellen Anderson and Chad Hood field questions from inquisitive high school students. Photo by Laurie Lamm.

for the resolutions. The workshops that they offered were great experiences as well. I attended a martial arts class where I was taught how to break a wooden board with my hand. I also went to a Salvation Army where we sorted clothes for the Air Force base. The tour of UAF really gave me an idea of what college will be as well. Spring AASG 2010 was a great experience."

Funding for the student's travel to Fairbanks was provided by the Alaska Region Diversity Matching Funds Program. The Alaska Region has a long established management emphasis on diversity and understands the significance and importance of integrating diversity into every aspect of how we do work and engage with our



Myra Gilliam gets "grilled" by a kindergartner. Photo by Susan Oehlers.

communities. The primary objective of the diversity matching fund program is to achieve the four diversity goals of the Alaska Region Diversity Strategy:

- Promote a better understanding of the value of diversity.
- Increase outreach, partnerships, and program delivery to non-traditional users, underserved communities, and diverse youth programs.
- Enhance personal commitment and accountability for creating an inclusive and diverse work environment.
- Increase the recruitment, employment, and retention of a more diverse workforce.

The diversity matching fund opportunity is intended to expand current programs, build upon existing partnerships, expand employment opportunities, and help develop new relationships with under-represented and nontraditional communities, partners, and youth.

Yakutat students also had the opportunity to explore possible future careers during the Yakutat Elementary and High School Career Fair. Approximately 60 people representing a variety of disciplines participated in the Fair, including the military, public safety offices, health care, law, architecture, and meteorology. Forest Service employees included Russel Wicka (representing trails and wildland firefighting); Teresa Hunt (recreation, minerals, heritage, lands, cabins, and special uses); forester Daryl James; District Ranger Lee Benson; and Susan Oehlers (wildlife biology). Visiting Forest Service representatives were Terry Suminski (fisheries and subsistence); Ellen Anderson (botany);



Yakutat high school students depart the Yakutat airport for the AASG conference in Fairbanks.

Myra Gilliam (archaeology); Jeff Bryden (law enforcement); Chad Hood (minerals); and Laurie Lamm (interpretation and conservation education).

Students from kindergarten through 12th grades circulated throughout the fair, each interviewing several representatives. Posters, videos, brochures, and other displays and props helped children to gain a better understanding of the careers available in the Forest Service (not to mention “freebies” such as Smoky gear that helped attract them to the tables in the first place). The Career Fair was a great success, with wide participation by members of the community, in addition to the students and their parents.

Exposure to educational and career opportunities that they might not otherwise be aware of is a valuable experience to students in this isolated, rural community. The Yakutat

Ranger District has extremely small staff and consistent community outreach can sometimes be challenging; however, we take great pride in our community involvement and will continue to build towards maintaining and increasing these important relationships.

The events high-lighted in this article are only a small sample of the district’s many outreach programs. Through all of our outreach activities, we believe we are making great strides toward addressing the goals of the Alaska Region Diversity Strategy. Many thanks to the “visiting” Forest Service folks who made time in their busy schedules to travel to Yakutat for the Career Fair; your dedication and participation are highly appreciated.! The school is already making plans for next year’s Career Fair, scheduled for Friday, April 8, 2011, so mark your calendars.