

LISA'S BIG IDEA

Rural Fire Training Coordinator combines her Inupiaq eye and big-as-Alaska heart to stitch Native and urban cultures together.

By Ken Marsh



Lisa Shield with State Fire Marshal Richard Boothby, right, and former Fire Training Administrator Gordon Descutner, receives her Alaska Fire and Life Safety Educator of the Year Award.

Not to overstate her accomplishment or cause her to blush, but Lisa's idea was really kind of brilliant. Her concept was simple in a way that might have left some wondering, "Why didn't anyone think of that a long time ago?" And in the end, fueled by determination and hard work, she was undeniably successful in bringing together a contingent of Alaskans too long separated by distance, money, and culture.

Of course, if you know Rural Fire Training Coordinator Lisa Shield (who in separate news was honored this fall by her firefighter peers as Alaska Fire and Life Safety Educator of the Year) her idea to meld formal dress protocol with Alaska Native traditional clothing will

come as little surprise. More on that in a moment. But first, for those who don't know her, a glance at Lisa's life will explain a lot.

Lisa's story begins in 1976 when her family left the arroyos of her Arizona birthplace for the soggy tundra of Selawik in northwestern Alaska. Lisa was an infant then and her mother, Sue Adams, a one-time professional violist known to perform with the likes of famed pianist Liberace, had left the stage to take a teaching job in the tiny village of a few hundred people.

"There was lots of glitz and glamor," Lisa explained of her mother's life at the time, "but she didn't feel like she was doing what she *should* be doing."

Lisa settled into a chair at her Anchorage Fire Training Center office, then added matter-of-factly, "So, she became a teacher."

Product of a wealthy upbringing, Lisa's mother felt inspired to brush privilege aside and contribute to others in ways she found meaningful. Even if that meant giving up familiar comforts for a new, more rustic, way of life. So, when the family arrived in Selawik, she made some things clear.

"My mom said, 'We're not going to live in teacher housing,'" Lisa said. "Because

teacher housing had water, sewer, electricity, and heat. ... They gave up all that stuff."

The idea? To show respect for the Iñupiaq people she would be serving by living as they lived. And to immerse her children into the culture and traditions of the people they would come to embrace as family – and vice versa.

"My parents had told everybody, 'Nobody speaks English to our babies. You only are allowed to speak Iñupiaq to the babies.' They were making a point," said Lisa. "Your language is valuable and it's part of what makes you who you are."

Meanwhile, Lisa's father, Terry Adams, a blue-collar man with a golden touch for building, fixing, and wiring just about anything, fit perfectly into rural life.

"He installed the very first phone system," said Lisa. "When he got it, the unit had been damaged, but the community really wanted it, so he put it in. When the first phone call was made, it rang all the phones and everybody answered – it was like a big party line," she said, laughing. "And he was like, 'That's not how it works.' And they were like 'No, no! You have to leave it. We want it that way.' Folks figured if they were going to tell somebody something, everybody else was going to need to know anyway," Lisa said. "My dad loved it."



Years later the family moved to Kotzebue where her father used his carpentry skills to spruce up the senior center. “My dad built, with his buddies – the senior center was kind of a center point of town – and he built these boardwalks all around it and a huge stage. And we used it for our celebrations every year. There was a gazebo and there were flower boxes and there was a little pond, and then he built like a sod house and a food cache and all this stuff so the elders would have something that felt like home. And there was a little creek that went through, and he put boardwalks all around the senior center so elders could go out on their wheelchairs and have access to it. It was beautiful.”

Thus, go Lisa’s childhood memories, all rooted to rural Alaska life, Native people, and deeply held social philosophies revolving around helping those around you.

Lisa, who is Native not by blood but by “adoption by her elders,” admits that people sometimes get confused when she refers to her Native Alaskan background. But to her, and to the Iñupiaq people with whom she grew up and who think of her as one of their own, it’s simple.

“I was immersed in it,” she says of the Iñupiaq way of life. “I grew up with it. So, it

gets confusing for people because I say, ‘in *our* language, in *our* culture, in *our* heritage, and *my* ancestors,’ and when I say all these things, I’m referring to my Native family.”

Flash forward a few decades – past Lisa’s early years in Selawik, followed by her family’s move to Kotzebue where she attended school and worked in the bilingual head-start/daycare center founded and run by her mother; beyond the awful day when

she lost a brother, a pilot, in a local plane crash; and through her young adult years where she spent a couple of six-month stints in Russia educating people there about the perils of drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence, and suicide. Move beyond all of that to September 2019 and the Alaska Fire Conference in

Ketchikan.

Co-sponsored by the Alaska Fire Chiefs and Alaska State Firefighters Associations, the fire conference is an annual gathering of fire chiefs, firefighters, and local and national instructors. The conference features workshops, presentations, awards ceremonies, and a banquet. It is an opportunity to mingle, network, learn and, for some, to be recognized for outstanding achievements.



During more official moments fire conference attendees wear formal attire – Class A uniforms – featuring black ties and jackets with brass buttons and gold-trimmed sleeves. This can be problematic for some attendees, particularly those representing smaller, rural fire departments where budgets are limited. Most must sacrifice frills in favor of essential department spending. Those who manage to scratch together enough money to attend the conference are sometimes left without enough money to afford Class A uniforms.

This brings us to Lisa’s big idea; the vision she had to integrate Alaska Native traditional clothing into state Fire and Life Safety uniforms and formal dress. As the Alaska Department of Public Safety’s Rural Fire Training Coordinator, Lisa works closely with small fire departments statewide. She knows the fiscal challenges rural fire chiefs face, but even more to the point she is aware of the cultural gaps that separate many from larger agencies. *How, she wondered, might she bridge those gaps?*



STITCHING CULTURES TOGETHER: Rural Fire Training Coordinator Lisa Shield and brother, Tim Adams, work to assemble formal kuspuks for Alaska’s rural fire chiefs. (Lisa Shield image)



Lisa Shield addresses rural fire chiefs in Iñupiaq and English before the badge-pinning ceremony in September.

And then it came to her: Why not stitch traditions together? Maybe she could blend the black with gold-barred sleeved formal uniforms into traditional Alaska Native clothing. In other words, perhaps she could create a new kind of Class A uniform in the style of the Native *quspeq* or *atikluq* – broadly called “*kuspuks*.” Over-shirts or jackets traditionally worn by many Alaska Native groups, *kuspuks* could be designed, sewn, and gifted to the Rural Alaska Fire Chiefs for the fire conference.

There was only one problem. Lisa had never used a

sewing machine. So, in May she took a class from Nikki Corbett of Sew Yup’ik which gave her the basics, then went home

to figure out the rest. Her brother, Tim Adams, was all too happy to join in with solving the mystery that is the sewing machine. And in a couple of weekends, they learned and created Fire Instructor *kuspuks* uniforms for Lisa and three contract instructors. The new uniforms were a hit both during the fire training hosted in Palmer for the villages and out in the villages where they were worn. The first chance she got



Roger Wassillie, Togiak Fire Chief/VPSO, displays the formal kuspuk.

Lisa proposed trying their hand at the formal Class A.

“The idea was approved by the Alaska Fire Conference committee, and the committee agreed to purchase the materials for the uniforms,”

according to an Alaska Fire Conference Facebook page post. The materials

would be paid for by the Ketchikan Volunteer Fire Department.

With the backing of her fire conference peers and donations from industry associates Lighthouse Uniforms, Lisa and her brother Tim took needle, thread, and sewing machines, and began creating new dress uniforms to be worn by the rural

chiefs. At the same time, Lisa rekindled her childhood hobby of beading and fashioned, with the help of FireTrex and Cut-it-Out Crafts, individual badges for each rural chief.

The final products – a sure enough blend of black-and-gold formal and traditional kuspuk style – were a

smash hit. The rural fire chiefs were overjoyed, and Lisa received an avalanche of congratulations and thanks. Many of those sentiments live on in social media.

“My husband is one of the rural Fire Chiefs who received one of these and it is beautiful work!” wrote Mayor of Atka Crystal Dushkin, on the Alaska Fire Conference Facebook page. “Thank you for

“This is so cool!! What a great way to pay respect to the rural Chiefs.”



that hard work and dedication it took to undertake a project like this.”

In another comment, Dave Boddy of the Alaska Professional Firefighters Association glowed, “This is so cool! What a great way to pay respect to the rural Chiefs.”

And former Klawock Volunteer Fire Department Chief Michael Peratrovich weighed in, “As always you continue to invent new and innovative ways to inspire the rural firefighters. The fire service is deeply indebted to you.

The accolades continue, on and on. In turn, Lisa’s reaction is one of graciousness; and perhaps a bit of deflection.

“*Quyanaqpuk* everyone,” she comments back – that’s *thank you very much*, in Iñupiaq. “But I never could have done any

of this without my bio brother, Tim Adams. Can you guys believe he tolerated me!”

Lisa uses “bio brother,” as a distinction, by the way. It’s short for “biological,” to avoid confusion with her many “fire brothers” and fire sisters who make up, in Lisa’s mind, one great extended family.

And in that vein, as a new year approaches, the non-Native girl with the unmistakable Iñupiaq heart carries on the work her mother and father started in the small village of Selawik decades ago. She’s still doing as she was taught, working with others to bridge cultural gaps through respect, education, and a love for all people near and far.

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