

The Long, Cold Journey

March 2012

Alaska Wildlife Troopers hit the trail with personal stories on a quest for suicide prevention

Story and photos by Beth Ipsen

There was a constant reminder to why three Alaska Wildlife Troopers snowmachined more than 850 miles in five days. A poster that hung on the wall at the different schools Alaska Wildlife Troopers Jon Simeon, Thomas Akelkok and Darrell Hildebrand visited included the quote from educator Spence Rogers: "Our kids are worth whatever it takes."

Hildebrand saw the poster at the school in Manley Hot Springs on March 19, the first of seven schools visited along the way. He wrote the quote down in a small blue notebook commonly carried by troopers. He repeated the quote at each of the following schools – Ruby, Galena, Koyukuk, Nulato, Kaltag and Unalakleet – when talking about preventing suicides, making good choices and setting goals throughout life.

To him, that quote summed up why the group would brave subzero temperatures and blowing winds to snowmachine to the different communities in rural Alaska to tell school children and commu-

nity members there is always hope in the midst of despair and that suicide is preventable.

It's a topic Hildebrand knows too much about.

When Hildebrand was 4-years old, his father took his own life. Since then, Hildebrand has had uncles, nephews and cousins also take their lives. He knows more than 40 people who have committed suicide. That's about one every year in the 47 years he's been alive. His father's death had an adverse effect on him. He admits to being an aggressive boy growing up and having troubles with alcohol at a young age. It was at the age of 17 that he decided he needed to grow up fast. He admits it took "a lot of personal soul searching and forgiveness" to get him to the calm, level-headed trooper he is today.

At each stop, the troopers asked for a show of hands from people that knew someone who committed suicide. At each stop, a majority of people, both young and old, raised their hands. In some schools, almost everybody raised their hand.

"In five, 10, 20 years, I don't want to see a single hand," Hildebrand said. "We want to stamp out suicide."

Growing up living in Fairbanks and Nulato, Hildebrand saw first-hand how alcohol-fueled violence can tear families apart. Likewise, Simeon, a 42-year-old Athabascan and Yupik Native from Aniak, also grew up witnessing the toll alcohol abuse takes on people close to him. It's a problem that many of the kids they talked to on the trip also face. Both Hilde-



Careline, Alaska's suicide prevention line, is always open: call 1-877-266-HELP (4357) or chat online at www.careline-alaska.com. You don't have to be in crisis; you're also welcome to call if you're worried about someone, grieving or just down.

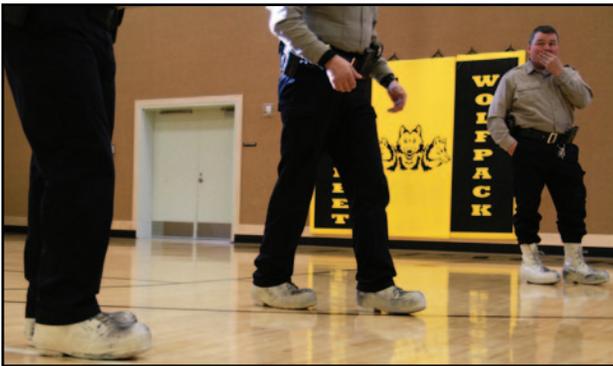
For more information, such as warning signs, visit www.juneausuicideprevention.org. For steps you can take to help prevent suicide, see stopsuicidealaska.org and click on the link to the Alaska State Suicide Prevention Plan.



Stewart Cleaver laughs as he and Alaska Wildlife Trooper Darrell Hildebrand listen during a talk at the Merrelaine A. Kangas School in Ruby on March 20.



Alaska Wildlife Trooper Darrell Hildebrand listens to a story during an overnight stay at Old Woman Cabin outside Unalakleet on March 21.



Bunny boots are the footwear of choice during the 850 mile snowmachine trek.



Alaska Wildlife Trooper Jon Simeon, on left, points to Trooper Thomas Akelkok's flexed bicep during a talk at the Kaltag School on March 21.

rand and Simeon were there to show them that they, too, can overcome adversity and live happy and productive lives, and raise their own children in a loving atmosphere.

A big part of their own healing was letting go of the anger and resentment they had for those who had committed suicide.

Shortly after Simeon graduated high school in Aniak, one of his best friends killed himself. The day they were supposed to go hunting for moose, his friend came by his house at 2 a.m. He was drunk. This friend, Alfred, had battled depression, alcohol-abuse and had several suicide attempts since his mother died the winter prior. During an alcohol-fueled argument, Alfred's father had kicked his mother out of the truck to walk back to the village in frigid temperatures. She was found three days later – frozen and clutching an empty bottle of booze. When Alfred dropped by early that morning, he told Simeon, "I have it all figured out."

"Everything is good," Alfred told Simeon in Yupik.

Little did Simeon know, that is one of the tell-tale signs that someone is going to commit suicide. Simeon told his friend "to go home and go to bed." Other tale-tell signs are talking about wanting to die, expressing feelings of hopelessness or having no purpose, talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain. This could be accompanied by mood swings, increased alcohol and other drug use, sudden impulsiveness and taking unnecessary risks. Other warning signs include giving away prized possessions and sometimes, at the end, there is a sudden sense of calm. Alfred had decided to end his life. It was his final decision.

"His selfish act took my best friend away from me for the rest of my life," Simeon said. This angered Simeon, who refused to go to his friend's funeral and potlatch.

Simeon continues to look back and realize his friend was asking for help.

"Nobody told me the signs to look for when someone is thinking about suicide," he said.

They were trying to change that with this trip.

"It's a topic that needs to be addressed," Simeon said. "It's like a virus in a computer. It gets in there and takes over."

According to the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council, Alaska has a rate of 21.8 suicides per 100,000 people, nearly twice the rate of the rest of the country. The rate among Native people was 35.1 per 100,000 people in 2007. The suicide rates for Western Alaska fall between 67.7 and 52.9. Native males between the ages of 15-24 are the most susceptible to suicide. In 2001-2010, 164 young Native men took their own lives.

It's something the three troopers are hoping to help change.

The wildlife troopers were joined by Public Information Officer Beth Ipsen and Brad Honerlaw, a law enforcement ranger for the Bureau of Land Management. Honerlaw is Simeon's federal counterpart in Glenallen in wildlife protection for hunting laws on federal lands. Honerlaw joined the group to visit villages that engage in federal subsistence hunting. This was a proactive trip for Honerlaw who was available to answer

questions about federal subsistence laws, the BLM and talk about summer and full-time job opportunities to the students he met along the way.

All three troopers remember similar visits troopers made to their villages. They saw troopers for the people they were behind the badges, not as someone there to take people away. The three hoped that by showing a more in-depth look at the person inside the uniform and mixing it with humor, kids would see the other side of law enforcement and inspire them to join trooper's ranks.

Akelkok, who is a Yupik and Aleut Native from Ekwok, was labeled "The Little Guy from the Ocean" and the "Eskimo Atlas" during the presentations. This was usually accompanied by Simeon pointing out Akelkok's 5-foot-8 stocky build was so he could easily walk into the Coastal Winds. Akelkok usually responded by flexing his brawny biceps.

Akelkok grew up in a strict, but loving family. The youngest of five, his father kept him busy commercial fishing in Bristol Bay during the summer and tending to sled dogs and fetching wood during the winter. It's a work ethic he still practices.

Quick with a dimpled smile, Akelkok talked about making good choices.

"You own that choice for the rest of your life," he told youngsters and some elders at the Ella B. Verneti School gym in Koyukuk. "For every bad choice, it takes five or six good choices cover the bad choice."

After Hildebrand talked about how suicide has affected his life, he talked about how setting goals can prevent falling into a dangerous lifestyle and combat depression. He set a goal of becoming a pilot at an early age. Hildebrand, a pilot for the past 33 years, is a trooper in Galena, located 249 miles into the trail. Many people already knew Hildebrand, who patrols an area that includes the villages of Ruby, Kaltag and his hometown of Nulato. Many people he ran into along the way were relatives.

Hildebrand and Simeon have spent the past three years preaching suicide prevention. The first year, Hildebrand was invited to talk during a Tanana Chiefs Conference gathering. When Hildebrand couldn't make it, Simeon stepped in at the last minute. Last year, the pair, AWT Director Col. Gary Folger and a representative from the Department of Health and Social Services flew to different villages coinciding with the Iron Dog snowmobile race. Hildebrand's cousin, Tanana resident Cynthia Erickson, was instrumental in organizing last year's effort. This year, Hildebrand, with the full support of Folger who is an Athabascan from Interior Alaska, pushed to use a mode of transportation heavily used in remote Alaska villages and by the Alaska Wildlife Troopers when patrolling their areas.

The group of five braved temperatures as low as 22 below zero and 40-mph wind, following the trail over the Tanana and Yukon rivers and joining sloughs before turning onto an overland section between Kaltag and Unalakleet. They snowmachined over dog booties left on the trail from the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race just weeks prior.

The goal to make sure the students know to reach out to someone and talk about their problems – whether it's a friend, a parent, grandparent, teacher or even the troopers. They handed out cards for the



Alaska Wildlife Trooper Jon Simeon calls on a student to shoot a basket from the free-throw line at the Unalakleet School gymnasium on March 22.



Alaska Wildlife Trooper Darrell Hildebrand talks to a group of school children and community members at the school in Koyukuk on March 21.



From left, Alaska Wildlife Troopers Jon Simeon, Thomas Akelkok, Darrell Hildebrand and BLM Ranger Brad Honerlaw saw wood for the stove in Old Woman Cabin near Unalakleet.



Alaska Wildlife Trooper Jon Simeon does a wolf call for a young wolfpack at the Unalakleet School on March 22.



From left, Darrell Hildebrand, Thomas Akelkok, Brad Honerlaw and Jon Simeon pause on the Norton Sound sea ice on March 22 before starting the long journey back to Galena.

Alaska Suicide Prevention Careline. They also offered encouragement because they were proof that despite all that may go wrong in life, there's still a way to succeed – reassurance that was missing in their own young lives.

“Nobody ever said this is what you could do,” Simeon said. “Nobody told me I could succeed in life.”

But there he was, standing in front of people of all ages, telling them how he decided to become an Alaska State Trooper while finishing a seven-year career in the Army.

At the end of the engaging presentation in Unalakleet, all five stayed afterwards to talk to a handful of juniors and seniors about career choices after high school and to shoot hoops. Simeon and Hildebrand were able to capitalize on rural Alaska's love of basketball at many of the schools along the way. In Unalakleet Akelkok finally got to talk wrestling – a sport he excelled in while going to high school at Mount Edgumbe in Sitka.

Unalakleet Principal Jay Thomas called the presentation a success after watching the faces of his attentive students. He said what was also telling was many were willing to take Simeon's basketball shooting challenge at the end of the talk.

“In telling their stories, they were honest, showed humility and were frank about it,” Thomas said. “I think that's what established that connection so quickly and made the students feel safe.”

“I hope they do it again next year,” he said.



From right, BLM Ranger Brad Honerlaw and Galena Alaska State Trooper Robert Nunley, who accompanied the group to schools in Koyukuk, Nulato and Kaltag, wait to enter the school in Koyukuk on March 21.



From left, Yvonne Ivanoff talks to Alaska Wildlife Troopers Jon Simeon, Darrell Hildebrand and BLM Ranger Brad Honerlaw before a presentation at Unalakleet School on March 22.



Alaska Wildlife Trooper Thomas Akelkok took this photo of Beth Ipsen leaving Galena shortly after dawn on March 21.