



PHOTOS COURTESY MIRRI GLASSON-DARLING

Wainwright student Samantha Wade, 13, traveled to Nome with Junior Public Health Educator Coordinator Mirri Glasson-Darling in May as part of the program's expansion beyond the North Slope Borough.

YOUNG TEACHING THE YOUNG

Public health education project lets youth take the lead

BY MOLLY DISCHNER
FOR FIRST ALASKANS

STUDENTS in Northern Alaska are getting help from their Elders, and each other, when talking about health topics.

Last year, when students from Barrow and Wainwright signed up to become junior public health educators, they agreed to talk about public health topics with their peers throughout the North Slope Borough School District. As they prepared to do so, community Elders visited their classes to give them an Inupiat perspective.

The students were part of the Junior Public Health Educator program, or JPHE, which is organized and run by Ilisagvik College and the Northwest Area Health Education Center (AHEC).

Ilisagvik houses the Northwest AHEC, one of five such education centers in Alaska.



Nuiqsut and Atqasuk 2013 160: Kayla Nungasak, a 13-year-old Inupiat from Barrow, talked to students in Wainwright about suicide as part of the Ilisagvik junior public health educator program.

JPHE pulls in components from several aspects of life. It's an introduction to public health careers, an opportunity to connect with culture and, for some, a first introduction to public speaking, said Mirri Glasson-Darling, the AHEC's healthcare careers coordinator.

The educators complete a training course through Ilisagvik, and prepare a presentation that they take to middle schools throughout the region. During a typical visit, one or two JPHE students present on a public health topic and then someone from the Northwest AHEC talks about health careers.

Presentation topics have included nutrition, teen pregnancy, alcohol abuse, child abuse, suicide and sexually transmitted diseases.

The 2012-13 school year was the first time Wainwright participated.

It was also the first time the program

incorporated the North Slope Borough School District's integration of Iñupiaq values into area schools.

The Iñupiaq Learning Framework is an effort to make learning on the North Slope culturally relevant. The school district worked with the community to identify what it means to be a healthy young Iñupiaq, and what knowledge a recent graduate needs to participate fully in the community.

The learning framework focuses on honoring Iñupiaq values, history, culture and language while producing creative and critical thinkers who contribute to the community.

Development of those skills and characteristics is blended with meeting state and national academic standards.

For the JPHE program, former coordinator Gloria Burnett worked on adding the cultural focus with the help of a First Nations grant and community interest.

Burnett is Ilisagvik College's dean of students, and coordinated the program in prior years.

That work came to fruition when the course was taught in the spring of 2013.

Elders helped the students understand the role Inupiaq values play in public health and wellness, Glasson-Darling said.

In Barrow, the class included a two-hour period with Inupiaq Elders Martha Stackhouse and Evelyn Williams, who talked to the students about Iñua and Iñupiaq perspectives on public health.

In Wainwright, Elders discussed similar topics, and worked with a student on a Native foods component to her project.

Iñua is the philosophy, history, language and interconnectedness of all living things, Glasson-Darling said.

Iñua is a core component of the learning framework, and it fits with a public health program that looks at overall wellness.

Each of the JPHE students is trying to articulate one component of healthy living to other students.

One Wainwright student, 13-year-old Samantha Wade (Inupiaq) was able to complete a project and present it throughout that community and in others. Wade presented about nutrition to two seventh-grade classes in Barrow, as well as in Wainwright, Atkasuk and Nome.

From Barrow, three students completed the JPHE course, and two presented their projects.

Nuala Kelly, 18, and Kayla Nungasak, 13, both Inupiaq, did a project on suicide awareness.

Kelly presented to all of the middle and high school students in Point Lay, and Nungasak presented to two classes in Wainwright.

"We had really, really exceptional students," Glasson-Darling said.

Glasson-Darling said the students who participated worked hard on their

presentations, and to get comfortable speaking in front of a class.

And students have been responsive to the presentations.

Glasson-Darling said a subsequent survey showed that 75 percent of the 72 students who heard a JPHE presentation said it was more impactful because the presenter was a middle or high school student.

Sometimes, the presentations also help the middle school audiences open up about concerns in their own lives, too.

April Phillip, a former JPHE and Ilisagvik student, said she appreciated the relationship between the JPHEs and their audiences.

"There's such a close relationship and a lot of the students grow to look up to you," Phillip said.

The program also has a benefit beyond educating middle school students about health topics, which also fits into the learning goals the district has created.

"It winds up being a really good recruitment tool for health care careers," Burnett said.

That's important because Alaska Natives are underrepresented in health care fields, she said, something Ilisagvik and the AHEC are trying to address through various educational opportunities.

The JPHE program was supported in part by a nearly \$16,700 grant from the First Nations Development Institute's Native Youth and Culture Fund.

Originally, it started as an AHEC pilot program, which was supported by the state Department of Health and Social Services.

The grant helped the program incorporate the cultural components, and also funded efforts to expand the class beyond Barrow.

In addition to the new Wainwright class, Glasson-Darling and Wade took the program to Nome for a pilot run. Wade presented her project to students there, and Glasson-Darling talked to a teacher about the program.

Nome has also expressed interest in the program, and Glasson-Darling has provided them with the course materials, that may be incorporated into a health class.

The grant also helped fund the students' presentations in schools outside their home communities, something that likely won't continue in the 2013-14 school year since the grant is complete.

Glasson-Darling said she hopes the program will continue in both Barrow and Wainwright. The JPHEs last year were outstanding, and she'd like to see students of their caliber again.

"I was really impressed and so very inspired by the students we ended up with," Glasson-Darling said. ■

Molly Dischner is a reporter for the Alaska Journal of Commerce and a frequent contributor to First Alaskans.



Barrow student Nuala Kelly, 18, talked to Point Lay students about suicide as part of the Ilisagvik junior public health educator program.



Thirteen-year-old Samantha Wade, Inupiaq, was the first Wainwright student to complete the junior public health educator program through Ilisagvik College. The program tasks students with researching a public health topic and creating a presentation about it for their peers. Wade talked about nutrition at schools in Wainwright, Barrow, Nome and Atkasuk.



Elders Martha Stackhouse and Evelyn Williams taught students in the junior public health educator program in Barrow about Iñua and Inupiaq perspectives on wellness and public health issues.