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## KHS Alutiiq I & II Growing New Speakers

### Erinarpet OUR VOICES



**KM** by Alutiiq Language  
Speakers & Learners



*KHS Alutiiq Language Student Jordan Hayden with Alicia & Adalyn Wallace and Aurora Sholl at the Alutiistun Niuwawik (Alutiiq Language Nest Preschool) playing a game of memory in Alutiiq.*

by Candace “Cutmen” Branson, second language Alutiiq speaker and teacher

I teach the Alutiiq Language class at Kodiak High School. It is both challenging and rewarding each week. It takes a lot of planning and preparation to present the content to a diverse group of students, ranging from grades 9-12, each with varying degrees of Alutiiq language knowledge. Some students come into 9<sup>th</sup> grade with 100-300 words learned at Native Village of Afognak’s Dig Afognak Camp or their after-school program, where Susie Malutin has taught Alutiiq for years. Others come in with zero words where they learn on day one how to say “Cama’i” – hello.

The KHS Alutiiq I class started in January 2011, when I was just beginning to learn Alutiiq from Elders and other learners. In October 2010 at the Alaska Federation of Natives Elders and Youth Conference in Anchorage, a group of Kodiak High School students who were members of the Kodiak Alutiiq Dancers were the catalyst. After a day of inspiring dialog about keeping our languages and cultures alive, one of the students started a discussion about wanting to learn Alutiiq and not having it available to them. They said they wanted a class in the Kodiak High

School because they felt that if Spanish is being taught in Kodiak, then Alutiiq should be taught, too!

They were right!

I had already assigned Alisha Drabek to be my mentor and teacher, whether she knew that at the time or not, so I called her to ask what it would take and if she thought making Alutiiq a class in the high school was a realistic goal. She said that she had already been working on a curriculum, and would be willing to teach a pilot class as soon as January, so long as I would help her. The path was clear. The school district loved the idea and agreed to offer it for World Language credit. I agreed to assist, and in that first semester learned a lot of Alutiiq!

Alisha led the class and I offered my support where I could at first. Our next step was to offer the class dual credit with the college, where April Counciller had been designing and teaching Alutiiq language courses and an Occupational Endorsement Certificate.

Today, there are two Kodiak High School Alutiiq Language classes, beginner and intermediate. Both year-long classes are offered for high school and college credit concurrently.

The classes span four hours each week during the school year. Students study and practice language under overarching themes, as they progress through the novice proficiency level. They start with memorizing words and phrases and grow into making their own original sentences and stories in Alutiiq. The transformation is amazing!

In my classroom, I hear things like, “I am teaching my mom and grandma our language.” This is the language of their ancestors, and for the first time in generations, the language is being brought back, even if only a little, into the homes of these families. These teens have been given the power to connect their families back to their community and ancestral knowledge. They inspire their parents and grandparents! They inspire me, too.

These kids are hungry for videos, memes, hashtags, apps, and video games in the language. I always tell them, what we need is someone who has the education, expertise and fluency to develop those things. It could be you!

When the high school class started, we hoped that it would inspire youth to take Alutiiq in college and

bring more young people into the language movement. The impact was quick. Our first cohort of teens immediately started helping the Kodiak Alutiiq Dancers sing the songs the way our Elders and ancestors intended. Their leadership and ability to apply their new knowledge has made vast improvements in the sound of the dance group!

We currently have four students, who took the Kodiak High School Alutiiq I & II, enrolled in Kodiak College classes. They are working toward their Alutiiq Language Occupational Endorsement Certificate.

Two of our previous students are now teaching language to young children. Anastasia Skonberg, a current student at University of Alaska Southeast in Juneau, teaches Alutiiq in East Elementary classrooms on a weekly basis via video teleconference. When Anastasia was a sophomore, her mom, Jessica Skonberg, a kindergarten teacher at East, told me at parent-teacher conferences that her daughter was going to be teaching Alutiiq to her kindergarten class. In her junior and senior years Anastasia taught language and dance to many classes at East, Kindergarten through 2<sup>nd</sup> grade.

Jordan Hayden is a current KHS senior who volunteers at *Alutiit'stun Niuwawik*—the Alutiiq Language Nest for preschool-age children three days a week. She shows up at 8am, when she doesn't have to be at school and helps run routines and facilitate activities in an immersion environment with other second language speakers. She has shown her dedication to the language by continuing to come and help, and in return, her fluency and comprehension has increased dramatically over the last year.

Both young Alutiiq teachers could very well have a career in language teaching, as I have. In addition to the shortage of Alaska Native teachers, we have a shortage of Alutiiq language teachers on Kodiak Island. Rural communities want language classes for all ages. There are far more classrooms than language teachers to teach short lessons.

It is exciting when students create videos, stories, and letters to Santa, when they understand a new piece of language, or try to form a sentence and

get it. But the most satisfying part for me is that we are again creating Alutiiq speakers.

After generations of silence and shame, these are the first speakers in their families since their grandparents, and for some, the first speakers since their great-grandparents or great-great-grandparents! I love getting to be part of their lives at this age and granting them access to this process of discovering a deeper sense of who they are—rooted in the language of their ancestors.

*Learn more about the Alutiiq language at: [www.alutiiqlanguage.org](http://www.alutiiqlanguage.org), [www.alutiiqmuseum.org](http://www.alutiiqmuseum.org), or on Facebook at "Alutiiq Language Speakers & Learners."*