

The Women Leaders of Alaska Native Corporations:  
A Brief Introduction to the Female CEOs and Board Chairs of  
Multi-Million and Billion Dollar Organizations

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Anchorage, Alaska

Women of the Mountains Conference  
Orem, Utah  
March 7-10, 2007

## **I. Introduction**

Alaska has many great women leaders. Presently, US Senator Lisa Murkowski, Alaska State Governor Sarah Palin, Alaska Supreme Court Chief Justice Dana Fabe are included on the list. Former Lieutenant Governor Fran Ulmer has just been appointed interim Chancellor of the University of Alaska and is always on the list. While there are many examples of women leaders in Alaska, some of the most fascinating are the women leaders who are Native Alaskan, including Katherine Gottlieb – Alaska’s only MacArthur Fellow, and long-time Alaska State Senator Georgianna Lincoln, to name a few.

This paper serves to introduce the women leaders of the Regional Corporations created as a result of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act. These Alaska Native Corporations are some of the largest businesses in the state. Only eight Fortune 500 companies are lead by female CEOs.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in Alaska women are increasingly earning positions of great responsibility and authority. Currently, five of the thirteen Alaska Native Regional Corporations have female CEOs.<sup>2</sup> Two of them are interviewed here.<sup>3</sup> Also, a Chairman of the Board has been interviewed. Finally, a CEO of an Alaska Native nonprofit has been interviewed to give credit to the enormous leadership of Alaska Native women giving back to their communities through leadership positions in Alaska Native nonprofits.

The paper gives a brief overview of Alaska history, Native Alaskans, and the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). However, the main point of the paper is to read the interviews in Section VI. Each woman was asked her thoughts on women as leaders; whether ANCSA created a unique opportunity for Alaska Native women to develop as leaders; what in their background prepared them for their current leadership positions; whether they felt that being a woman was a particular advantage or offered any particular insight into their job; and whether they had any advice for other women hoping to develop as leaders, particularly indigenous women in newly developing economies. Their answers are transcribed in Section VI.

It is hoped that the four leaders selected will offer insight and inspiration to women leaders and future women leaders, especially those from indigenous cultures.

## **II. A Brief History of Alaska**

In 1867, the US Government paid the Russian Empire \$7.2 million<sup>4</sup> for “the Russian possessions in North America.”<sup>5</sup> The treaty between Russia and the United States stated that, “The

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<sup>1</sup> Inskip, Steve. National Public Radio. "Women CEOs Still Rare Among Fortune 500." February 23, 2005. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4509605> (accessed March 4, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Vicki Otte, Executive Director, Association of ANCSA Regional Corporation Presidents & CEOs – e-mail correspondence with the author, March 5, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> One additional CEO, Maria Green of NANA was not available for interview.

<sup>4</sup> US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/gp/17662.htm> (accessed March 4, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> "Treaty concerning the Cession of the Russian Possessions in North America by his Majesty the Emperor of all the Russias to the United States of America; Concluded March 30, 1867; Ratified by the United States May 28, 1867;

uncivilized tribes will be subject to such laws and regulations as the United States may, from time to time, adopt in regard to aboriginal tribes of that country.”<sup>6</sup> Alaska Natives had no right to US citizenship under the treaty and the United States did not acknowledge that Alaska Natives might actually have a right to the Alaska territory that superseded any right of the Russian Empire or the United States.

In 1915, the United States granted Alaska Natives limited rights of citizenship.<sup>7</sup> Only in 1924 were rights to citizenship granted without forcing individuals to give up tribal rights.<sup>8</sup> Alaska became the 49th state of the United States in 1959.<sup>9</sup> The State of Alaska was granted 103 million acres upon statehood. Fifty four million had already been designated as national parks or wildlife refuges prior to statehood, leaving 218 million acres in federal control and subject to eventual land claims by Alaska Natives.<sup>10</sup> However, the issue of resolving ownership rights to tribal lands would have to wait until later.

### III. Alaska Native Cultures

Alaska Natives represent approximately 16 percent of Alaska's residents.<sup>11</sup> Alaska's Native people are usually divided into eleven distinct cultures, speaking twenty different languages. These cultures include Inupiaq, Yup'ik, Cup'ik, Siberian Yupik, Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Eyak, Athabascan, Aleut and Alutiiq.<sup>12</sup> Each is unique, with its own unique language and cultural system. These cultures are often divided into groups based on cultural similarities and geographic proximity:

The Native Alaskans in the northern part of Alaska are the Inupiaq and the St. Lawrence Island Yupik. These cultures are still, to a large degree, hunter/gatherers with a particular emphasis on whale, walrus, seal, and on caribou and fish.<sup>13</sup>

The people of southwest Alaska are known as the Yup'ik and Cup'ik based on the two different languages traditionally spoken by the people. These cultures also still rely upon a subsistence lifestyle.<sup>14</sup>

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Exchanged June 20, 1867; Proclaimed by the United States June 20, 1867."

<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/diplomacy/russia/treatywi.htm> (accessed March 4, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Alaska History and Cultural Studies, <http://www.akhistorycourse.org/articles/article.php?artID=136> (accessed March 2, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Commonwealth North, <http://www.commonwealthnorth.org/studygroup/timeline1900s.html> (accessed March 4, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> University of Alaska, "President Eisenhower Signing of the Alaska Statehood Proclamation, January 3, 1959." <http://www.alaska.edu/creatingalaska/StatehoodFiles/infodocs/pictures/statehoodproclamation.xml> (accessed March 4, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> PBS, "American Experience: The Alaska Pipeline." April 4, 2006.

[http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pipeline/peoplevents/e\\_claims.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pipeline/peoplevents/e_claims.html) (accessed March 4, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Alaska Native Heritage Center, 2000. <http://www.alaskanative.net/4.asp> (accessed March 4, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

The Athabascan people traditionally lived in Interior Alaska that starts in the Brooks Range and continues to the Kenai Peninsula. Athabascans spoke eleven different dialects and were highly nomadic people.<sup>15</sup>

The Aleut and Alutiiq peoples traditionally live in south and southwest Alaska. These cultures rely upon the North Pacific and Bering Sea, and were heavily influenced by Russian culture, especially the Russian Orthodox Church.<sup>16</sup>

The indigenous people of Southeast Alaska include the Eyak, Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian. Each of these Native cultures developed a unique and elaborate social system. However, each of these groups had it's own distinct separate language.<sup>17</sup>

Each of these indigenous groups has a rich history and a unique and diverse culture and language. Like most indigenous people in the world today, issues of maintaining cultural identity, language, and values are considered to be of extreme importance by most Alaska Natives. Each of these cultures deserves a tome and many have been written. This thumbnail sketch will serve only to launch the discussion of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act and the resulting Alaska Native Corporations.

#### **IV. Alaska and ANCSA Background**

Oil finally prompted the settlement of the issue of Native Alaskans' right to land. While oil was known to exist in many parts of Alaska including the North Slope (northern coast of Alaska), it was not known in what quantities until exploration in the 1960's. In 1966, Alaska elected Governor Walter J. Hickel. He determined it was time to develop the North Slope and promptly sold the rights to pump oil on 37,000 acres of land along the North Slope.<sup>18</sup>

In the same year, the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) was created.<sup>19</sup> AFN was formed to fight for the settlement of aboriginal land rights.<sup>20</sup> Alaska Natives wanted their land and they wanted compensation for land taken from them. This actually occurred. The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was passed by Congress in 1971. The Congressional Findings of the Act stated that,

... there is an immediate need for a fair and just settlement of all claims by Natives and Native groups of Alaska, based on aboriginal land claims;...the settlement should be accomplished rapidly, with certainty, in conformity with the real economic and social needs of Natives, without litigation, with maximum

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> PBS, "American Experience: The Alaska Pipeline." April 4, 2006.

[http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pipeline/peoplevents/p\\_hickel.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pipeline/peoplevents/p_hickel.html) (accessed March 4, 2007).

<sup>19</sup> Alaska Federation of Natives, "About Us: Background." <http://www.nativefederation.org/about.php> (accessed March 4, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

participation by Natives in decisions affecting their rights and property,  
...without creating a reservation system or lengthy wardship or trusteeship...<sup>21</sup>

In the end, the act allowed for 44 million acres of land to be owned outright. Additionally, a settlement of \$962.5 million was reached for land that was not distributed. However, it was the form of ownership that was unique: Alaska Native Corporations were created to hold and develop these assets on behalf of Native people.<sup>22</sup>

## **V. The Alaska Native Corporations**

Rather than creating a reservation system modeled on the American Indian experience in the contiguous United States, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act created a corporate structure to hold both the land and the money for Alaska Natives that qualified – the shareholders. These corporations were based geographically, with 12 in the state and a 13<sup>th</sup> corporation created for those Native Alaskans living outside of Alaska.<sup>23</sup>

Those that qualified as Native Alaskans as defined by Congress – one-quarter or more Native Alaskan blood and alive on December 18th, 1971 – qualified as shareholders.<sup>24</sup> If you happened to be born on December 19th, 1971, you would only be able to own stock in a Corporation through inheritance. At the time, there were approximately 80,000 Alaska Natives. Each qualified for 100 shares of corporation stock.<sup>25</sup>

While Native Corporations struggled in the initial years of the Act,<sup>26</sup> they are now some of the largest revenue-generating corporations in the state.<sup>27</sup> In 2004, Alaska Native Corporations had combined revenues of \$4.47 billion.<sup>28</sup> Alaska Native Corporations are at the top of the list in terms of revenue for all Alaska-owned businesses.<sup>29</sup>

## **VI. Women Leaders of Alaska Native Corporations – The Interviews**

During February and March of 2007, three women leaders of Alaska Native Corporations were interviewed. Each was asked their thoughts on women as leaders; whether ANCSA had created a unique opportunity for Alaska Native women to develop as leaders; what in their background prepared them for their current leadership positions; whether they felt that being a woman was a particular advantage or offered any particular insight for their job; and whether they had any advice for other women hoping to develop as leaders, particularly indigenous women in newly

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<sup>21</sup> 43 USC 1601, Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act.

<sup>22</sup> 43 USC 1606, 1607.

<sup>23</sup> 43 USC 1606.

<sup>24</sup> 43 USC 1602, 1604.

<sup>25</sup> McClanahan, A. *Alaska Native Corporations: Sakuuktugut*. Anchorage: The CIRI Foundation, 2006. pg. 48-49.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 56.

<sup>27</sup> Bluemink, Elizabeth. "Native revenues dominate. CORPORATIONS: With old problems gone, they are a force." November 14, 2006. [http://www.adn.com/money/industries/native\\_corporations/story/8408226p-8303012c.html](http://www.adn.com/money/industries/native_corporations/story/8408226p-8303012c.html) (accessed March 2, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Association of ANCSA Regional Corporation Presidents/CEOs, "Ch'etbuja: We Share It. A Look at 13 Native Regional Corporations and 29 Native Village Corporations." (2006): 16.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*.

developing economies. Also, the first female head of the Alaska Federation of Natives, and current CEO of First Alaskans was interviewed. Their answers are transcribed below after a brief introduction of their respective corporations:

### **A. Arctic Slope Regional Corporation (ASRC)**

The Arctic Slope Regional Corporation (ASRC) currently tops the list as the largest Alaska corporation in terms of revenue. In 2005, ASRC reported \$1.6 billion in revenue and \$127.5 million in profits.<sup>30</sup> It employs over 1,000 people.<sup>31</sup> ASRC subsidiaries include companies in energy services, petroleum refining and marketing, construction, technical services, and other businesses.<sup>32</sup> The ASRC region encompasses an area about the size of the state of Minnesota.<sup>33</sup> ASRC has approximately 10,000 shareholders. Shareholders are Inupiat. Whaling is still an integral part of Inupiat culture.<sup>34</sup>

#### **Words of Bobbi Quintavell – ASRC President and CEO<sup>35</sup>**

Any opportunity that we have to showcase women as leaders is fundamental to the economic growth of the state because women are going to play a very meaningful role in economic development, especially the more rural you go in Alaska.

At its most fundamental form in the context of the development of Alaska, growing from a subsistence economy to a cash economy without women -- there would have been no development and I think that remains true today. In a subsistence economy, women in some cases were perceived to play a subservient role to men, yet in other parts of the state you had more of a matriarchal society. Regardless of your background, there would have been no development without women and healthy families. In that context, as we move to a cash economy, women continue to play a very strong role.

The commitment women have to ensure that their children are educated is huge. I'm not downplaying the role of men and fostering the need for education in their children, but at the end of the day you find that men are either practicing subsistence, or they are going toward the economic centers and working to send their money back home. So on a daily basis they're not as active with their children. Women on a daily basis are there to emphasize the need for education or order to make the transition. This is going to continue to play a big role.

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<sup>30</sup> ASRC Annual Report 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Association of ANCSA Regional Corporation Presidents/CEOs, "Ch'etbuja: We Share It. A Look at 13 Native Regional Corporations and 29 Native Village Corporations." (2006): 18.

<sup>32</sup> Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, <http://www.asrc.com/companies/companies.asp> (accessed March 4, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> McClanahan, Alexandra J. *Alaska Native Corporations: Sakuuktugut*. Anchorage: The CIRI Foundation, 2006.pg. 108.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Bobbi Quintavell -- Transcript of personal interview with the author, March 1, 2007.

Even in my own family, what did it take for me to come into this position [as CEO]? My education was a big part of that. I got my education because Mom never let up. Even after I had started my own family, there was always that question from her: “ so when are you going to school?” It didn’t matter if I was 25, it was that constant push and never letting go of her dreams for us to make the transition into the new economy. I don’t think she really distinguished between the girls and the boys in our family. She pushed us all really hard and had equal expectations of us.

My perception of my family history is that I come from a very long line of very strong women. My grandmother and my great-grandmother. There have been stories that have been passed down to me that I have passed down to my children that are examples of being on the edge and flirting with that line of what was supposed to be a woman’s place. I don’t think this was ANCSA as much as the family’s expectations. Our social structure inside of my family is very much on having healthy families and in order to have healthy families there was a respect for the role that you play as an individual and I think that’s really at the crux of the values that were instilled in me and I hope that I have passed on to my children.

I just want my children to be happy at what they do and raise healthy families. I’m lucky that I have found something I love to do and I get paid for it too!

I don’t want to sound like I’m under-appreciating some kind of connection [between ANCSA and opportunities for women as leaders], but ANCSA in and of itself is really one of a number of tools that the Native community has available to it to get us through this next evolution of development in our culture. Clearly our culture is changing. Culture is not to be stifled or not allowed to grow. To give ourselves the freedom to experience this and express it – it’s a critical time for all of us. We certainly are struggling with language retention, and values retention. How do you grow into the new economy and maintain your cultural identity – I think we all are at different parts of our growth towards maintaining our identify inside a new economy.

Values are a huge part of whether or not we are going to be successful and time is going to bear that out. I think the resurgence inside the Native community to go back and center around our cultural values in light of the governmental structures – of being a United States citizen as well as the corporation structure – our aboriginal settlement has brought. We weren’t given a choice on the structure. I don’t look at it as having a choice, we’re just going to find the path of least resistance to ensure we survive and that we’re healthy when we do. Those

values and translating the values is what's going to allow us to get there and a lot of the values are pretty germane to any society.

There is a change in context as to how women are leaders. There is no denying that. With regards to how does one become a woman leader inside of a corporation, first of all I have to give the credit where credit is due and that is our Board of Directors. They have a tremendous amount of confidence in my ability to lead this organization and they have communicated that. Having the support of the Board of Directors is a huge advantage for any Chief Executive whether you're male or female.

There are a whole slew of contributing factors and it goes as far back as my childhood. Everything I can remember from developing as a child and certainly through my young adulthood has prepared me for this role. There were certain choices that I made that provided me with a scenic path to this destination and others were quite direct. If I go back to my family values, what was instilled in me as a child, I have been very blessed for having drilled into me that oftentimes it's not what you want to do but what you have to do. That's not always going to give you what you want, but it's going to give you what you need.

There are going to be some things that happen in your life that you may not even see the value or the need for, but somewhere along the line you're going to understand why you need it. What that translated into on a day to day level, was that my mom would say "stop wrestling with your brother, you need to study", or "you can't go check the [fish] nets, you need to do your homework."

Decisions were made for the greater good of the whole at the expense of the individual. If any one lesson was drummed into me, it was that. If my grandparents or my parents would say, "There is a function in town and you need to go inside and get all of the candy that you have been saving and give it to all those kids", even though I bought the candy and saved it. If I even uttered a word that looked like a no, that was unacceptable. A lot of that kind of thinking and that kind of behavior is currently practiced through whaling. A lot of that kind of communal decision making...those were the kinds of things that were important.

Another example, as a young woman I was on the city council and was butting heads over the budget and over the confines of a strict interpretation of what our powers were as a government. At the end of the day, I found a very innovative way to get what I wanted even though it looked like I lost the argument. I defeated the budget.... As I was going through that and we voted down the budget, I had a couple of elders asking whether that really was the smartest thing to do. When we walked through the issues and we walked through the



solution, the lesson in that walking through the solution gave me the forum I needed with our elders that you don't argue for argument sake. Now we're not discussing the dollars inside the budget. Now we're talking about the real issue: what are truly the powers of the government and are we overstepping ourselves. It's no longer about the dollars and cents. Initially the reluctance to recognize what the issue was as I saw it could well have been because I was a woman only I didn't recognize that. A little outmaneuvering perhaps was necessary for the [real] issue to be recognized.

Whether I want to admit it or not there is still a stigma and hurdles to overcome for women. Not just in Alaska, but everywhere. Do I feel that women have to work harder? Yes. There is that sense. Do I feel any less respected? No.

What piece of advice would I have for women? For Potential Chief Executives and leaders of any size company or whatever role you're playing the community or the family: There is no role that is too small. One of the greatest gifts that we have as people is the gift of responsibility. Once you embrace that responsibility it becomes much easier to give back. Denying the fact that you have a role or a responsibility is a lot of work! Are you going to complain about doing your homework in the same amount of time it would take to get it done?

A perspective I offer women in particular is that we have a responsibility to make decisions for ourselves. Inside of that responsibility we can choose to complain about the obstacles that are put in front of us as women or we can really work through them. Having done both in my life, it has served me much better to work through the issues and to oftentimes bite my tongue because you might win the battle but you'll lose the war. If you frame it in the context of "It's the endgame." My endgame really is the opportunity to do the best job that I can to make a difference for my people. That's worth having to bite my tongue on an issue. Pick your battles carefully and watch what you say at all times.

## **B. CIRI (Cook Inlet Region, Inc.)**

In 2004, CIRI reported nearly \$85 million in revenue and nearly \$8.4 million in net income, with total assets of \$722 million.<sup>36</sup> CIRI's business includes construction and oilfield support, as well as a joint venture with T-Mobile USA.<sup>37</sup> CIRI territory is located in the Cook Inlet region of Alaska. It is the most urban of the Regional Corporations. Unlike most of the other Native Corporations that each represent homogenous shareholders, CIRI shareholders include a cross-section of Native Alaskans from a variety of Native cultures.<sup>38</sup> CIRI has approximately 7,000 shareholders.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> CIRI Annual Report 2004.

<sup>37</sup> CIRI, <http://www.ciri.com/content/company/business.cfm> (accessed March 4, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> McClanahan, A. *Alaska Native Corporations: Sakuuktugut*. Anchorage. pg. 121.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Words of Margie Brown – President and CEO, CIRI<sup>40</sup>**

Women are coming into positions of leadership now realizing that they can be who they are and still be leaders. That is to say they don't have to act like they're male counterparts; twenty years ago or so they felt they had to act like their male counterparts. There are a lot of different leadership styles and women are able to find the styles that are comfortable. To be comfortable in their own skin is important; you can't project leadership if you're not.

I came from a very good family with dedicated parents that valued education and it was never a question that I was expected to get a college degree. It wasn't forced on me and it was just something I knew I needed to do. I was raised in a little village called Takotna. I was taught first by missionaries and when they closed the school down my folks elected to leave the village as opposed to send me to boarding school. Their desire was for me to get a good education.

Then I think a lot of it is for me being the age that I am, I was a very young woman when I started with CIRI 30 years ago. It took a lot of determination to stay in the game. I faced a lot of uphill battles when making my way up the career ladder. But I always tried to create a good work product and to be worthy of my pay. When you're an Alaska Native shareholder and you're working in a Native corporation it's always easy to get comfortable. I always guarded against that and worked to see that my work product would be competitive outside the Native Alaskan circle. It's just a work ethic I've developed over time. I come from pretty humble beginnings and that created a good work ethic.

I think that those of us who are involved in ANCSA corporations are at the right place at the right time. I am very grateful for being at the right place at the right time. I am a shareholder and did nothing to earn it. All I did was be born in the right place and right time. It has presented to me personally such tremendous opportunity for personal growth. The business that I'm involved in, the people that I get to meet, the decision makers that I get to meet are unique and I always try to remember what this job means for me both professionally and personally. And to stretch my own wings and to be in contact with other women, I have enjoyed that very much.

ANCSA is a social experiment. It's evolving and it's still playing out in some places it was very successful and in some cases it was not so successful. When I started

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<sup>40</sup> Margie Brown - Transcript of telephone interview with the author, February 16, 2007.

very early on many thought ANCSA was going to be a panacea for all worries for Alaska Natives. Now we know that is not the case. There is a variety of organizations besides just these corporations. But what the corporations have given Native Alaskans is just tremendous. It has given them an economic toe hold in this state and it has given them political power that they would never have achieved otherwise and I think that's enormous. There were many people who thought CIRI would not survive and it took many, many years for something nice to be written in the paper about CIRI.

But slowly over time people have recognized that these are powerful economic engines for the state. They import money into the state. None of the other businesses can point to that. They make money and export it. We have investments outside of the state and revenues pouring into our state. And that has been recognized and is being recognized. That gives Native people through their corporations a lot more economic clout than if it were just individuals.

I have always described Native corporations as one tool in a tool box . We're important in the equation but we are not the only thing.

Why women and why women in Native Alaska corporations? One of the things that you are seeing is that we act in many ways in our various corporations as a large extended family we can be dysfunctional at times but we operate as a family. It's obviously about making money and tending to business. But it's always about taking care of family. These corporations put a tremendous amount of energy into taking care of shareholders, much different than just looking at the bottom line. Women are particularly suited to this part of it.

Women are getting a good education, but they come to the jobs with good mothering skills and that is being translated to the shareholders in a way that is pleasing to them.

Advice to women in other parts of the world? It's a difficult task to find economies in very remote and difficult areas. It's a very difficult task. However, there is a lot of effort being done in Alaska and across the world to figure out ways that you can have local economies. With the satellite communications available, having some kind of communication system is instrumental in getting connected to the world. Women and rural economies, if they could develop microfinance arrangements where people could get a little seed money, a little capital money if they have the desire to do business. You take baby steps before you can run. There are ways that you can put programs in place that you can help small entrepreneurs to get that first start. We're working hard on it here in Alaska and other parts of the world are just as suitable. With global communications people can get in a position to take advantage of that.

I would add and embellish the comment I made about the corporation status and how we try to relate to our shareholders. One of the reasons is that we do care so deeply about our shareholders. They and their descendants are our shareholders for the long haul. It really gets transferred through the generation to close family through gifting or through inheritance. So for people it may be that the single largest asset they have are these shares. That has put us in an awesome place to care for our shareholders. That puts us in a very unique position with these shareholders.

Once we got past the belief that ANCSA was going to be “the be all end all” and solve Alaska Native issues, then it became very clear that there were issues that needed to be addressed and the corporate form was not necessarily the right form. Doing business is very hard work. It’s very competitive. It’s all you can do to be a corporation and to make profit year after year. So there needed to be other organizations to address these other issues. Alaska Natives realized early on that they would do a better job in delivering these services than having the federal government do it. Very early on the Native corporations made compacts with the federal government to receive the money but to design and implement services. Cook Inlet Housing Authority, Cook Inlet Tribal Council, Southcentral Foundation. And we have our own educational foundation in which CIRI has endowed educational initiatives to give shareholders and their descendants. In addition, CIRI has founded organizations that it doesn’t control any more. We founded Koahnic broadcasting corporation. We founded the Alaska Native Heritage Center, which delivers services to the school system and is a place for visitors including non-Natives, as well. And CIRI has founded the Alaska Native Justice Center. The number of inmates in Alaska is growing. A third of the incarcerated population is Alaska Native. This is a very disproportionate percentage. So there was a real need to get a handle on how services are delivered to prisoners.

I am very proud of the fact that we have not only run a successful business, but also we have founded [nonprofit organizations that] are serving Alaska Natives and all Alaskans.

I think a lot of the people involved are what counts. Alaskans have a can-do spirit. Working in CIRI in those early days I can’t tell you how many people didn’t think CIRI would survive. We were dealt a raw deal on the land distribution. And we were out to prove everybody wrong. It is driven, of course, by people.

At a recent conference I was asked about how do decisions get made...[Anchorage resident] Ruth Molton, not a wealthy woman, she was just dogged about the creation of a town square. She wielded power and she got decisions made. I use that Margaret Mead quote: “Never underestimate that a small group of thoughtful,

committed people can change the world, indeed it's the only thing that ever has." I think that's what happened at CIRI, a small group of people committed to changing the world. Get to work every day and try to do that and most of them happen to be women! We're treating the whole person here. They needed economics, but they need health care and housing, as well.

### **C. Chugach Alaska Corporation**

Chugach earned revenues of over \$785 million in 2005. It has over 6,300 employees and consists of seven subsidiaries and several joint ventures.<sup>41</sup> Chugach represents several different Alaska Native peoples. These groups include Eyak, Athabascan, Tlingit and the Chugach people who are of Aleut/Eskimo descent.<sup>42</sup>

#### **Words of Sheri Buretta – Chairman of the Board of Directors, Chugach Alaska Corporation<sup>43</sup>**

Women are raised to be leaders. I was raised with three boys. They needed a leader! I don't know, it just kind of came naturally to me. Ever since I was young I've always taken charge of situations. When I started getting into Native politics it really appeared to me that we were lacking women leaders as role models. I was the only woman when I got elected to a nine member board and I was eight months pregnant when I was elected. I knew there needed to be some changes to focus on elevating our people to a different status among the larger community in Anchorage. I decided that based on my education and ability and my business background that if I didn't contribute to my people I couldn't complain. I decided to get involved and I decided my accounting background would be beneficial and it has proven to be enormously beneficial.

Truthfulness, caring and kindness is expected from women. One elder said "we almost need a saint to step in." I thought, "I'm not a saint, but I'm a woman." I don't know if we have more ability to be more emotionally caring and spiritual, but it's too bad for men that they have to have a persona of toughness. We do need that when they're fighting for us. We need a balance of men and women on our Board. As far as leaders, women are just as qualified and have just as much right to assume leadership positions.

The generation that my mom grew up in, where they basically went from a subsistence life surviving off the land and dealing with the BIA [Bureau of Indian

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<sup>41</sup> Chugach Alaska Corporation, "Welcome to Chugach Alaska Corporation." 2006. <http://www.chugach-ak.com/profile.html> (accessed March 4, 2007).

<sup>42</sup> McClanahan, Alexandra J. *Alaska Native Corporations: Sakuuktugut*. Anchorage: The CIRI Foundation, 2006.pg. 117.

<sup>43</sup> Sheri Burretta—Telephone interview with the author, February 13, 2007.

Affairs]. There was a whole generation that weren't comfortable in their own skin – both men and women. In the larger society, that generation really thought it was ok that men should keep their women in line and that they were somehow possessions.

Growing up in Alaska, you have to be pretty tough. In being raised with three boys, I don't even think I knew I was different. I never thought I should be less than a man. I was as tough as they were. The idea that I should be less was very tough for me. Native and non-Native friends had situations where women were supposed to be house wives etc. and I just couldn't do that.

I'm reading *Lolita in Tehran*; it's just incredible to think about how those women are treated today. It's just amazing to think that those women are made to feel that way. It hasn't been that long since women got the vote in this country. We've really come a long way.

We need to build confidence to be leaders. You have to be doing it for the right reasons. You build trust, you have to be truthful and honest. The right reason for me was that I wanted to see an educated, proud, united people. That's always been my vision and it continues to be. I want my people to be strong and have a better life than I've seen they've had – and to be comfortable in their own skin and to be proud of who they are. It has not always been that way. I hope that this is happening. I hear this from people that they are proud that they're part of something.

ANCSA has created leadership positions that wouldn't have occurred otherwise. The opportunity to do this has been because of ANCSA. ANCSA's attempt was trying to level the playing field because it provided resources, land and cash for people who historically depended upon the land. Particularly through the 8 A program [federal program that allows noncompetitive contracts for minorities], because it allows the Native corps to create a sustainable development opportunity to achieve the "Corporate Goals of America." The fact that the bylaws required that shareholders serve on the board and you are eligible if you're 18 years old. For our region, this is a pretty small pool. For me to come to that realization that I really felt that we were lacking in our representation and that yes, maybe I could get involved. I'm glad I did. I feel very fortunate to have this opportunity.

My background is in accounting, bookkeeping and business. I saw that we were starting to dig ourselves out of a humiliating bankruptcy and I saw some real opportunity that education could assist the corporation. I realized early on that every company needs a bookkeeper and accountant. I knew that I would always be able to get a job and always be able to take care of myself.

It took me eight years to get a two-year degree because I was working full time. I really support education and we have done a lot of work in educating our shareholders and descendants. We have a whole new generation that are educated. The idea that the corporation will provide for people isn't right; it's really the education and jobs that are really going to make the difference.

Message for women? Trust your instincts, do what you know is right, it's not always going to be easy, but you'll be surprised how much change you can create by being strong and standing up for your ideals. And I won't mention that can of whoop ass that I have to take out occasionally. I would much rather be pleasant and work with people, but some people don't get it unless you confront them with how they are being. It's a political environment, the corporate environment is political and you have to be aware of that – otherwise you get burned.

#### **D. Alaska Native Nonprofits**

Most of the Alaska Native Regional Corporations have affiliated nonprofit organizations to help to serve the social service needs of shareholders. The Alaska Federation of Natives and the First Alaskans Institute work on behalf of all Native Alaskans. Janie Leask was the first woman to lead the Alaska Federation of Natives, the organization originally formed to advocate on behalf of indigenous land claims. Ms. Leask is now the President and CEO of First Alaskans Institute, a statewide nonprofit foundation with the mission of developing the capacities of Alaska Native people, especially in the areas of education, economics, and social issues.<sup>44</sup>

#### **Words of Janie Leask – President and CEO, First Alaskans Institute<sup>45</sup>**

I never went to college. My father, grandfather, great-grandfather were all mayors of Metlakatla. Through my father's involvement I was raised to become involved. Plus we were a very competitive family. The reason why I didn't go to college is because I was too impatient, I just wanted to go out and do something. When I was 26 my dad introduced me to Roger Lang, he was president of AFN. I started working off of the manpower department. Over the years from 1974 to 1982 I really worked my way up through the ranks and I had great mentors along the way. I went from executive secretary, special assistant, special vice president, then I decided to run for presidency and I stayed there for 7 years. I went to the private sector for 16 years and now I'm back at a Native organization.

As far as being a woman, I was the first woman president of AFN. I remember being asked, "How does it feel to be the first woman of AFN?" And I remember answering, "I don't know." I always grew up around what I called "the Boys" and learned to work with them, so it didn't feel any different.

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<sup>44</sup> First Alaskans Institute, "Welcome." <http://www.firstalaskans.org/> (accessed March 4, 2007).

<sup>45</sup> Janie Leask – Transcript of telephone interview with the author, March 1, 2007.

I think that Alaska Native women have always been leaders, they've certainly been leaders of their home. My grandmother was Haida and she was a very strong woman. During the time I was in AFN, there were women on Boards of Directors or in the background who made decisions. We've seen Alaska Native women emerge in the last 15 years as public leaders. In fact one of my board members - there's nine women over here [at First Alaskans] and one man - they were joking about how I needed to have some men over here. Women are more flexible than men are. Women can multi-task and for Alaska Native women, there have been more Alaska Native women over the last ten years or so that have gone to college than Alaska Native men. It's easier for women to leave the village and feel good about it and go to college or do something than it is for men.

You see the rise in organizations like mine and some of the board members in Sealaska [, a Native Alaskan corporation,] and Arctic Slope Regional Corporation, you see women, there are more if not as many [women as men] in leadership roles. I think that for a variety of reasons Alaska Native women are taking positions of visible leadership now.

Yes, ANCSA is part of this rise...with the Regional Corporations, they needed boards of directors, with the establishment of nonprofits, they needed boards of directors so people started looking around for people who can run those organizations. There were women who started to become more involved. I think ANCSA had a lot to do with it. If you look at the subsidiaries, women can go get business training, or leadership training. There's more opportunities for women to be trained and assume various positions of leadership.

I think women are more inclusive for the most part. I think women try to arrive at a consensus more. Those two things. All women aren't empathetic feelers or mothers, they don't all bring that quality at work. But they are consensus builders, problem solvers, multi-taskers, and networkers. I think women reach out more for networking and pay attention to the networks that they've established. I pay attention to my network. I have four different groups of women that I meet with once every six weeks. One of my greatest strengths is that whatever job I'm in, they return your phone calls.

My advice for women developing as leaders is just networking and learning from the experiences with other women. They had the UN Beijing Women's Conference I don't know what happened with that. The ICC brings in Greenland, Iceland, Russian and the US, there's a component there...Those kind of international organizations are really good for networking and learning from each other. But what works in one culture may not necessarily work in another.



I also think women, once they reach leadership positions, should turn around and reach out to other younger women coming up!

## **VII. Conclusion**

Women in Alaska Native organizations have stepped into the forefront as leaders in Alaska. ANCSA provided a platform for unique economic development opportunities. The businesses managed by these women are successful multi-national, multi-million dollar enterprises. This is big business.

The leadership acumen demonstrated by these women has also flowed into other parts of their communities. The for-profit businesses have in turn established nonprofit entities that provide services to shareholders and to all Alaskans. These women lead organizations that affect every part of life of their shareholders and their broader communities. Alaska benefits greatly from the skills developed by these women leaders. The next generation of Alaskans will also be the beneficiaries of their skills, dedication and passion for enhancing the quality of life for their shareholders and for all Native Alaskans.