The Newest Members of our Extension Family

The people of Alaska are as diverse and colorful as the landscape. We met so many wonderful people through our travels – not only interesting locals, but also Extension colleagues and friends. At each of our locations, our hosts were fellow Extension colleagues. This was such a nice way to travel and explore the state! The common bond of Extension work made our time together even more interesting and relevant. Each and every one of them was knowledgeable about the people, the culture and the community needs as well as the Extension programming successes and challenges. It was so interesting and rewarding to ‘walk a mile in their shoes” as we traveled around the state. Tony Nakazawa, Jay Moore, Natalie Thomas, Lucy Bayles, and Jeff Smeenks – all are now considered not only friends, but also fellow Extension colleagues.

Anthony Nakazawa, Director
University of Alaska Fairbanks Extension

Joanne Keith, Jay Moore and Mary Andrews

Joanne Pihlaja & Natalie Thomas

Jeff & Luz Smeenk

Lucy Bayles & Joanne Keith
We especially enjoyed seeing Alaska through the eyes of one of the newest Extension employees – Jay Moore. Jay had never worked in Extension prior to this assignment, and what we saw was a competent young professional finding his way through this culture of Extension. We all recalled the early days of our Extension careers, and felt like we had many things in common. It was interesting to learn more about his background and his work in Extension. It was also a joy to meet his family, and have the opportunity to spend time with his wife and kids. Jay was very knowledgeable about Alaska and the Fairbanks area, and was able to provide all of us with a “local” programming perspective. His stories and experiences were not only enjoyable to listen to, but also very helpful in understanding the diversity and challenges of programming in Alaska.

Alaska “Family” – An Unexpected Souvenir

One of the best parts of the trip was the formation of our “Alaska Family.” Although many of us knew one another prior to our trip – mostly because of our work in Extension – we truly did not know each other like we do now. It was an unexpected treasure to spend so much time together with one another, and have the opportunity to know each other on so many levels. Family stories and insights were shared, advice was given, wonderful experiences were enjoyed and beautiful memories were created. We especially enjoyed the times of laughter and fun. Each and every one of us shared our gifts with one another, and we will forever treasure the time we spent together.
Becky & Rick get cozy in Bethel (Sure we can all fit in the van!)

Lee catching a few “zzz’s” in the back of the van on our way back from Palmer

Joanne and Jodi being “captured by a bear” at Reindeer Park in Anchorage

Joanne and Bruce in front of Denali “The Great One”

Joy poses with Santa during our trip to North Pole

Harry and Mary hard at work – on the bus ride back through Denali National Park

George & Marilyn enjoying our Cabin Night Dinner Theatre fun in Denali!
In addition to the great times we had with one another and with our fellow Extension colleagues, it was also a special privilege to meet so many people who call Alaska home. It was through our connection with Extension staff that we were able to meet so many interesting people. In particular, there were two times we had the opportunity to not only meet local people, but also spend time talking and interacting with them. It was during this time that we were able to truly get to know the beauty of someone who calls Alaska home.

First, we had the pleasure of spending a day in Nenana. Our local tour guide was Annette McDonald – who considers herself a local historian. She was a wealth of knowledge about Nenana – both past and present, and was a wonderful tour guide. We also had the pleasure of enjoying lunch at the Nenana Senior Center. We thoroughly enjoyed a delicious lunch, and were also privileged to spend time with a number of Nenana seniors. It was a memorable experience for everyone on many levels. We met Gerald Riley, a former Iditarod Winner; a local native Chief, a relative of Bear Ketzler we had heard about on our riverboat tour; and a professor who taught criminology in the “Lower 48.”

It was a varied group of people who – for the most part - were open and willing to share with us about a variety of issues. They talked about what they do to keep busy during the long winter days, how long they’ve been in Alaska, and what drew them there in the first place.
In addition to our time in Nenana, we were also lucky enough to spend time in Bethel with Lucy Bayles, the Regional Extension Agent. We all had many rich experiences in Bethel that we will not soon forget. One morning in particular, a small group of us spent time at a local grocery store – enjoying coffee and visiting with just about anyone who walked by. As in many small communities, Lucy is quite well-known, and many people stopped by to visit with us. It was an unexpected treat for us to be able to meet so many interesting people.
The first stop on our Alaska Adventure began in Fairbanks at the Bridgewater Hotel. We enjoyed staying at this quaint hotel, and began each day with a full breakfast! The hotel was located in the heart of the city, and turned out to be a great location. While in the Fairbanks area, we were able to visit a variety of places including the Alaskan Pipeline, the Large Animal Research Facility and the University of Alaska Fairbanks campus. A small group of us also had the opportunity to fly to Fort Yukon – and can share the distinction that we have been above the Arctic Circle!
Nenana, 55 road miles southwest of Fairbanks on the Parks Highway, is famous for the yearly “Nenana Ice Classic” - also known as Alaska’s biggest guessing game. Thousands of people pay to guess the date and time when the ice will breakup on the Tanana River. When you buy a ticket (for $2.50) you take a chance at winning a lot of money if you guess right. Many of us on the trip gave it a shot – and bought a ticket to win the big money! It was fun to see the watch tower, the tripod and hear the history of Alaska’s version of the lottery.

Nenana is in the westernmost portion of Tanana Athabascan Indian territory. The Athabascan word Nenana means ‘a good place to camp between the rivers’. The town boomed in the early 1920s as a construction base with thousands of workers for the Alaska Railroad. The Railroad Depot was completed in 1923, when President Warren Harding drove the golden spike at Nenana. The depot, still in use, now houses the Alaska State Railroad Museum and was a treasure of information and artifacts!
Denali National Park was one of the most beautiful stops on our journey - from the dome car train ride to the majestic mountain. Everything about it was spectacular. We stayed at the quaint Sourdough Cabins, and enjoyed an evening of Cabin Night Dinner Theatre. We also spent a day exploring the Denali National Park, taking a 7-hour bus tour through the park, and experiencing the animals and nature up close. One of the most amazing sights we saw was a mother bear and her three cubs - walking right down a hill, and past the back of our bus. It was quite strange to see wild animals like that up close - and almost a little sad. Of course, the highlight of the tour was seeing Mt. McKinley in all its glory. Although the top half was shrouded in fog, it was still a majestic sight!

Several of us also took a flight around Mt. McKinley - which was an amazing experience that we will always remember. The mountain was majestic from afar, but even more so as we got closer and closer. The amount of uncharted wilderness was amazing, and it was so spectacular to see it from above!
During our stay in Anchorage, we stayed at the Ship Creek Comfort Inn - located right across from the train station. It was also right next to the Ulu Factory, and just down the hill from the open air market. Again, it was a perfect location and allowed all of us to enjoy a variety of sights and activities.

While spending time in Anchorage, Joanne and Jodi happened to meet another Extension staff person, and ended up spending the afternoon with her. It was such a fun experience – and so unexpected! DeShana York, Office Coordinator for the UAF Anchorage office, was having lunch at the museum and happened to be sitting near Joanne and Jodi. They noticed DeShana’s Extension pin and commented on it as she was leaving. Once they introduced themselves, she was immediately interested in our trip and so gracious! She spent the next 2 hours showing them all around Anchorage – including her office, Reindeer Park and a local chocolate factory. It was a great way to spend the afternoon – and another valuable Extension connection and friend.

The other highlight of our time in Anchorage was when we visited the Anchorage Farmer’s Market. Many of us spent time talking with the local farmers and vendors, and enjoyed delicious fruits and vegetables!
Palmer is located just outside of Anchorage, and is considered the gateway to Alaska's recreation and agricultural area. Palmer is also the trading and supply center for the fertile, farm-filled Matanuska Valley. The many farms and dairy herds are further proof that this is the State's agricultural center. We were lucky enough to spend the day with Jeff Smeenks, an Extension Horticulture specialist located in Palmer. We met him at his office, and he gave us a first-hand tour of the Palmer area, surrounding agricultural highlights and even took us up into the mountains for a wonderful picnic dinner!
Bethel is accessible only by land and sea; it's located approximately 424 miles by air from Anchorage. With a population of almost 6,000 people, the City of Bethel is the main port of the Kuskokwim River in the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta. Bethel serves as the regional hub for 56 surrounding Native villages, and is considered Alaska’s sixth largest city. Bethel was first established by Yup’ik Eskimos who called the village “Mumtrekhlogamute,” meaning “Smokehouse People,” named for the nearby fish smokehouse. There were 41 people in Bethel during the 1880 U.S. Census.

While in Bethel we were hosted by Lucy Bayles, and had the wonderful opportunity to stay in student housing at Sackett Hall. Although we were only in Bethel for a short time, it was a very warm and inviting community and one which welcomed us with open arms. We all felt like part of the “family” by the time we left, and appreciated the various experiences we had.

One of the sayings we heard over and over again is “no roads lead to Bethel,” and that was apparent in more than one way. Anything that arrives in Bethel has taken quite a journey, and if it’s a good or service, it is often very costly. One of the more interesting day trips was to the local grocery stores to see the difference in prices. Another amazing discovery was that approximately 20% of the community is a part of the public water system. The rest of the residents have their water delivered, and their sewage hauled away. There are even many people who still use “honey buckets.” In addition to that, there is the ever-present concern of the permafrost - which causes “frost heaves” in the 9 roads throughout the city, as well as challenges for getting around. Many of the buildings are connected by walkways located above the ground. This is because it is often hard to get around - in the winter the snow is too high, and in the summer there is an abundance of mud and muck.

Another one of the striking differences was, of course, the economy. For the most part, the prices of goods and services were considerably higher throughout Alaska. This was especially apparent in the smaller and more remote communities like Bethel and Nenana. The other obvious difference was the remoteness of Bethel. At times it was a bit disconcerting for some to be so far removed from all the creature comforts. Though plenty of wires criss-cross Bethel, none connect the city to the outside world. Internet access and phone calls alike travel via satellite dishes.

On our last night in Bethel, Lucy and her close friend Sophie hosted a salmon bake that was great fun. She invited many local residents, and we had a great time visiting with one another, sharing local stories and history, and even learning a bit about “tapping.” This evening was the highlight of our time in Bethel, and helped all of us feel more connected to the people and the places we had experienced.
Bethel is home to the postal service's one and only hovercraft, which is also the only postal service vehicle that carries paying customers. Based out of Bethel, it also carries supplies to remote villages across the tundra. Many in our group had the chance to spend time on the Hovercraft, and visit several remote villages.
Juneau (population of about 31,262) is the only state capital in the US with no road access. It can only be reached by air or sea. Considered the third largest city in Alaska, it is supported largely by state and federal employment and by tourists cruising the Inside Passage. On any given day (during the tourist season), there are 3 to 5 massive cruise ships that dock alongside main street. More than half a million visitors arrive each summer on cruise ships so large that they dwarf even the largest buildings in Juneau. They reach this isolated town, with no road connections to the "outside world," via the almost unbelievably scenic Inside Passage of Alaska. Most will not stay long. The majority stay one afternoon and evening, and then move on to Glacier Bay.

The Mount Roberts Tramway links Juneau's waterfront district to the alpine reaches of Mount Roberts and to great views of Admiralty Island, the Glacier Bay area and the Chilkat Mountains.

Mendenhall Glacier is one of 38 major glaciers flowing from the 5000 square mile expanse of snow, ice and rock of the Juneau Icefield. Located just 13 paved miles from Juneau, the glacier attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors each year as well as local residents. Although not the "prettiest" glacier, it is definitely an amazing sight to see.
In Their Own Words..... Reflections of Rick & Becky Counsellor

- Scale of things is daunting & difficult to judge
- Disparity between lives of natives and whites
- Omnipresence of the tourist industry
- Silted rivers glacial gray
- Salmon everywhere—life blood of natives, wild, plentiful, spiritual
- Importance of oily things to Alaskan economy from fish to petroleum
- Beautiful vistas, beautiful flowers, spectacular mountains
- Saw more things in Alaska that made me sad—not happy; i.e. mother grizzly & 3 cubs among tour buses in a wild preserve
- Warm hospitality shown by our hosts
- Native arts and crafts reflect use of animal products
- Wonderful fish dinners
- Limited transportation and harsh environment impede significant population growth maintaining a wild Alaska
- Mixed blood native community activist owns a sternwheeler in Alaska and spends winters in Puerto Vallarta with his young wife—interesting perspective
- Place where you can have a fine seafood dinner w/exquisite wine, mingle with European & Japanese tourists, and buy artwork made of fossilized mammoth or penis shaft of a walrus
- Viewing large mammals in their native habitat was a thrill albeit commercialized
- Native villages; welcoming, poor, difficult to reach, uneducated & undereducated, ATVs, snowmobiles, no cars, subsistence living
- Immigrants have a story, seek work, fortune, anonymity, and adventure
- The sea and rivers are the highways of Alaska
- Agriculture is impressive yet limited
- Denali—splendor The High One, Mt. McKinley, 20,320 feet, must be viewed as a native to appreciate—from afar