

High School Students Learn How to Testify

By George Yaska, Contractor

Participating in policy making for fish and wildlife requires knowledge, dedication, and lots of public testimony. To help build public testimony skills in youth, earlier this year YRDFA spent several months working with the 10th and 11th grade science class at Fairbanks North Star Borough Effie Kokrine Charter School. Nearly all of these students are Alaska Native, and the majority are from Yukon River villages.

Using funds from Alyeska Pipeline Service, YRDFA contracted with George Yaska, originally from Huslia, now residing in Fairbanks. George is a strong resource within Alaska on fish and game issues. He sat on the National Academy of Sciences from 1995 to 1996, principally on predator /prey relationships in Alaska. He has operated his own fishing vessel since 1977 on the Yukon River. George has had extensive interaction with the Alaska Board of Fisheries and has testified in the U.S. Senate 10 times at both the Resources Committee and the Indian Affairs Committee. He also brings experience and exposure to great potlatch speakers from the Yukon River area during his upbringing in the 1960s and 1970s.

The 10th and 11th grade students in the science class of Effie Kokrine Charter School are all familiar with fishing in Alaska, whether subsistence, commercial, or sport. Thirteen of the 14 students are Alaska Native and 11 out of the 14 fish in Western Alaska from locations such as Buckland, Shungnak, Rampart, Tanana, Beaver, Kaltag, Holy Cross, Nenana, and Russian Mission. These students pull nets, operate and build fishwheels, operate fishing vessels, cut and dry salmon, and are intimately familiar with subsistence fishing in Alaska. They are also knowledgeable about the life cycle of many fish species in Alaska, such as Chinook, chum, silver, red and pink salmon, whitefish, sheefish, northern pike, and burbot.

George began the first discussion at the class on January 20, 2010 with an introduction to the traditional role of public speaking at potlatches by Chiefs and Leaders. These chiefs spoke in incredibly eloquent terms about the fisheries or game resources within their areas and their management by local fishers or hunters. The leaders were responsible for the proper management of the resources and they could not allow over-hunting or over-fishing at any area. They directed hunters to certain resources, and the hunters were not allowed to exceed the limits set by the leaders. As time progressed towards current management regimes in the 1970s, the leaders urged younger people or students to become familiar with the new management to allow for adequate participation by locals in the management of fish and game.

During the next discussion, which occurred during the last week of January, George focused again on public speaking and its role in regard to boards and commissions in Alaska. He related a personal early exposure to this role when Edwin Simon, a leader from his hometown of Huslia, traveled on his own to Anchorage in 1975 to speak to the Alaska Board of Education. Edwin spoke about children from Alaska who were forced to attend school outside of the state because of disabilities and the negative impact this had on the children and their families. The Alaska Board of Education decided at that meeting to begin educating these children in Alaska.

The next discussion, held in March (after the basketball season, which many students are heavily involved in) was on presentation. George arrived to class in regalia that was used to speak at the U.S. Senate in 2003 in front of the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs. He related the

importance of presentation when speaking before the public and boards and commissions such as the Alaska Board of Fisheries. He spoke about dressing for the occasion. He also spoke about the equally important role of courtesy and a respectful attitude towards the audience.

The next two discussions, held in March and April, reiterated the importance of a demonstration of courtesy towards the audience. The audience will naturally work to listen with more attention when they know that the speaker is demonstrating respect and courtesy towards them. In addition, George introduced the local fish and game advisory committee process. Several students spoke up or asked questions about fishing period lengths and abundance forecasts for the Chinook salmon season. George introduced the mechanics of testimony for these boards. Afterward, he sought help from the local Fairbanks Fish and Game Advisory Committee Chair Raymond Heuer to set up a mock Board of Fisheries meeting at the school.

The final two sessions were set up for a final run-through for a testimony effort at the mock Board of Fisheries. George enlisted assistance from Nissa Pilcher, Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) Boards and Support Section, and Tom Taube, ADF&G Sport Fish Division, to act as the "Board of Fisheries" members at the science class. He set up a desk as the testimony table and used the lever on three-hole punch as a pretend microphone on-off switch.

The students were provided with the following basic script: "Thank you, Mr. Chair, members of the Board, my name is _____. I fish for _____ at _____. I [support or oppose] _____". They were required to demonstrate a respectful attitude as they gave testimony. Nine out of the 14 students did wonderfully and proved that they were listening all spring. Three students were brilliant and it seems obvious that they are destined to make significant contributions wherever they may go in their lives. Several were absolutely terrified but they all stood when their name was called and stepped up to the "mike." Two students asked questions of the ADF&G officials about the season. Another asked about aerial wolf hunting. They all spoke clearly and several of the students seemed to have surprised themselves as to the growth they experienced through the effort.

George has since seen several of the students at the school and they acknowledge him with a smile and a friendly attitude. They appeared more confident about their abilities to express themselves. The 10th and 11th grade students get less opportunity to speak publicly than those in the 12th grade, and it seems that they are not expected to do so with as much frequency, so this program seems to have aimed at the right group. Most students are required to stand before their class to defend a paper or position. This program increased their exposure to public speaking; it also added the additional experience of presenting to officials from outside of the school. The most terrified student was the one who asked the question about the aerial wolf hunting issue. Whether this student would have publically stood and asked such a question without the program is debatable, and it seemed to be a great breakthrough.

This program was customized to fit these students. Most were fishermen or had a high exposure to fishing. Each student gained an increased understanding and experience with public speaking, the boards and commissions process in Alaska, and the mechanics of actual testimony to a board.