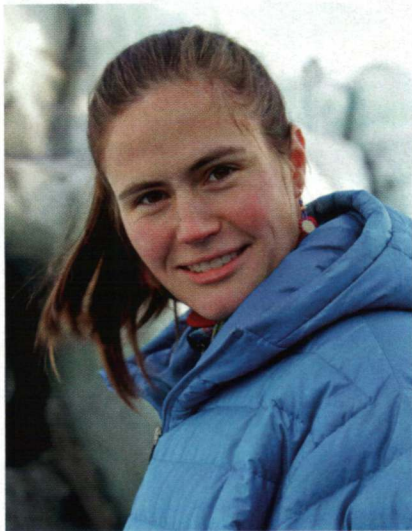


Lighting the Way

Anna Hoover builds connections through art

BY SHEHLA ANJUM



Anna Hoover is the founder and executive director of First Light Alaska, an organization that brings indigenous artists to work with people of the Bristol Bay region.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ANNA HOOVER



A student sews a grass basket in class taught by Lucy Andrew.

PHOTO BY ODIN PETER-RABOFF

WHEN ANNA HOOVER (Unangan) entered the University of Washington (UW) she planned to study political science, become a politician, and change the world. She quickly realized her passion instead lay in the arts. “I took one political science course and knew it wasn’t for me. It was full of foreign acronyms and had nothing to do with changing the world.”

But Hoover, the daughter of renowned Unangan artist and commercial fisherman John Hoover, also took a printmaking class and that “felt like second nature.” A course in Native art history followed. “I knew the artists in the textbook. Many of them were my dad’s friends. I also realized art history can have influence.”

Although she grew up with art, Hoover never considered studying it.

But, in 2007, she received bachelor’s degrees in art history and interdisciplinary visual art, followed by dual master’s degrees in Native documentary art history and indigenous documentary filmmaking, all from UW.

She now works to change, if not the world, then at least a small part of it in Bristol Bay through her organization, First Light Alaska. Hoover began developing the idea for First Light Alaska after finishing graduate school in 2011. “Artists are visionaries and help translate daily life to their communities. I believe artists have the responsibility to help communities connect with each other through art and by reviving arts and crafts that were once part of our lives,” she said.

First Light Alaska has been bringing international, national and Alaskan



Students lash together a qayaq frame in a class taught by Greenlandic champion Maligiaq Padilla.

artists to work with people of the Bristol Bay region since 2012. It is now a nonprofit organization, with Hoover as executive director.

The idea of giving back to Alaskan communities, and especially those in Bristol Bay, began in Hawai'i in 2007, when Hoover attended a ten-day international gathering of more than 100 indigenous artists. "I met artists from across the Pacific and other parts of the globe who spoke emotionally about their deep appreciation and connection to their lands and I forged many lifelong friendships," she said.

Choosing to work in Bristol Bay was easy. "I have spent every summer of my life in Bristol Bay, since I was one. I have strong ties to the people in the region, the plants, animals, land, and rhythm of life."

Bristol Bay is a part of her, she said. "I feel a great reverence for it. We spent every summer in Egegik, where my parents fished commercially for salmon. When I was eleven I began helping out on our drift boat. The family's fishing permit is now in my name and I run a crew in the summers."

The idea of taking local, national, and international indigenous artists to Bristol Bay for workshops became a reality in late 2011. That was a year of momentous changes. Hoover's father passed away and she received her graduate degrees.

She took her idea to the Alaskan Leader Foundation, which is affiliated with Alaskan Leader Fisheries, a partner company of Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation (BBEDC).



Students' prints dry, in a class by Hawaiian artist and printmaker Maile Andrade. PHOTO BY ANNA HOOVER

'Artists are visionaries and help translate daily life to their communities.'

Anna Hoover
executive director, First Light Alaska

"I was fresh out of college and dreaming of big things. The foundation supported my idea and gave me \$10,000 for the project. I flew to Kodiak and Dillingham to meet with the community and potential funders including BBEDC and the Bristol Bay campus of UAF and we made it happen."

Hoover raised additional funds and in March 2012 she took five artists to Dillingham to hold the first workshop. Birch bark artist Svetlana Rosugbu came from Siberia; Maori storyteller Julie Tipene O'Toole traveled from Australia. Alaskan artists included Drew Michael (Yup'ik/Iñupiaq), who taught mask carving, Ossie Kairaiuak (Yup'ik) who showed drum making, and Tanis S'eiltin (Tlingit) who held classes in printmaking.

That weeklong session attracted 37 residents from Naknek, Aleknagik, Manakotak, Togiak, New Stuyahok, and Dillingham.

FIRST LIGHT ALASKA has since raised a total of \$140,000, with funds from BBEDC, Icycle Seafoods, UAF Native Arts Center, Ocean Beauty, Bristol Bay Native Assoc., Bristol Bay Native Corp., and Alaskan Leader Foundation. The organization has organized four workshops since 2011, three in Dillingham and one in Anchorage.

The courses are popular and Hoover's work is winning praise. "The workshops reintroduced several art forms that people had not practiced for many years such as drum making and qayaq building," said Chris Napoli, Chief Administrative Officer at BBEDC.

Napoli has visited the workshops to speak with students and instructors. "I see a lot of happy faces and people excited about relearning old ways of doing things. People of all ages take part, from teenagers to Elders. All glad to be learning or relearning the crafts," he said.

A Dillingham workshop in 2013 had 94 participants and nine artist instructors including three from the region—skin sewer Annie Fritze, (Yup'ik) Ivory



PHOTO BY ODIN PETER-RABOFF

A student carves ivory jewelry in a class taught by Alfred Gosuk.

carver Alfred Gosuk (Yup'ik) and grass basket weaver Lucy Andrew. Greenland Maligiaq Padilla (Greenland Inuit) taught the traditional craft of qayaq building and participants completed a full-size qayaq now on display at the UAF Dillingham campus. Tlingit and Nisg'a artist Larry McNeil led a popular class in the more contemporary art of digital photography.

Spurred by First Light's success, the UAF Bristol Bay campus designated April 2014 as Art Month and held art events each weekend. This year, Hoover's workshop had 44 attendees. Artists included Unangan/Tlingit brothers Nicholas and Jerrod Galanin (silver engraving), Iñupiaq performer Allison Warden (storytelling), Athabaskan artist Lana Simpson (caribou tufting), and Sugpiaq Andrew Abyo (steambending wood drum frames).

Hoover's hope of making a differ-

ence in the community is coming true. Petla Noden (Yup'ik) took the mask carving class in 2012 and sold one of his masks. This year he enrolled in the painting workshop with Samoan artist and instructor Dan Taulapapa McMullin. "Dan was impressed with Noden and said he should be in an MFA program," Hoover said.

The new qayaq taking shape in the senior center in Dillingham is another measure of success. Harold Andrew (Yup'ik), a skilled artist and craftsman, attended the qayaq workshop in 2013 and is combining the knowledge he gained there with what he learned about qayaq building from his father and grandfather.

This year Hoover plans to expand the workshops to UAF's Northwest campus in Nome and through UAA in Anchorage in the fall.

She is also working on another

dream, to build an indigenous arts institute in Anchorage. "We have partnered with Anchorage Historic Properties to develop three existing buildings on Government Hill into a permanent space for the arts." First Light Alaska will soon launch a fundraising campaign to raise \$3 million to \$5 million for the center and another \$10 million to endow it for scholarships and operations.

Hoover is hopeful and buoyed by what she has accomplished. "I feel that I am a part of the conversation that is happening here in Alaska, and I am grateful to have a voice in what our future can look like." ◀

Shehla Anjum, an Anchorage writer, profiled Kenaitze-Dena'ina artist Joel Isaak for the spring 2014 issue of First Alaskans. She can be reached at anjum@alaska.net