

THE Mukluk Telegraph

THE OFFICIAL QUARTERLY NEWSPAPER FOR THE CUSTOMER-OWNERS OF THE ALASKA NATIVE TRIBAL HEALTH CONSORTIUM

JANUARY-MARCH 2012

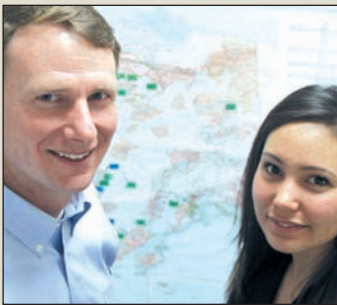
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ANTHC, SCF earn national honors

ANMC campus celebrates prestigious awards

This winter has been packed with tributes to the unique and life-changing care provided by the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) and Southcentral Foundation (SCF) at the Alaska Native Medical Center (ANMC).

SCF was recently named a Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award winner. The award is one of the most notable distinctions a health care organization can receive and it is a true reflection of the quality and innovation of SCF's work.

Shortly after that news arrived, The American Hospital Association (AHA) named ANTHC a Carolyn Boone Lewis Living the Vision Award winner.

SCF is Alaska's first health care organization to receive the Baldrige award, which recognizes nationwide advancements in innovation and quality. SCF was one of the four organizations able to meet the nation's highest standards and receive the 2011 award. The announcement was made by the



PHOTO BY MICHAEL DINNEEN

AWARD-WINNING CARE: Angela Kewan and her infant son visit Dr. Matt Hirschfeld, medical director of Maternal Child Health, for a checkup at the Alaska Native Medical Center, which recently earned the Carolyn Boone Lewis Living the Vision Award.

U.S. Secretary of Commerce and the award will be presented to SCF leadership by President Barack Obama in April.

The Carolyn Boone Lewis Living the Vision Awards are presented to organizations living AHA's vision of

"a society of healthy communities where all individuals reach their highest potential for health."

Only 11 hospitals and health systems have earned the Living the

SEE AWARD-WINNING CARE, PAGE 2 ▶

ANTHC names Roald Helgesen new CEO

With a personal history in Alaska and a career filled with helping Alaska Natives live healthier, Roald Helgesen was recently named Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium's (ANTHC) new Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

"It's a great honor to be named ANTHC's new CEO," said Helgesen, who began at ANTHC in mid-December. "I look forward to working with the staff at ANTHC and the Alaska Native Medical Center who are committed to the service of Alaska's Native People."

ANTHC Chairman and President Andy Teuber added: "Mr. Helgesen has worked on behalf of Alaska Native People in health care for many years. He brings



Helgesen

a wealth of expertise to the Consortium, as well as his demonstrated commitment and experience achieving considerable success in improving quality and outcomes. I am confident he will provide strong leadership as we work together and with our partners to improve the Consortium and the Alaska Tribal Health System."

Helgesen grew up in Sitka and is an enrolled tribal member with Sitka Tribe of Alaska and Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska.

His professional career has spanned from emergency medical technician to leader of health care organizations. And he's no stranger to ANTHC's work. As President and CEO of SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC) since 2007, Helgesen has partnered closely with ANTHC and is intimately knowledgeable about of the Alaska Tribal Health System.

ANMC's Electronic Health Record launch earns industry award

The health care landscape for Alaska Natives changed historically following the October 1 launch of the Electronic Health Record (EHR) at Alaska Native Medical Center (ANMC). Its implementation instantly improved the quality of care at ANMC and made work more efficient for staff providing care.

The EHR project was the largest technological advance in ANMC's history, and just a few weeks after the launch the project was deemed a major success and recognized with a Project Excellence Award by Cerner, the health care solutions company that helped ANMC implement its EHR.

"I've been involved in three EHR go-lives in my career, and this was the largest and most complicated but also the most

successful," explained Gary Shaw, ANMC administrator and ANTHC senior vice president. "I've never seen an entire suite rolled out in such a seamless manner, and that success is truly a testament to the sterling staff across ANMC. Their work and this system will lead directly to information being in the right place at the right time, and ultimately better care for those we serve."

Cerner said the magnitude of ANMC's deployment placed it in the top 5 percent of hospitals in the nation. The award announcement noted that ANMC's launch was unique in many ways and often met and exceeded expectations. Most importantly, the project was truly dedicated to improving quality of care for ANMC's patients.

AWARD-WINNING CARE, FROM PAGE 1 ▶

Vision Award since its inception in 1996.

"The Consortium came into existence to exemplify the approach of Alaska Native people taking ownership of their own challenges and responsibilities not only related to personal health, but the wellness of our communities as a whole," explained Andy Teuber, ANTHC's Chairman and President. "Though care is provided in the most visible manner at the Alaska Native Medical Center, without staff from all our divisions, as well as our numerous partners across the state, we wouldn't be the recipient of such a tremendous honor."

ANMC is the nation's first IHS hospital and Alaska's second company to receive the award: Fairbanks Memorial Hospital also holds the distinction.



PHOTO BY CRAIG HAVER

The Dental Health Aide Therapist (DHAT) Class of 2011 celebrates at a graduation ceremony in Anchorage. From left, Trisha Patton of Napakiak, Jana Schuerch of Kiana, Kate Kohl of Bethel, and Shannon Hardy of Ft. Yukon. The group completed two years of training in Anchorage and around Alaska and will now begin preceptorships working with supervising dentists for a minimum of 400 hours. They will then begin working as DHATs in regions around the state.

2011: A year of healthy news and powerful impact

Read ANTHC's 2011 Annual Report online by visiting <http://anthctoday.org/annualreport>

Traveling to ANMC soon?

Be prepared before you arrive. Request an ANMC Anchorage Travel Packet today at www.anmc.org or call 1 (800) 478-6661.

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VISION

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VALUES

Achieving excellence
Native self-determination
Treat with respect and integrity
Health and wellness
Compassion

THE MUKLUK TELEGRAPH

The Mukluk Telegraph is the official newspaper of the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium.

The paper is published quarterly and distributed at no charge to customer-owners, employees and partners of ANTHC statewide.

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Alaskans blaze trail of oral health

BY BARBRO RAKOS AND JOSH NIVA

ANTHC's Dental Health Aide Therapist (DHAT) program educates future dental professionals, most of them Alaska Natives, in the knowledge necessary to return to their regions and provide hands-on dental care and disease prevention services. The first and only DHAT training program in the U.S., ANTHC's DHAT program opened in 2007 and has graduated 16 students.

It took a pioneering group of Alaskans leaving the state for training to give the Alaska program its inspiration, model and beginnings. In 2003 and 2004, eight Alaskans traveled to New Zealand to complete a two-year diploma in dental therapy course at the University of Otago.

In summer 2011, that group of eight Alaskans was given the National Impact Award by the National Indian Health Board at its annual Consumer Conference, which took place in Anchorage.

"The standing ovation they gave us was very emotional – I tried very, very hard to hold back tears," explained Aurora Johnson, one of the original Alaska DHATs. "We had so many people who were very proud of us for being ambassadors and for paving the way for the rest of Alaska's dental therapists."

The group is viewed as pioneers on many levels. They were Alaskans traveling across the



PHOTO BY BARBRO RAKOS

Aurora Johnson accepts the National Impact Award from the National Indian Health Board at the Consumer Conference in Anchorage in 2011. Johnson, from Unalakleet, was one of eight Alaskans who traveled to New Zealand to train as a dental therapist and is now viewed as a pioneer for Alaska's DHAT program.

world for training in a profession that would make a real difference in reversing the decades-old epidemic of oral suffering and disease. They were also the targets of a lawsuit by the American Dental Association, which wanted the program stopped.

"We were all a little apprehensive in the beginning – and most of us were being sued for

ONLINE

Learn more about the Alaska Dental Health Aide Program by visiting:

www.anthc.org/chs/chap/dhs

the first time in our lives," Johnson joked.

The lawsuit was eventually dropped, and the new dental therapists returned to Alaska prepared to provide care in communities like Shishmaref, Kiana, Kotzebue, Nome, Aniak, and many more. ANTHC created its own dental therapist training program based on the successful New Zealand model. Today, the ANTHC program is viewed as a model for other U.S. states looking for ways to address access to dental care issues. In October 2010, RTI International released a study finding that Alaska's DHATs are providing safe, competent, and appropriate care under their scope of practice, and that their patients are very satisfied with their care.

Six of those eight Alaska pioneers are still practicing DHATs around Alaska. Johnson works in Unalakleet; Robert Curtis and Tammy Merchant have worked in the Nome area; Kimberly Baldwin and Stephanie Woods work in the Maniilaq region; and Conan Murat works in the Yukon Kuskokwim area. This group is helping provide care for more than 35,000 Alaskans across the state, while inspiring others who will one day follow in their footsteps.

Bethel DHAT manager Balasko wins national award

Kathy Balasko, RDH, MS, a manager with ANTHC's Dental Health Aide Therapist (DHAT) program in Bethel, was recently awarded the Indian Health Service (IHS) Senior Hygiene Clinical Service Award for Excellence. Balasko was presented the award at the IHS Dental Update in Albuquerque, N.M.

"Kathy is an invaluable resource for our dental disease prevention and oral health promotion efforts in Alaska," said Mary Williard, ANTHC's DHAT Training Director. "As a clinician, an educator, and program manager, Kathy has given remarkable energy and commitment to improving oral health care access in rural Alaska."

Senior dental hygienists in the IHS program perform a variety of roles, such as clinician, educator/health promoter, program administrator/manager, and patient advocate. The Award for Excellence was created to recognize outstanding contributions and



Kathy Balasko receives the IHS Senior Hygiene Clinical Service Award.

service in the field of dental hygiene.

"In a unique environment which has many barriers to care, Kathy efficiently oversaw the installation of a Dental Health Aide Therapist training clinic in Bethel," said Sarah Shoffstall, DENTEX Clinical Site Director. "Her clinical skills, organization and dedication to improving the oral health of Alaska Natives make her the perfect candidate for this award."

Balasko began her IHS career in Alaska in September 2004. She started at the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation (YKHC) in Bethel, where she worked as a clinician, educator and manager of YKHC's Primary Dental Health Aide Program. In 2007, Kathy was recruited to oversee the installation of a temporary clinic in Bethel that would house the new DHAT training program. In 2008, the Bethel clinic moved to its permanent location, the Yuut Elitnaurviat Dental Training Clinic.

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ALASKA NATIVE MEDICAL CENTER



The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium and Southcentral Foundation jointly own and manage the Alaska Native Medical Center under the terms of Public Law 105-83. These parent organizations have established a Joint Operating Board to ensure unified operation of health services provided by the Medical Center.

FIVE MINUTES WITH ...

Alaska Rural Utility Collaborative's John Nichols

BY JOSH NIVA

Alaskans know ANTHC's Division of Environmental Health and Engineering (DEHE) as the team that provides clean water, better sanitation and improved health to thousands of Alaska Natives in rural communities. But DEHE's work doesn't end when those systems are in place.

DEHE's Alaska Rural Utility Collaborative (ARUC) helps communities manage the infrastructure, maximize efficiency, and provide the best health impact that the water and sanitation systems can. ARUC manages services in 24 communities to more than 1,500 homes, and its staff includes 108 Alaska Native plant operators. The Mukluk Telegraph talked to ARUC Manager John Nichols about the program's history and its future.

Mukluk Telegraph: *How did ARUC get started and why is it so important?*

John Nichols: We provide good drinking water to rural Alaska every day. After building water and sewer systems, operating them efficiently and making them last as long as possible is the best way to ensure they improve the health of rural Alaskans. ARUC began as a pilot program partnering with the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation in 2002. Results of the pilot program showing more efficient and sustainable water/sewer operations convinced ANTHC to take ARUC statewide in 2008.

MT: *People might be surprised to learn the extent of your team's services.*

JN: ARUC provides full service water and sewer operations and management to 24 communities. ARUC services includes billing and collection, supervising and paying local water plant operators, parts ordering and assistance with repairs. ARUC recommends water/sewer rates that are high enough to pay all expenses, which is the foundation of utility operations. For communities that don't want full operation and management services, we also offer billing assistance, which provides utility billing services only for a small fee. Thirteen communities use our billing assistance services.

MT: *Your team also does a lot of energy efficiency work, right?*



PHOTO BY JOSH NIVA

ARUC Manager John Nichols, left, and DEHE Office Manager Francine Moreno.

JN: ARUC has excellent data on operations, so we've become the go-to people for getting grants for energy efficiency work and water and sewer upgrades. There are lots of opportunities to save: for example, we've helped Selawik receive energy efficiency grants that will reduce the cost of energy there by \$200,000 a year.

MT: *How important is local hire to ARUC's success?*

JN: Local hire is critical to what we do. We have at least two water plant operators in each community; many communities have more. They have the training and skills in each community to increase capacity to operate their systems.

MT: *What are ARUC's goals for 2012 and beyond?*

JN: We look to have steady, sustainable expansion. We're looking to expand to five additional communities in 2012. We've got about 10 that want to join, but we don't have funding or staff levels to provide a good service for that many communities. We also want to continue offering energy audits to find ways to reduce costs, and make rural water/sewer systems as efficient and sustainable as possible.

Online

Learn more about ARUC by watching a video at:

youtube.com/watch?v=eHlcEm8uHVM



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Pitkas Point project makes headlines and healthier Alaskans

BY JOSH NIVA

ANTHC's Division of Environmental Health and Engineering (DEHE) wrapped up its busy summer construction season with the completion of its project in Pitkas Point, where 109 residents celebrated the new water and sanitation system and the end of honey buckets and haul water.

The massive water and sewer project in the Western Alaska community near Saint Mary's took three construction seasons to complete. The work included a new water treatment plant; a new washeteria; a 125,000-gallon water storage tank; 2,100 feet of sewer main and 700 feet of force main; a sludge stabilization pond; installation of two 6,000 gallon septic tanks; 3,100 feet of arctic pipe water main; and indoor plumbing for 34 residential and three non-residential units.

"They were ecstatic – the community was really enthusiastic to have these services and really happy with ANTHC's efforts," explained Shad Schoppert, DEHE's Pitkas Point project manager.

Schoppert added that the project had a few unique elements, including a large, experimental sewer system that uses percolation through bedrock and oxygen to provide treatment. Schoppert added that Pitkas Point has a better quality of water than many communities in the area, which means fewer chemicals used to clean the water and lower costs for community members.

KTUU television and the Alaska Dispatch covered the project



PHOTOS BY BOB TERRAZAS

Pitkas Point residents pose near the community's honey bucket collection bin during ANTHC's recent grand opening of the new water treatment plant.



completion this summer and the community celebrated with a grand opening event. And recently, Pitkas Point signed on with DEHE's Alaska Rural Utility Collaborative (ARUC), which will assist the community in operations and affordability of its systems.

DEHE studies have concluded that clean water and sanitation services lead to healthier communities and are directly linked to lowering mortality, pneumonia and infection rates.



Water treatment plant operator Charlie Salison, a Pitkas Point resident, gives a tour of the community's new facility.

\$12.3 million grant means better health coming soon to more communities

In October, ANTHC was selected to receive almost \$12.3 million in Rural Alaska Village Grants (RAVG) from the United States Department of Agriculture's Rural Development group. The funds will be used to help develop and construct water and wastewater systems, which will improve health and sanitation conditions in Larsen Bay, Nondalton, Crooked Creek, Golovin, Eek, Kiana, Nanwalek, Toksook Bay, Kwethluk, Venetie, Levelock, Tetlin, Chevak, Chalkyitsik and Chenega.

Those projects and others will be funded by RAVG grants, which were authorized under a streamlined process that was approved between USDA Rural Development and program partners

in a Memorandum of Understanding signed in June. Under the new memorandum, the State of Alaska and ANTHC can apply for funding on behalf of rural Alaskan communities.

"This is big news in that the simplified process now allows us to go out, get work done and make a difference quicker," said Matthew Dixon, Vice President of Operations at ANTHC's Division of Environmental Health and Engineering. "Seven or eight of these communities will be getting water service for the first time and many others will receive repairs to facilities that are non-functional or don't provide adequate service. It's pretty significant and it's the result of great work by everyone involved."

Dixon also noted that these funds will be matched – a 75 percent match from the federal government and a 25 percent from the State of Alaska – allowing ANTHC and its partners to make an even bigger impact.

"The recent announcements represent a long-standing commitment by USDA to improve public health conditions in predominantly Native villages in rural Alaska," added Dallas Tonsager, Agriculture Under Secretary for Rural Development. "These investments improve water and sanitary conditions bringing basic services to these communities that most Americans take for granted."

Partnership inspires tobacco-free families

BY ALASKA NATIVE TRIBAL HEALTH CONSORTIUM

Solving big problems takes innovative partnerships with unique approaches. In an effort to stem high tobacco use rates among Alaska Natives and reduce the number of young Alaskans who begin using tobacco, the Growing Up Tobacco-Free in Alaska team offers tobacco-free education and messaging to children, families and Head Start staff around the state.

Growing Up Tobacco-Free in Alaska is a collaborative initiative fusing the community reach of the RurAL CAP Head Start program with the tobacco experience and expertise of the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium Tobacco Prevention and Control Program.

In just one year, families and communities have become more aware of the risks of using tobacco. The first year of the three-year pilot program, from late 2010 to



PHOTOS BY
CHERYL DALENA
AND
KAYSE ERICKSON

2011, involved 176 families in the communities of Chevak, Kodiak, Kwethluk and Nunapitchuk. Head Start staff screened 98 percent of the families; more than 80 percent of these families reported that their children were exposed to tobacco use in the home; and more than 400 members in these Head Start homes reported tobacco use.

Tobacco education was offered to all families through individual meetings with family advocates or home visitors, or through parent programs. Family advocates and home visitors were trained in giving respectful, simple approaches to sharing tobacco education with Head Start parents. Head Start staff also learned about the health risks of tobacco use and exposure to secondhand smoke.

Results are just beginning to be reported, but the message is clearly making an impact. One site manager commented, "My daughter attended the community presentation and won a door prize

from Alaska's Tobacco Quit Line. She called them on her own and has been trying to quit now."

This work is critical around the state, where Alaska Natives use tobacco more than other Alaskans and some communities have tobacco use rates as high as 60 percent. Smoking is the leading cause of lung cancer and increases the risk of heart disease, stroke, emphysema, and chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases. Chewing tobacco can cause oral cancers, throat cancer, cavities, gum disease and heart diseases. Secondhand and third-hand smoke also impact nonsmokers.

Yet 43 percent of Alaska Native adults smoke, compared to the state average of 22 percent. Alaska Native youth are more likely to smoke than their non-Native peers (32 percent to 13 percent). Alaska Native adults spit tobacco rates are at 11 percent, nearly triple that of the Alaska average of 4 percent.

Year two of the Growing

Online & other resources

To learn more about Growing Up Tobacco-Free in Alaska, contact Cheryl Dalena at 907-729-2488 or cadalena@anthc.org. Ready to quit using tobacco? Contact the Alaska Tobacco Quit Line at 1-800-Quit-Now or www.alaskaquitline.com

Up Tobacco-Free in Alaska project began in late 2011, with 10 additional sites completing training: Emmonak, Hooper Bay, Kake, Kluti-Kaah, Savoonga, St. Mary's, Stebbins, Sterling, Tok and Napaskiak. Year two of the project will focus on further refining the process of bringing tobacco education to families, training staff and linking families and communities to tobacco cessation services. Year three of the project will be a final implementation at all 24 RurAL CAP Head Start sites, evaluation, and dissemination of the project for possible low-cost implementation throughout the state.



Dr. Kamilla Venner, an Alaska Native who works at the University of New Mexico, teaches a group during the recent Growing Up Tobacco-Free in Alaska training session.

Food for thought and better health around Alaska

BY JOSH NIVA

Food is an essential part of many family holiday traditions, and an element of life most people take for granted year-round. One of the unique ways that the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium works to improve the health of Alaska Natives is through the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, which helps federally recognized tribes build the capacity to offer nutritional food assistance to families in need.

Operating since 2007, the Food Distribution Program currently partners with 19 tribal agencies around Alaska, offering everything from technical assistance to inventory management to help shipping villages food. In fiscal year 2011, the program served 111,816 pounds of food with 1,586 Alaska Natives. That's powerful impact, particularly for elders, the disabled, and those in



PHOTO BY JOSH NIVA

ANTHC's Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations team is program associate Crystal Meade, program manager Gregory Nothstine, and program associate Uyuriukaraq L. Ulan.

need.

"By in large, most Alaska communities already have a store to buy food, but not everybody can afford the food or is eligible for food stamp assistance," explained Gregory Nothstine, the

Online

To learn more about the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, visit: www.anthctoday.org/community/fdpi.html

program manager who leads a team of three. "Once tribal agencies started offering this program, it began filling a gap where there was need.

"We also help tribal agencies provide nutritional education to those who receive food on how to maintain a healthy diet and best utilize that food," added Nothstine.

The Food Distribution Program is funded by a service grant from the United States Department of Agriculture and is available to federally recognized tribes.

Colorectal Cancer Screening Clinic opens at ANMC

Colorectal cancer is the leading cause of new cases of cancer among Alaska Native people. To continue combating this trend, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) and Southcentral Foundation (SCF) recently opened the new Alaska Native Medical Center Colorectal Cancer Screening Clinic.

“The thing most people don’t realize about colorectal cancer is that it is very preventable,” explained Paul Ferland, SCF’s Gastrointestinal Nurse.

“If people get regular screenings,” Ferland added, “polyps (small growths) can be found and removed before they have the chance of becoming cancer.”

The Alaska Native Medical Center Center Colorectal Cancer Screening Clinic is a one-stop shop for colorectal cancer screening services, offering convenience and improved care coordination for customer-owners and providers.

The clinic, located on the third floor of the Primary Care Center, provides flexible sigmoidoscopy and colonoscopy services, and is staffed by providers, case manager assistants, and patient navigators.

All people over age 50 should be screened for colorectal cancer, or younger if there is a family history of colorectal cancer.

Online & other resources

Contact the ANMC Colorectal Cancer Screening Clinic at 907-729-5730 or toll free 1-800-478-6661.

For more colorectal cancer health information for Alaska Native people, visit the Alaska Native Epidemiology Center webpage at:

www.anthc.org/chs/epicenter/colorectal_cancerprogram.cfm

Watch Alaska Native colorectal cancer educational videos at:

www.youtube.com/anthcepicenter

ANMC Advanced Nurse Practitioner earns national recognition

Longtime Alaska Native Medical Center Nurse Practitioner Donna Zeznock was recently named the Northwest Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nurse of the Year. She was the first Alaskan to receive the award and the first Alaskan nurse trained in this specialty.

Zeznock has worked as a consultant or full-time employee with ANTHC for 27 years. Her hands-on work is unique and critical for ANMC patients and includes caring for acute and chronic wounds and patients with bowel and bladder problems. She is also known for being a great mentor at ANMC and around Alaska.

“There are a lot of challenges in my work, but I love helping patients and I love what I do,” said Zeznock. “It’s humbling and very nice to be recognized with this award.”



PHOTO BY JOSH NIVA

ANMC Nurse Practitioner Donna Zeznock with her Northwest Wound, Ostomy and Continence Nurse of the Year Award.

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Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium

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Details of Rona Johnson's
"The Journey of the Spirit."



ANMC Oncology receives an artist's touch

BY JOSH NIVA

As an Alaska Native and lifelong Alaskan, Rona Johnson has an appreciation for the significance of salmon and the presence of art around our state. As a longtime Alaska Native Medical Center nurse and a fixture in the busy Oncology Department, Johnson is also sensitive to the people and patients she works with every day.

Johnson recently combined her personal and professional passions into a project that literally changed the atmosphere in Oncology: "The Journey of the Spirit" is a collection of salmon in their life cycle, crafted and decorated by Johnson and her husband, John Ennenga, out of wood, glass and stones. The couple created the works this summer and recently had them installed in Oncology.

"We put our hearts into the work in Oncology, so this was very special for me to create," said Johnson. "The response has been incredible from patients, employees, and even people touring the hospital. People love the story."



PHOTOS BY JOSH NIVA
Rona Johnson, Alaska Native artist and Alaska Native Medical Center Oncology Nurse, shows off her work.

The Journey of the Spirit

The story of this wall is spoken in the imagery of the life cycle of the salmon. It represents the cancer journey as well as the spirit of the Alaska Native people.

The "spirit salmon" are colorless. They reflect their surroundings and symbolize the innocence of birth and beginnings. They swim in circles, without direction, but strongly and with purpose.

Color blushes in the salmon's eyes as they begin to see. The shade of their skin deepens – painted by experience and emotion.

As the salmon journey farther, their color becomes richer with perspective and knowledge. They overcome obstacles, adversity and the unseen. The salmon continue forward, against all odds, with faith, hope and an intense instinct for survival. They carry the spirits of the next generation in their bellies. Their heart stones glow with love and nurturing for their families and futures.

The spawning salmon are the brightest and most vivid in color. They represent our elders and those at the end of their cancer journey – in life or in process. They are the most beautiful as they are the keepers of wisdom and inspiration for those who have witnessed their strength, courage and resilience.

And so is the journey of the spirit ...

— Rona J. Johnson