

Elaine Abraham, innovative Tlingit elder and nursing educator, dead at 87

Accomplished groundbreaker established model for health aide program in rural Alaska.

Mike Dunham
Alaska Dispatch News

In the Tlingit idiom, Elaine Elizabeth Abraham "walked into the woods" early Monday morning. The much-accomplished Tlingit woman from Yakutat died around 1:30 a.m. at the Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage. She was 87.

She was born June 19, 1929, in Yakutat, the daughter of Teikweidei, whose English name was Olaf Abraham. He was one of the last traditional clan leaders of the village. Her mother, Susie Bremner was the great-granddaughter of John

James Bremner, a Scottish guide who helped the U.S. Army explore the Copper River area not long after Alaska became an American possession.

Abraham, whose Tlingit name was Chuu Shah, was raised in a traditional household where her first language was Tlingit. In 2012 she told the Alaska Dispatch News her name meant "Little Grandmother Returns." She was Naa Tláa (clan mother) of the Yéil Naa (Raven Moety), K'ineix Kwáan (people of the Copper River Clan) from the Tsisk'w Hit (Owl House).

She learned English at the village elementary school. But Yakutat did not have a high school. So she attended the Sheldon Jackson Presbyterian Boarding High School in Sitka. After graduating at age 17, she studied nursing at Arizona

Sage Memorial Nursing School in Navajo Country and passed her final tests with some of the highest scores ever achieved. She is said to have been the first Tlingit registered nurse.

Returning to Alaska, she worked for the Indian Health Service in Bethel, Sitka and Anchorage. She was supervisor of nursing at the Mount Edgecombe Hospital in Sitka, where she helped create the Southeast Health Aide Program, the model for providing health care in remote parts of Alaska to this day.

After retiring from nursing in her 40s, she went back to college and earned a wall-full of diplomas, including a bachelor's in human services, a master's degree in teaching in multiethnic education,



Photo courtesy of Sealaska Heritage Institute

See Page B-3, ABRAHAM

Elaine Abraham attends a conference in Yakutat in 2006.

ABRAHAM: Alaska Women's Hall of Fame honoree

Continued from B-1

a certificate in Native linguistics and an associate degree in anthropology. For the rest of her life, she continued to pursue higher education, working on a doctorate in her 70s.

She served in several key positions at Sheldon Jackson College, including associate dean of students and vice president for institutional development. She co-founded the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska and became the first woman and the first Native American to hold a senior position in the statewide administration of the University of Alaska system when she became the vice president of rural education affairs in 1976. In that position, she helped establish community colleges in previously underserved parts of the state with large Native populations, including Nome, Barrow, Tansna, Kotzebue, Sitka,

Ketchikan, Valdez, Kodiak and the Aleutians.

She served on numerous commissions, boards and other organizations, including the Yakutat Native Corp., the Yakutat Tlingit Tribes Council and the Alaska Native Science Commission.

Throughout her life she was the recipient of prominent awards. She was the first Alaska Native to receive the American Indian Achievement Award, Indian Council Fire, in 1973. The Cook Inlet Native Association named her Citizen of the Year in 1984 and the University of Alaska bestowed its Meritorious Service Award on her in 1996. She was elected to the Alaska Women's Hall of Fame in 2011.

She was a lifelong member of the Alaska Native Sisterhood, Yakutat Camp No. 13, an Anchorage delegate to the Central Council of Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, an Elder of the

Yakutat Presbyterian Church and a General Council Member of the Presbytery of Alaska. She performed with the Mount St. Elias dance group, once led by her father, one of the oldest Alaska Native performing groups in the state.

In 1953, she married George Ramos, also of Yakutat. They later separated. Of their five children, four survive their mother: George Ramos Jr., Charmaine Ramos, Judy Ramos and David Ramos. One son, George Milton Ramos Jr., died shortly after birth.

A notice from her family named grandchildren Nirvana, Melody, Davi⁴, Kai Monture, Leonti Williams and Ma^{ta} Monture, and great-grandchildren Daylon Ramos, Jaime, Olaf and Soriano.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

Contact Mike Dunham
at mdunham@alaskadispatch.com.