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STORY

‘We Are All We Have’: Nome Sexual Assault Victims Find Their Collective Strength

September 12, 2019 | *National Native News*
(https://pulitzercenter.org/publications/national-native-news)

BY VICTORIA MCKENZIE

The sun rises on the horizon in Nome, Alaska. Image by Wong Maye-E. United States, 2019.

Frustration over Nome officials' inaction on sexual assault and other violent crimes boiled over in the summer of 2018. Residents voiced their anger at public meetings to try and spur some kind of response. But the process to get to that point started much sooner—more than three years before allegations started going public.

"I'm not just a… troublemaker, I swear to God," said Lisa Ellanna. "You know, this is my home. I love my home. I love my land. I grew up here. This is my ancestral land. This is my community. And I love my community, and I'm proud of my community. I really am."

Ellanna started talking with other residents and meeting regularly in living rooms for mutual support. Their conversations revealed a pattern. The stories the members of the group shared with one another involved investigations that ended without any communication to the accuser. Worse, people in the group described how police seemed to blame those who suffered violence. Other times, survivors said that police didn't even respond to their calls for help.

"I'm not an expert in sexual assault and domestic violence," Ellanna said. "But I do know what I'm seeing in my community."

Another member of the group, Panganga Pungowiyi, said it became clear to group members that sexual assault cases were more likely to reach a dead end if the victim was Native. She is Yupik and lives in Nome.

"It makes it so Alaska Native women are an easier target because you're less likely to get in trouble for it," Pungowiyi said.

The Nome group started seeking alliances to help them restructure a system that seemed stacked against victims. One of the logical first places for improvement was the police department. In 2015 they appealed to a community alcohol safety group that included the police chief, and asked for help establishing new policies and responses to sexual assault and domestic violence. They also spoke up at other collaborative meetings that the police chief attended, like the regional wellness forum. Survivors shared their personal experiences. Two years went by.

“That took a while for us to really see that that wasn’t going to go any further,” said Ellanna. “And that’s when we decided then to go public.”

The advocacy group started drafting a resolution to present to the city council. And they began preparing their fellow residents. They alerted the hospital, the community center, and other service providers what was coming, anticipating an uptick in people needing social and mental health support.

“We knew that when we started coming forward in a public way around this issue people would start to feel empowered,” Ellanna said. “Survivors would start to feel empowered and begin to come forward with their situations too.”

In May 2018, several Native women addressed the all-male, non-Native city council, city manager and mayor, and presented a three-page resolution calling for an outside review of the police department and its operations manual. They proposed over a dozen policy changes.

The city responded with its own resolution, striking all but one reference to race, and suggesting that any enforcement failures were due to understaffing. Several women objected. Darlene Trigg is an Inupiaq resident of Nome and the lead Native Cultural Liaison at the regional hospital. She’s also a member of the advocacy group. She addressed the city council in May 2018.

“I really, really need to point out that there has been an injustice (against) Alaska Native people,” Trigg said at the public meeting. “And the way the Resolution is crafted does not acknowledge that. You have every opportunity to raise up the Native community right now. In the end we can come out of this in a good place. We all just have to be humble enough to recognize that there’s been mistakes. Please, please recognize that.”

The drive to get to this point is informed by a long, unacknowledged history of abuse and betrayal in Alaska at the hands of government agencies and religious organizations. And Nome is not an isolated instance.

“I think the thing more people need to understand is that, there’s a thing that says ‘oh get over it. That happened a long time ago,’” said Jim LaBelle. He’s Inupiaq from the Village of Port Graham. He’s also a member of the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition and an Alaska Native historian. “But what they don’t understand is that the stuff that happened to us is cumulative. It isn’t just one thing we have to get over.”

LaBelle is also a survivor of the Wrangell Institute, a boarding school for almost 100 years in far southeast Alaska notorious for physical and sexual violence against young Native children through 1969.

“Wrangell was such a place that it just attracted pedophiles of all kinds,” LaBelle said. “They were almost freely practicing their own form of abuse. Boys and girls. I remember girls going home in the middle of the school year pregnant—and these are girls that are 11,12, 13 years old. I experienced violence. I was eight, but there were children as young as five.”

Abuse wasn’t limited to boarding schools. In St. Michael, a village of just 400 people near Nome, at least seven Jesuit priests and one layperson are known to have sexually abused children between 1949 and 1986 according to a list of credible allegations published in 2018 by the Jesuits West, the province that includes Alaska and several other states. The Jesuits based in Oregon settled a $50 million lawsuit brought by Alaska Native victims in 2007.

Many Alaska Native communities are still dealing with the layers of trauma from similar experiences all over the state. In Nome, as elsewhere, that history remains a significant dynamic in how Alaska Native residents live their daily lives.

“There’s a whole bunch of different things that piled up on each other,” LaBelle said. “There’s really no way of unravelling it all—well there is, but it takes a lot of time and effort. There is the boarding schools, there is economic slavery, there’s all kinds of things that kind of piled on. There’s never been any uniform or creative way to deal with it.”

After the turmoil that culminated with the Nome city manager and the police chief both leaving office, residents took a step in a new direction, electing an Alaska Native woman to city council.

Meghan Topkok is Inupiaq and an attorney. Her family is originally from Mary's Igloo on the Seward Peninsula. Her city council campaign highlighted the lack of Native representation in city leadership. She said officials either didn't listen to, or failed to understand, their Native constituents.

In addition, Topkok says she was sexually assaulted after she moved back to Nome following law school. She didn't report it, partly because she didn't think her accusation would go anywhere.

"Part of it was kind of the fact that I didn't realize that it was sexual assault," Topkok said. "Then the other half of it was that I had heard such horrible things from my friends who had reported that I didn't feel comfortable going through that myself.

Topkok commends the group of women who came forward to try and change things. They are the reason she decided to share her own experience.

"I mean nobody wants to go back in and tell a bunch of old, white men what you just had gone through in your life," she said. "To just hope that they'll understand and take it seriously. I mean there's definitely people who don't take it seriously, and that is frustrating and I think dampens people's voice. But the more people who speak out, hopefully the more conversations we'll have, the more solutions we'll find."

In May, Lisa Ellanna and the other women pushing for reform secured a victory. The council agreed to appoint a commission to provide civilian oversight on public safety issues. It's the first city in Alaska to do so. The vote was unanimous. After two months the mayor had yet to name anyone to the panel. Supporters are hopeful the seats will be filled soon and that they will include Alaska Native residents.

“Policy doesn’t cost anything,” Ellanna said. “You can write a rule, it’ll stay there regardless of who comes in next, right? They have to follow that same policy. There are procedures they can put into place that’ll be there. Step by step procedures, and how to handle certain situations, that’ll be there no matter who’s employed at the police department.”

Ellanna said progress remains slow, but that they are seeing the first steps in what she hopes is a significant turnaround

“Relationships in small towns all we have,” she said. “We are all we have. I really hope that the people that can affect change see this as not an us-against-them situation. I hope they see it as we’re all in this together, because we are. We’re all we have.”

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