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Family, friend and neighbor caregiver in Nome.

❖ ALASKA

"You Are As Rich As You Share": Kids Grow Strong on Indigenous Values and Traditional Foods

In Nome, Alaska, where I was born and raised, we introduce ourselves by also saying who our family members are on both sides and where our family comes from because those relationships to people and place connect everything. Those connections also shape how I see my role as a mother, a child care provider, and a member of my community. To me, caring for children is about helping raise the next generation to know who they are, where they belong, and what it means to care for your community.

I began providing child care after my son was born. When our own child care situation no longer felt reliable, my husband and I decided I would stay home with him. We were fortunate that his job made that possible, even in a place where the cost of living is incredibly high. Once I was home, I realized our son

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also needed other children to grow up with, so I began caring for friends' children. What started as a practical solution for our family became a way to contribute to my community as well.

Through Kawerak's Tribally Approved Child Care Provider Program, I received training, supplies, and encouragement that helped me build a safe, welcoming environment. Kawerak, a consortium of about 20 tribes near the Bering Strait, invests tribal funds in programs that benefit the whole community. It pays about \$900 per child to FFN providers – both relatives and non-relatives – who care for related or unrelated children for at least 20 hours per week. That investment showed me that our community values family child care as an important part of supporting young children.

One of our traditional values is our connection to the natural world, so the most important classroom I have is outside.

I truly believe children need fresh air every day. Being outdoors helps me regulate my own emotions, and I see the same thing happen with the children I care for. Right now I am caring for my son and a friend's baby. Even when temperatures reach 20 below zero, we bundle everyone up and head outside for 20 minutes. It often takes longer to put on all the winter gear than the time we spend playing, but it is always worth it.

The children ride balance bikes, pull sleds, dig in the snow with toy loaders and dump trucks, and learn how to move confidently through the world. Road safety begins early in our family. By the time my son was a toddler, we were teaching him to stop at intersections and look in every direction before crossing the street. Today, at 5 years old, he rides his bike around town with us as a family. Those lessons are about much more than traffic. They build independence, confidence, and responsibility.

Living in Alaska also means learning from the land itself. Our year follows the seasons of harvesting. There are places for fishing, berry picking, hunting, and gathering beach greens (a wild edible chickweed that tastes a little like cilantro). Those rhythms have guided families here for generations, and I want the children around me to grow up understanding that cycle.

Fishing season is especially important to our family. My freezer is almost empty by the end of the year, which always makes me eager for the next salmon run. Moose hunting fills another part of our freezer each fall. We also gather beach greens in the spring and berries later in the summer and autumn. Salmonberries, blueberries, blackberries, cranberries—each has its own season and purpose. Some become Thanksgiving cranberry sauce. Others are frozen to brighten meals in the middle of winter.

Those foods are staple foods for us and also reminders that we are connected to the land and to one another. My experience is that the families who come here with children who don't have family in the community and don't know indigenous ways are the most food insecure. Groceries are very expensive here: \$7 for a gallon of milk, \$35 for five dozen eggs or a big pack of bacon. If you also have a mortgage and student debt, it can be impossible to afford both child care and food.

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One of the most important values I hope children absorb is something I was taught growing up: You are as rich as you share.

Around here, the first catch of the season or the first greens you gather are often given away. They go to elders or people who cannot harvest for themselves. This year, after gathering beach greens, my husband and I divided what we picked and delivered half to an elder before bringing the rest home. Even though our own freezer still needs to be filled with fish, sharing comes first.

I do not have to lecture my son about generosity because he watches us practice it. Sometimes he asks why we are giving food away again, and I explain that this is simply what we do. We take care of one another.

During one outing, several children I cared for joined us to gather greens. Most of them spent the afternoon running and playing, which is exactly what young children should do. But one little boy surprised me by picking a handful of greens all by himself. Earlier, he had also helped my husband and son make traditional seal oil by stirring it each day while it was rendered. When the oil was ready, we filled a small jar with greens preserved inside and gave it to his parents. I told them their son had helped provide this food and that I hoped they would enjoy sharing it together. Watching a child discover that they can contribute to their family and community is one of the greatest rewards of caregiving.

I believe children learn far more from what we do than from what we say. They watch us share our harvest. They watch us help elders. They watch us spend time outside, respect the land, practice kindness, and thank others. Those daily examples become the foundation they build their own lives upon.

In a child care desert like rural Alaska, providing care certainly helps families continue working. But I hope the children who spend time in my home leave with something even more lasting. I want them to remember snowy afternoons outside, the taste of wild foods gathered close to home, and the quiet understanding that wealth is measured not by what we keep, but by what we are willing to share.