



It takes a village: Tenakee continues search for children to fill school

By Katie Spielberger | Capital City Weekly 8/25/2010

TENAKEE SPRINGS - When you arrive by ferry in Tenakee Springs, you only need to walk the length of the dock to arrive in the center of town. To your left is the bathhouse, containing the therapeutic hot springs that the town grew up around. To your right is Snyder's Mercantile, which has served as the general store since 1899.

Ahead of you is the main thoroughfare, where the speed limit is 10 miles an hour and traffic is composed of four-wheelers, bicycles, walkers, dogs and black slugs.

On the first Friday in August, three women pause on their bicycles in this hub to exchange some important news. Hannah Meyer will be attending school in Tenakee this year, her mother, Cynthia, says. The other two women - the school's teacher Anne Connelly and school board member and parent Shawna Harper - are delighted. Now they only need two more students to keep the school going.

Shawna will share this piece of news with almost everyone she runs into later on. "We've got eight," she'll say, or "We just need two more." Everyone will know what she's talking about, because in this town of about 100 residents, everyone keeps track of the kids.

"It takes a village to raise a child" goes without saying in Tenakee. The town's only problem is that it needs a few more children to raise.

Last year, Tenakee received local, and then national, news coverage for its innovative efforts to attract families with school age children: an ad on Craigslist calling for "a few good families" to move to town. "Southeast town seeks students to fill school" read the headline in the Juneau Empire last March. "Alaska's Rural Schools Fight Extinction" read the headline in the New York Times in November. And indeed, Tenakee's problem of keeping a student body of at least 10, the threshold below which funding will be severely cut, is not unique to the Chichagof Island community. Across the state, people are leaving rural villages for urban Alaska's promise of better jobs and lower costs of living.

What might set Tenakee apart is the fervor with which the community is recruiting new members. Much of the outreach is just letting people know they would be welcomed. Last year's efforts met with some success - most notably, a family with five children moved from Petersburg for the year.

This July, another ad appeared on Craigslist: "The Tenakee Springs School Reaches Out Again." I responded to the e-mail address listed to see what was going on; the school board invited me to come to town for a weekend to get to know the community.

When the ferry LeConte arrives in Tenakee, the town's residents all turn out to help visitors unload. In the hustle and bustle of hugs and welcomes, Gordon Chew - the husband of teacher Anne Connelly and a

member of the school board - explains that this ferry stop was a little bittersweet for the town. As families with children spill off to spend the weekend in Tenakee, the family with five children is boarding. Just as this family's arrival saved the school last year, their departure is leading the school board to increase their recruitment efforts for students again.

The Craigslist campaign worked well last year, but Gordon wonders whether it will work again. The school board has been considering taking an ad out in the Juneau Empire. He raises an interesting question: how do you market a town, a lifestyle?

To people looking for a simple life in a small town with access to subsistence foods, Tenakee could be an easy sell. The street is lined with huckleberry and salmonberry bushes; a daily routine involves at least one bath in the hot springs; the only danger of leaving your bike unlocked is that your son, or mother, might take it for a joyride. But the young families needed to sustain the town are likely to need two things that are hard to come by: housing and jobs.

After his family moved to Tenakee in 1999, Gordon Chew created his own job, first as a carpenter, and then as the owner of the Tenakee Logging Company.

When Shawna and Jim Harper decided to move to Tenakee a few years ago so their son could attend the school here, Shawna kept her job in Juneau, and Jim built their family's home in Tenakee. But these and other community members are seeing to it that a family that moves to Tenakee now will have at least a home waiting.

The hope: If you build it, they will come.

The Chatham school district owns another building in town in addition to the \$3 million school that was constructed in 1987. The original school building, now called the teacherage, was intended as a home for a teacher after the new school was built. Now, it's been refurbished into a home for a family with students.

Hundreds of hours of volunteer work from community members has gone into fixing up the home, Shawna says - "I tracked it on a spreadsheet, it was amazing."

Shawna and Anne show me the teacherage the day after the family with five children had left town, their belongings still in boxes in the living room. Shawna puts a new tablecloth on the kitchen table, waters the plants. They discuss rearranging furniture, and what needs to be done to make the place livable for whoever wants to move to town. Since the school district owns the building, they can rent the space for far less than even a studio apartment would cost in Juneau. They consider the work that would need to be done to make a duplex out of the building.

"So we could do a large family or we could do two smaller families," Anne says.

A short walk from the teacherage is the spacious, well-lit, modern school. During even a short tour of the facility, there's evidence of community involvement around every corner.



Community members volunteer to share their skills with the students - art, music, math, construction, cooking, you name it. "They take what they love and share it with the kids," Anne says. This sharing of passions works well in getting the kids excited about subjects they wouldn't otherwise be, Shawna says. In her son Tucker's case, it's math: "Tucker never liked math before," she says. But now, "He loves math. He loves it."

The school boasts a 100 percent graduation rate and some of the highest test scores in the state. Since in many cases a student will be the only one in his or her grade level, each will receive individualized lesson plans. They also benefit from being able to teach and be taught by each other, Anne says.

"They get to strengthen their skills by teaching the other kids," Anne says. "It makes you feel so good if you know something well enough to teach it to others."

"It's like a big family," Shawna adds. "Nobody ever gets left behind."

The next morning, I find most of the children of this big family hanging out at Snyder's Mercantile. Manning the counter is Becca Wilson, 21, who grew up in Tenakee and graduated from the school in 2007. Her younger sisters make up nearly half the school's current student body.



She gives her educational experience glowing reviews.

"The teachers are so amazing. You don't ever ditch," she tells me. "We get the highest grades in the whole district," she adds proudly.

Having spent a few years away from Tenakee, attending college in Fairbanks and Portland, she says she's enjoyed returning to her hometown during the summers and plans to live here year round again someday.

"I always knew I lived in a special place," she says.

The need for students in this special place is not news to her either.

"It's been a problem for a while," she says. "When I was in school, the most we had was 13 kids. Thirteen kids is a pretty hopping place."

More information about Tenakee Springs can be found at the website www.tenakeespringsak.com.

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