

## **Guardians of the Sacred: The Delegates of the 2012 Conference of Young Alaskans**

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Every time I looked outside the glass doors of the Centennial Hall in Juneau, I saw large majestic ravens marching in front of the doors like soldiers guarding a treasure. Since raven is so sacred in the Tlingit culture, I found it apropos considering we were on Tlingit territory that these guardians of the sacred were here watching over the fifty-five youth delegates of the 2012 Conference of Young Alaskans as they debated the toughest political, socio-economic issues facing Alaska today. As the strong Juneau winds constantly blew open the doors of the Convention Center, I envisioned the winds carrying away the messages of our youth across the state of Alaska.

Born and raised in rural Alaska myself, I was particularly impressed with the un-fettered advocacy by the non-Native rural delegates on issues affecting the indigenous peoples of rural Alaska. The rural contingency brought to light important rural issues in a way that showcased their solid and sophisticated grasp of the unique Native cultures and traditions of Alaska's rural indigenous inhabitants.

The non-Native rural youth delegates eloquently explained and defended numerous important indigenous issues in a way often only espoused by Native people. These delegates possessed a rare and deep reservoir of personal knowledge and understanding of indigenous ways that could only be garnered from living among the Native people of rural Alaska. Yet, their strong voice in championing issues such as subsistence protection, strengthening rural education, suicide prevention, protecting tribal sovereignty, and addressing the rural energy crisis, helped provide a catalyst to propel these issues to the forefront of many discussions.

The strength and solidarity in unity for which the entire rural youth contingency spoke in concert on rural issues, was indicative of the "*strength-in-numbers*" efficacy reminiscent of the "*Rural Block*" of the Alaska State Legislature.

The following are the well thought-out goals that received the most votes in each category as carefully chosen by the youth delegates: Make energy prices more affordable for all Alaskans (Energy & Power); Alaska will preserve and value traditional Alaska culture and protect subsistence lifestyles (Natural Resources & Environment); Provide access to the education, preventative care, and resources necessary for healthy lifestyles (Ilakuyulluta -Living Harmoniously with Oneself & Others); Educate Alaskan students in ways consistent with their cultural traditions and interests (Education & Workforce Development); and Support diverse economies that sustain our cultures and unique State (Economic Resilience & Fiscal Policy).

Overall, all of the COYA delegates proffered proposals with poise, elegance, confidence, and a deep intellectual understanding of the issues on par (and occasionally superior to) that of any Alaska State legislator or current public policy maker. All of the delegates came to the Conference adequately prepared to discuss current issues and to learn from each other and the seasoned leaders participating as guest speakers.

I was sincerely impressed with how all of the delegates carried themselves and exhibited superior listening skills. The delegates were attentive, respectful, responsible, charismatic, and exhibited a great depth of understanding spanning a myriad of complex public policy issues. All of the delegates impressed me with their ability to think “*outside the box*” and to present unique and creative problem solving ideas equal to any of Alaska’s greatest political minds and visionaries. As one speaker, Bernie Karl, put it, he described the delegate’s important visioning role as Alaska’s, “*Future Imagineers*.” The delegates did precisely that . . . they “*Imagineered*.”

Equally impressive was the fact that most of these young minds espoused thoughts and creative solutions to Alaska’s complex social problems in a fashion clearly demonstrating that these young delegates are wise beyond their years. All of the delegates spoke from deep within their hearts with a committed passion that clearly demonstrated how much they care for Alaska, her land and her people.

The Conference was a prime example of civic engagement and civil discourse among Alaska’s budding leaders. Although at times the delegates disagreed with each other’s ideas, they nonetheless praised one another’s intentions. I often witnessed delegates expressing sincere appreciation for each other’s differences, recognizing that each delegate comes from a different place, culture, and belief system. I was humbled by the high level of respect with which each delegate extended to one another and equally impressed with the high level of professionalism in which they conducted themselves.

Moreover, instead of getting wrapped around a cog and failing to reach a solution during heated debates, each delegate helped each other to solve common problems in a way that demonstrated a mutual respect for each delegate’s life experiences and intellectual strengths. The delegates worked long hours and built a close camaraderie with one another that will undoubtedly follow them for many years to come.

One day the alumnae of COYA 2012 will be sitting together as legislators in Juneau; as CEOs of corporations; as teachers and professors; as judges; as high level public policy makers; or as colleagues in some other form of leadership position. Whatever the COYA 2012 delegates decide to do with their lives, they can look back and be proud of the meaningful contributions they made to the State of Alaska through their deliberations and proposals generated in Juneau. Like the revered ravens of Alaska, these youth are the guardians of the sacred . . . our State and our future.