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ELEGY TO A HOSPITAL - ALASKA NATIVE MEDICAL CENTER - Anchorage Daily News (AK) - May 18, 1997 - page M1

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The landmark downtown structure Natives already are calling ''the old hospital'' was a place of passages and parallels. Of joys and sorrows, hellos and goodbyes, of coming into the world and leaving it.

Painted and repainted, the walls have the patina of more than 40 years of living and dying. But no matter how eager staff and patients are to vacate the **Alaska Native Medical Center**, there is an indelible sadness attached to its demise.

True, the freshly mopped linoleum never quite seemed clean. The hallways were jammed, the elevators spooky. The closet-sized lobby, scented with age and antiseptic, overflowed with patients and visitors: grandmas in calico kuspuks, frazzled moms keeping an eye on bored children, men of all ages, stoic as statues behind ball caps and dark glasses.

All true. But the hospital, built in the shape of a cross, carries such spiritual and emotional weight that volunteers have planned an extensive ceremony to say farewell. Not so much to the hospital itself, but to the memory of loved ones lost there.

In an all-night prayer vigil that begins Friday, volunteers will read aloud the name of each person who has died in the hospital since it opened. It is unclear how many names that will include, but organizers expect the reading to continue well into the following day.

Saturday, Natives from around the state will hold a sunrise drum ceremony, a cleansing and traditional feast. They'll sing honor and grief songs, offer prayers and tell stories. They'll prepare memorial plates with berries, moose meat and other favorite foods of a loved one who died, then burn the food in a blazing communal fire.

Because of the loss of life that took place in the building, people believe spirits are there for a time, said memorial organizer Ethel Lund, a Tlingit from Juneau. ''It's a remembrance. It's showing respect and a remembrance.''

THE TENDER HEART

Ask Natives about the spiritual quality of the old hospital and heads nod, but few can put the feeling into words.

''In moments of crisis or joy, or when you brush so close with uncertainty, then your soul, your heart, is really exposed,'' explained Tiny Devlin, 51, director of Native ministries for the Catholic Archdiocese of Anchorage.

Kissing the face of a newborn child, holding a dying grandparent's hand, wheeled into a life-threatening surgery -- these are the moments when the heart is tender, she said.

''Then, you're really putting yourself in front of God, whatever God might be,'' she said. ''It's an opportunity for you to stop and think and consider what's going on in (your) life.''

To not put this place to rest in a right and proper way would be to shirk a duty, Devlin said. An Athabaskan from Nenana, Devlin went to work at the hospital after graduating from high school in the early 1960s. She took a job in food services on the tuberculosis ward to earn money to study nursing. In various capacities, she's had ties with the hospital ever since.

''I don't want to go near that new building,'' she said. ''I don't want to go until this one is put away. To me, it's like a burial.''

Devlin began to weep, thinking of an aunt who recently died.

All cultures honor the dead. In this case, the house to be blessed is huge, the number who died immense, the setting hardly intimate. No matter, Devlin said.

''If you do it with love, with care, with dignity and respect, then you're doing it right.''

GHOSTS AND MEMORIES

The six-story **Alaska Native Medical Center** opened Nov. 29, 1953. The Alaska Native Service approved construction of the $7.2 million facility primarily to treat TB. From 1949 to 1951, TB was the leading killer of Alaska's Natives. The new facility was as much a way of quarantining the disease as treating it. Patients, far from home and isolated, played table games in the sixth-floor solarium.

At the time, treatment for TB emphasized good diet, sunshine and bed rest. The new hospital's walls were painted pink, sky blue and aqua to brighten the surroundings of long-term patients, according to Robert Fortuine, a former director who wrote a history of the hospital in 1986.

Equipment was modern, but not fancy, he wrote. Rooms included ultraviolet light reflectors to reduce the spread of TB. Staff refrigerated garbage until it could be incinerated on the premises.

Even today, some still refer to the hospital as the ANS. But in 1955, ownership transferred to the U.S. Public Health Service under the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. By the early 1960s, new drugs had reduced TB in the state dramatically, and the hospital emerged as a general medical facility. Its mission included outreach and prevention services across the state.

Gloria Park, a physician, ran the hospital's outpatient clinics beginning in 1957. After she retired in 1985, Park worked part-time at the hospital, then later as a volunteer. Early on, she took immense satisfaction in traveling to remote villages, sometimes by dog team, to offer Pap smears, school physicals and long-term care to the chronically ill.

''It was just a great experience professionally,'' she said.

Like Park, Fortuine, now a professor at the University of Alaska Anchorage, had a hard time walking away after retirement. He still volunteers there. As worn out as it was, the old facility possessed an intimacy he fears will be lost in the new.

''I really love the place,'' Fortuine said. ''I have a lot of ghosts there. It just has a lot of memories for people -- not only the patients, but the staff, you see.''

A MICRO-VILLAGE

One day last week, a man wearing pajamas sat in a wheelchair on the hospital's sunny front sidewalk, taking slow drags on a cigarette and watching the foot traffic.

There is a comfort level attached to this place, Natives say. For some Bush dwellers, the hospital was a micro-village, the one place in town they could

relax. You never had to be sick to visit. People dropped in just to see who was around. By chance or design, reunions were as common as June berries in the lobby, the hallways and the Tundra Club, a hospital cafeteria where Natives found traditional foods like salmon strips, fry bread and reindeer stew.

''I think it's the people,'' Teddy Mayac said. ''You get to meet your own kind. It's a good place where you feel you belong.''

Mayac, 60, grew up on King Island. He moved to Anchorage 28 years ago but has never felt at ease here -- except at the Native hospital. When far-flung friends travel to town for medical treatment, Mayac usually hears about it and makes a point to visit.

''I think we miss the friendliness,'' he said of Bush dwellers displaced in Anchorage. ''And that's where we seek it.''

Three years ago, administrators updated a mission statement, emphasizing the hospital as a gathering place for Natives. Richard Mandsager, director, believes the strong community spirit found there helped patients heal.

''My dream is that the new place continue this tradition,'' he said.

So far, the only thing missing at the shiny new facility on Tudor Road is people. But it's just a matter of time before Natives ''own it,'' Lund said.

While Devlin has yet to visit the new place, she believes the spirit of fellowship will follow Natives there. Maybe because a hospital is a place of crisis, and people pull together in a crisis, she said.

''Maybe it's where you appreciate life.''

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