

# We Breathe Again

## VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE



**Top:** Earl "Keggulluk" Polk (Yup'ik) teaches a dance to the youth at Camp Pigaaq in Sady Creek, Alaska. Photo by Marsh Chamberlain.



**Above:** Earl "Keggulluk" Polk (Yup'ik) has devoted his life to helping his people, their families and communities. Photo by Marsh Chamberlain.

**Right:** Summer in Elim, Alaska. Photo by Eric Chamberlain



### Program Synopsis

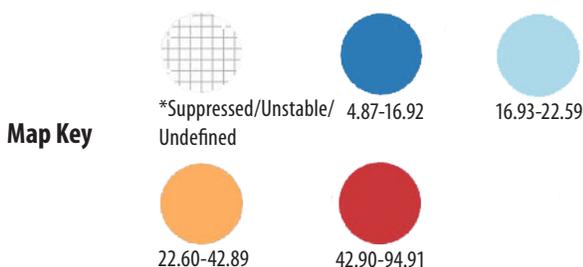
For millennia, Alaska Native peoples thrived in the seasonally harsh conditions of life in the far north. They depended upon strong social, cultural and spiritual practices passed from generation to generation. In the last century, rapid and forced changes in the life ways of Alaska Native peoples created many complex, painful scars for Elders who experienced them, and for their children's children. In a landscape as dramatic as its stories, *We Breathe Again* is a documentary film that intimately explores the lives of four Alaska Native people, each confronting the impacts of inter-generational trauma and suicide.

### In Their Words

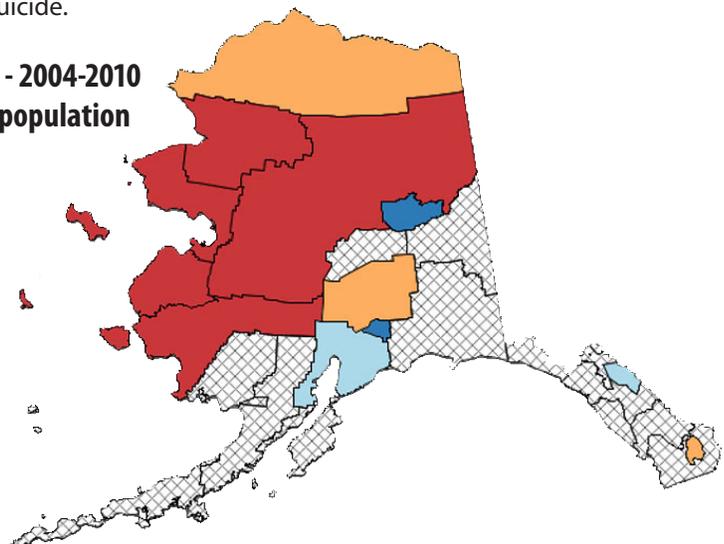
**"We are very much in a battle for the lives of our people. With our young people, we're trying to get them to be hungry about who they are."**

— Earl "Keggulluk" Polk (Yup'ik)

### Suicide Rate - 2004-2010 per 100,000 population



\*rates based on 20 or fewer deaths may be unstable



Map produced by the Statistics, Programming & Economics Branch, National Center for Injury Prevention & Control, CDC Data Source: NCHS National Vital Statistics System for number of deaths; US Census Bureau for population estimates.

## Producer Comments



### Marsh Chamberlain • Enei Begaye Peter • Evon Peter

The traumatic impacts of colonization and practices of forced assimilation affect generations of Alaska Native people. The associated social outcomes

include formidable inter-generational challenges, such as substance abuse, sexual abuse and suicide.

The legacy of this recent history and inter-generational trauma is complex and rarely discussed. Yet, it is through shining a light on these experiences that people may find a path to well-being.

The story of Alaska Native peoples' journeys to heal from the past and shape a self-determined future captured our interest and inspired us to make this film.

Through our involvement in prevention programs and engagement with the struggles of extended family, we reached out across the state to identify a diverse group of Alaska Native people willing to open their lives for us to follow. We are grateful for their courage and willingness to share their stories with us, in what has become a life-changing experience for us all.

## Discussion Questions

1. The title of this film is *We Breathe Again*. Explore the meaning of this title as it relates to the lives of the individuals featured in the film as well as the overarching picture of Alaska Native life. What does it mean to "breathe again," and why is it important?
2. The health of any nation depends upon the flow of life from one generation to the next. In the film we see the painful interruptions to that flow caused by suicide and addiction—and the resulting emotions for those left behind. What are some examples of that emotional aftermath based on the individuals we meet here?
3. Those touched by suicide must travel a path through pain and into healing. What are some of the signs of healing that Jody, Keggulluk, Eddie and Paul show us? Explore from your own perspective a loss that you have experienced and the path that you took toward healing.
4. Keggulluk tells us that his grandfather warned him that, "The things from your past cast a really tall shadow, and even though you're moving on in life, that shadow is still affecting you." Explore and discuss what his grandfather may have meant by this statement both as it relates to a single life and to historical events that have affected Alaska Native people.
5. What do you think are some of the root causes of the high suicide rate for Alaska Natives? Explore the role of identity, culture, inter-generational trauma and sense of self as you consider this. In what ways do you think that strengthening a sense of identity and place are part of the solution?



Jody Potts connects with her sled dog, Chick. A village public safety officer in Copper River Valley, Alaska, Jody carries on the dog mushing tradition. Photo by Marsh Chamberlain.

## By the Numbers

1. The state of Alaska has the highest rate of suicide per capita in the country. (Alaska Government Suicide Statistics)
2. The highest rate of suicide for any demographic in the U.S. is Alaska Native men between the ages of 15-24. There were an average of 141.6 suicides per 100,000 each year between 2000 and 2009. (Alaska Government Suicide Statistics)
3. The majority of those who die by suicide in Alaska are men (78%), with about 22% of deaths by suicide among women, according to the Suicide Prevention Resource Center.
4. Alaskans are working hard to prevent suicide, with 15,202 people training in suicide prevention in 2016. (Stop Suicide Alaska)
5. Sergeant Slawomir Markiewicz, an officer with Anchorage Homicide, said that, "For every homicide we have in Anchorage there are four suicides." (Alaska Public Media)
6. In 2001, the Alaska Legislature established the Statewide Suicide Prevention Council. (Alaska Department of Health)
7. Camp Pigaaq provides Alaska Native youth with an annual culture camp. The Camp is a program of the Maniilaq Qargi model of wellness, which is working to prevent violence, abuse and suicide in the Northwest Arctic region of Alaska, while promoting a positive and healthy way of life.
8. Youth suicide in Arctic Indigenous communities was, until modern times, a very rare event. In circumpolar Alaska, youth suicide was not documented until the 1960s. (Chance, 1990)
9. Alaska Native communities are taking self-determined actions to address the public health crisis concerning youth suicide and substance abuse with efforts focusing on increasing youth resilience and protection through stronger and healthier connections to indigenous culture and language. (Wexler, citations; Ayunerak, et al., 2014; Rasmus, Charles, Mohatt 2014).



A hunter in Elim, Alaska, listens for beluga in Alaska's Bering Sea. Photo by Marsh Chamberlain.

## Suggested Activities

1. To better understand the suicide crises that Alaska Natives face, choose one or more Alaska Native villages and create a historical timeline for that village. What events and changes have impacted the people of that village? Identify key factors that may be contributing to the issue. Some of the communities included in the film are Bethel, Barrow, Kenny Lake, Nome, Elim and Stebbins.
2. *We Breathe Again* is not just a story of loss but also a story of healing and discovery. Use specific examples from the film to identify steps the people have taken to lead to that healing.
3. Using the internet, conduct research on how the suicide rate of Alaska Natives compares to other Native communities in the United States. How do they compare to non-Native communities as a whole? Are there other populations that are experiencing a rise in suicide rates? What conclusions can you draw from these numbers?
4. The population most at risk of suicide among Alaska Natives is young males. Research what other Native communities are doing to support their young men into adulthood. Include what they are doing to strengthen a sense of cultural identity.
5. Traditionally, it has been the Elders that guide the young people toward adulthood using initiation and rite-of-passage rituals. These rituals have many common elements from different cultures around the world. Explore rite-of-passage rituals used by other Native or ethnic cultures and identify three of the most common elements that are included.
6. Casting the Net Upstream is a statewide effort in Alaska to "work upstream" to prevent suicide and not just do intervention. Examine what some of the goals of this effort include and identify specific examples of both "prevention efforts" and "intervention efforts."

## Resources

### About Alaska Natives

<http://alaska.gov/kids/learn/nativeculture.htm>

### Websites for more resources

<http://www.webbreatheagain.com>

<http://www.stopsuicidalaska.org/>

[http://dhss.alaska.gov/SuicidePrevention/Documents/pdfs\\_sspc/AKSuicideStatistics.pdf](http://dhss.alaska.gov/SuicidePrevention/Documents/pdfs_sspc/AKSuicideStatistics.pdf)

[http://www.alaskapublic.org/interactive/?page\\_id=264](http://www.alaskapublic.org/interactive/?page_id=264)

<http://dhss.alaska.gov/SuicidePrevention/Pages/default.aspx>

[http://dhss.alaska.gov/SuicidePrevention/Documents/pdfs\\_sspc/SSPC\\_2012-2017.pdf](http://dhss.alaska.gov/SuicidePrevention/Documents/pdfs_sspc/SSPC_2012-2017.pdf)

<http://www.maniilaq.org/>

### Video About Camp Pigmaq

<https://vimeo.com/46499143>



Youth and leaders learn how to dance at the Inupiaq Leadership Conference in Barrow, Alaska. Photo by Marsh Chamberlain.



In Alaska's Bering Sea, hunters bring an ugruk (bearded seal) to their boat. Photo by Marsh Chamberlain.



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*We Breathe Again* is a co-production of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Crawl Walk Run, LLC, Native Movement and Independent Television Service (ITVS), produced in association with Vision Maker Media and in association with KUAC, with funding provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).

This Viewer Discussion Guide was developed by Jamie Lee, an author and former instructor at the Oglala Lakota College, where she taught for five years. Lee has a master's in human development and has been a communications trainer and an educator for the past 30 years. Her stories and articles have appeared in *The South Dakota Review*, *Winds of Change Magazine* and several other anthologies. She has published three non-fiction books, a novel and a collection of writings from Oglala Lakota College students. Her first novel, *Washaka: The Bear Dreamer*, was a PEN USA finalist in 2007. Lee has written more than 70 documentary programs, including Public Radio's landmark 52-part Native music series, *Oyate Ta Olowan: The Songs of the People*.

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Educational resources for this film are available at <http://www.visionmakermedia.org/educators/we-breathe-again>