**2018 ANCSA Panel Series**

*By ANVCA Staff*

Dialogue with members of the community is important if ANCs are to fulfill their mission of serving their Alaska Native shareholders. This is why ANVCA is thankful that Irene Rowan, former CEO of Klukwan, Inc., Alaska Native Professionals Association, and Alaska Native Media Group, coordinated a three-part panel series to include the public in discussions about ANCSA, its challenges and successes, and other relevant topics. Each panel discussion had its own distinct theme, which provided for meaningful dialogue.

**Panel 1: “ANCSA: The Good, The Bad, The Ugly”**

Moderated by Jennifer Romer, current grant administrator for the Anchorage School District, the panelists on the first panel included Dr. Gary Ferguson of the Aleut Corporation, Willie Hensley of NANA Regional Corporation, and Kacey Hopson of First Alaskans Institute.

Much of the dialogue that resulted from this panel underscored the immense history of advocacy required for the passage of ANCSA, as well as the importance of continued shareholder involvement.

When the moderator asked the question, “What was your first experience with ANCSA?,” the responses ranged from an original lack of understanding of what ANCSA actually was, to acknowledging the tensions between corporate profitability and sticking true to traditions, to using the lessons and successes of the past to inform future growth strategies.

Having grown up in a diverse family, Kacey Hopson advocated strongly that teaching the youth about ANCSA needs to be more active if an understanding and passion is to be instilled at an early age. “If it were framed as an everyday issue that doesn’t affect only shareholders,” says Hopson, “youth would continue to be more engaged.” Continuing along the same lines, Dr. Gary Ferguson spoke of the importance of staying true to cultural traditions. Speaking to his work experience as a public health physician, Ferguson said that “a connection and healthy relationship to the land is everything. It is central to our culture. ANCSA Corporations continuously operate at a crossroads between revenue- and profit-making and perpetuating our ways of life. We need to always ensure that our investments align with our values and sustain the land.” Speaking to his own legislative experience as a key player in the passage of ANCSA, Willie Hensley spoke to the history of Indian title and town site selections and the negative impacts it had on Native communities around the nation. If past legislative acts caused people to lose their homes and become homeless in their own towns, what would this mean if it happened to Alaska Natives? “This mentality of ‘pay off the Natives, develop the lands’ is what got me worried about the future of our land claims. Looking at what happened to other tribes, and looking at legislation and political history, I was fearful that the same thing would play out, once the state selected lands and our claims would be extinguished.” This, Hensley says, is what motivated him to write his seminal paper, “What Rights to the Land Have the Alaska Native?” which arguably spearheaded the movement to get ANCSA passed.

Speaking along the lines of the impacts that ANCSA has had on Alaska Natives, the moderator afterward posed the following question: “What direct or indirect impacts has ANCSA had on you as a young person?”

To this, William Hensley offered the following response: “No one had an idea that ANCSA is what we would end up with, because we were far from being businesspeople. But knowing that we had so much at stake, a lot of people devoted their lives to the fight of passing this form of land claims settlement, and a lot of other people saw this settlement as prohibitive to their own success. But as Alaska Natives, we’re in the unique position to determine the economy of our state and people. If we want to continue this fight, we need to light a fire under our schools to teach a full and accurate history. *Our youth need to know this stuff*.”

To this, both Gary and Kacey offered complimentary responses. “I agree that we need to involve more youth,” Ferguson said. “Our young people tend to get jaded because many of them are not original shareholders. We need to level the playing field between the haves and have-nots. Too many people equate their Native identity with shareholder status. Even if we engage via educational foundations, we need to engage our youth in our Corporations. It’s going to be challenging, but it will be a fix.” “What would my life have been like without ANCSA? It’s difficult to imagine since so much of who we are is tied to the land,” said Hopson. “While I have a lot of gratitude for the work that’s been done so that ANCSA would pass, I find it ironic that it’s led to the creation of a classist system that in a way shuts people out. When we follow Western models as many ANCSA Corporations do, it devalues youth voices. We need to create a space for youth to have true, substantive voices, and be intentional in the way we give feedback.”

A lot of the discussion up to this point, evidently, focused on how ANCSA Corporations truly aim to serve their people, and how they could improve. Moreover, the question of identity and reconciling Western business models with traditional styles of leadership has brought up an important point: If we are to stay true to our people and heritage, we need to make a point of including youth in our processes and making our corporations more democratic with our shareholders. Outreach and inclusion can be difficult, but is nonetheless very necessary, especially if we want to align with traditional identity and values. To many, it comes down to a question of identity: “Traditionally, we are charged with being stewards of our land,” said Ferguson. “We can look at ways to raise revenues to fund scholarships, internships, and language projects, but raising money and revenues to fund these projects doesn’t automatically equate to protecting our lands. The onus is on us to protect investments and the perpetuity of our lands and people. Our connection to our shareholders is everything; they are our connection to our past.”

To close out the panel discussion, Hopson said: “I don’t like simply being called a ‘shareholder.’ The connotation of it is transactional. I’m reducing my connection to the land as monetary, and not cultural. That’s not how I want to think of it, because that’s an immense disservice to the people that fought for ANCSA’s passage. We need to ensure that we’re actively working towards indigenizing our Corporations. How do we infuse our values in meaningful ways? Let’s find a way to ensure that it’s not leading us away from our values and culture as we pursue growth and development. Let’s make it suit us and OUR needs as Alaska Native people.”

**Panel 2: Diversity of Alaska Native Village Corporations**

This panel was moderated by ANVCA Executive Director Hallie Bissett. On the panel sat ANVCA Chairman of the Board and St. George Tanaq CEO, Nathan McCowan. Also on the panel was Dr. Jeane Breinig, CEO of Kavilco, Inc., UAA English professor and interim associate vice chancellor for Alaska Natives and Diversity, as well as Gerad Godfrey, Chairman of the Board of Afognak Native Corporation and Rural Affairs Advisor to Alaska Governor Bill Walker.

In staying true to the title of the panel, much of the panel’s discussions centered around corporate structure, business development strategies, and investments. The intent of the panel was to capture, in a broad sense, how village corporations make use of the diverse resources made available to them via their land conveyances, and how they address challenges pertinent to their organizations.

Below is a summation of the conversation that took place amongst the panelists and moderator.

**Hallie:** Describe the structure of your organization, annual revenue, etc.

**Nathan:** St. George Tanaq is a small corporation. We have a nine-member board and approximately 300 original shareholders that mainly consist of four large families living on St. George Island out in the Aleutian chain. Our main source of income is our subsidiary operations. We do not have a board slate.

**Gerad:** Afognak was formed because of a merger between two original village corporations. In our early aughts, a lot of our revenue came from timber harvesting from around the Kodiak archipelago. Afognak Native Corporation is a parent company to a lot of subsidiaries that participate in DoD opportunities for contract awards under the 8(a) program. Because of strategic board decisions, we’ve been able to grow revenues significantly through competing for 8(a) contracts, some of which have won us upwards of $20 million.

**Jeane:** Kavilco, Inc. is a small corporation of around 120 original shareholders. A lot of our own corporate strategy has centered around divestiture programs. Our central operating question is, how do we maintain principle? Future generations should always benefit, too, so how do we maintain revenue streams moving forward, even with such a small shareholder base? That is when we decided that we needed become a registered investment company. Because of that, we have approximately $350 thousand per year to give to our shareholders in dividends, and we always aim to give at least $10 thousand a year per shareholder. We have a low overhead cost, and essentially operate as a mutual fund. The only thing that can remain challenging about this is that our revenue-generating is highly dependent on stocks and bonds. We have a board that works strategically to address these issues.

**Hallie:** Can you describe your investment criteria?

**Nathan:** There’s not a lot of ample resources available on St. George Island. Most corporations didn’t have an immediate ability to create capital. Fishing industries, in fact, were the main source of income for a lot of them. The majority of village corporations operate without those advantages, since most of them don’t have the immediate access necessary to harvest resources. Thirteen percent of shareholders live on our island itself. Our mandate is to maximize returns for all of our shareholders, so the challenge for us is to decide what investments will maximize returns for our shareholders living on St. George Island. So far, government contracting is proving to be the most promising area of investment.

**Gerad:** We merged early on, and so our shareholder base grew to approximately 500 shareholders. As our main resource and revenue generator was contracting, our board made it so that descendants had to share at least one of their shares, which spiked our shareholder base. So whenever our Board makes strategic decisions, we always aim to keep perpetuity in mind so that we could push out a dividend for our shareholders indefinitely. Thus, we always want to make sure that we always invest in our villages, too. Like Nathan, we focus a lot on government contracting, but the tricky thing about that is that it often swings based on DoD funding, as well as their successes and failures.

**Hallie:** What is a strategy you recommend for putting shareholders to work?

**Jeane:** Get educated about ANCSA. Mentor youth that have an interest in business administration.

**Gerad:** Create apprenticeship and internship opportunities for younger shareholders, and always invest in their education. We also employ a lot of our shareholders in our facility maintenance, IT systems, and finance departments.

**Nathan:** The more shareholders that we aim to employ, the better. When we recruit for project management, we aim to employ our shareholders first.

**Hallie:** Do you see ANCSA as an opportunity or barrier for Alaska Native economic development?

**Gerad:** Village corporations today might say we’ve been caged, and of course this is all dependent on the resources made available, which determined a village corporation’s potential for bounty. But I wouldn’t say that we’ve been caged; rather, we’ve been blessed with unprecedented opportunities.

**Jeane:** Kavilco, Inc. was almost not included in ANCSA. ANCSA isn’t perfect for a lot of the reasons mentioned above. However, it’s connected Kavilco, Inc. to our tiny community of Kasaan. We didn’t always get to choose our traditional lands, so that it was allocated to us puts is in a unique stewardship role.

**Nathan:** ANCSA came at a funny point in federal Indian policy. Elders would say that ANCSA was a HUGE success. Lands that would otherwise be disposed of, or taken away and given to the feds or the state, now belong to Alaska Native people via ANCSA corporations. ANCSA isn’t perfect, but the latter could have been much worse. I believe the best days of ANCSA and of our tribes is yet to come.

**Panel 3: Women in ANCSA**

The third and final panel discussion centered around the role that women played in ANCSA of 1971, as well as what leadership today means to women serving in leadership roles in their respective corporations. Moderated by ANVCA Executive Director Hallie Bissett, the participants were Sheri Burett, Chairwoman of the Board at Chugach Alaska Corporation, Ana Hoffman, President of Bethel Native Corporation, Sophie Minich, President/CEO of CIRI, and Shauna Hegna, COO of Koniag, Inc.

**Hallie:** Describe your journey to leadership.

**Ana:** I was born and raised in Bethel. I was an afterborn, so I didn’t become a shareholder of BNC until 1996. I inherited shares from my mother, and if I’m being honest, becoming a shareholder was not a concern of mine since I knew I’d inherit some. When I ran for the Board of Directors, I was a stay-at-home mom. There was an effort to find a shareholder successor, and the Board had approached me. It’s a very Native way to identify leaders amongst the community. I originally started as the COO, but was later promoted to President. At first, I was overwhelmed and intimidated by the challenge, but when you feel overwhelmed, you just have to try to get through the end of the first day. I got through the first day, the first week, the first month, the first year, and I’m still going.

**Sophie:** I was born the 10th child in my family. My mother was from Fort Yukon. She died when I was 12 years old. She was orphaned and sent to a boarding school, so we didn’t get to listen to our stories growing up – they were extinguished. I wasn’t raised to know my heritage. I was lucky to have a mentor when I was 12, named Marsha; she stood up to help Dad raise the family. This taught me the value of paying it forward. My father was also my mentor – he was always keen on seeing us graduate from college, so for us kids it wasn’t an option. I graduated from UAA with my degree in Finance. I became a Certified Public Accountant from there. My second mentor was my brother John. He was the one that originally encouraged me to work at CIRI, but I didn’t want to listen to him because I was Doyon and he was CIRI, but I applied anyway. I’ve been working at CIRI now for 25 years. I started off as a project accountant. I then became the CFO for CIRI. I’ve been the CEO now for over 6 years. I am there to serve over 9,000 shareholders and provide for them socially, economically, and culturally. I have to thank Carl Marrs and Margie Brown for their encouragement.

**Shauna:** I grew up in Port Lions and was raised in a subsistence lifestyle with my sister Sarah Lukin, whom many of you may know. My father was always intent on us kids attending college. I remember helping him fish one day and he turned to me and said: “You will go out, get an education, and then return to serve our people.” I am an alumna of UAA, and have my Master’s degree from UAF. Starting out, I spent 10 years working at RurAL CAP, where I got to travel across Alaska. After that, I went to work at Afognak where I helped coordinate development programs. After working at Afognak, I transferred to ANTHC and served as their COO. I am now at Koniag, Inc. as the President. On this journey, I have to thank my sister Sarah for the tough love, Liz Perry and Dr. Gordon Pullar for their guidance as I transitioned from RurAL CAP, as well as David Ardenberg who had overseen my work at RurAL CAP for the time I was there. Biggest lesson I’ve learned was to always follow my moral compass.

**Sheri:** I have been the Chairwoman of Chugach Alaska Corporation for 20 years. My family is originally from the PWS village of Tatitlek. I was the oldest out of four children – three other brothers. I was clearly the boss growing up. My mom had always instilled in me the idea that my identity sprouted from where I grew up; she would always tell me that “Tatitlek is who I am.” Modern conveniences are great, but it comes down to the question of identity. The impact of the BIA schools changed how Natives felt about themselves and their identity. The trauma caused a lot of social problems, and a lot of our people continue to suffer from those problems to this day. We need to rise above and be strong. I ran for the Board in 1997, where my platform was ultimately intergenerational prosperity: you have to try to empower shareholders to eventually provide for themselves. You can’t put an individual price tag on pride, so we have to work to ensure that cultural resources are available to our youth, too. This is important in my own ideation of pride and leadership – giving back in meaningful ways. In terms of mentorship, I have to thank Carl Marrs, Dennis Metrokin, and Chugachmiut for assisting with accounting infrastructure. I also want to thank the women of our region – some of my earliest role models were Nanwalek women who took control of the tribal council and really showed us what leadership in Native communities meant.

**Hallie:** How do you manage the interaction between villages, other CEOs, and tribes?

**Sophie:** Seven villages are included within the CIRI region. We haven’t always gotten along but I always believe in building bridges? We started what’s called Tikahtnu Forums, which is a dialogue series between villages, tribes, our village corporations, and CIRI. We discuss a lot of things that affect our communities, like the opioid crisis for example. We are driven toward economic benefit when we pursue solutions. So how do we ensure that everyone is protected? We make a point of always having universal agreements.

**Shauna:** In Koniag, we also have approximately seven villages. Similar to the Tikahntu Forums, we have rountables that include all tribes, non-profits, village corporations, and regionals. We convene twice per years for full day meetings. Koniag, Inc. does not set the agenda whatsoever. Our cohesiveness as a result of these roundtables show in the way we vote together at AFN. Anything we do, we do together, which includes developing advocacy plans on issues like troops in our villages and school closures.

**Sheri:** We have the Chugach Alaska Corporation regional summit. We work toward economic development with positive results within our region. We work with villages, non-profits and corporations to move substantively on issues like village safety and drugs. Because the drug problem was brought up as a concern, the corporation moved to invest in a teen center to promote positive healing for our communities.

**Ana:** In my regional corporation, we represent over 56 villages. We’re also growing in population sizes; we have approximately 30 thousand people in our region, where over 50% are just over 18 years old. There’s an inherent conflict of interest between ANCs and tribes because of our for-profit mandate. This can and does create tons of tension. ANCs have been successful in moving forward, and I think village corporations have been successful in staying in tune with their communities. I became the co-chair of AFN at the encouragement of my regional corporation, Calista. I regularly check in with my region for support and guidance.

**Hallie:** How does your corporation invest in shareholder development? How does your organization grow to raise future women leaders?

**Shauna:** We have a youth scholarship program. We have one program that is open for K-12 youth, and we give them $500 to do anything that will help them to be substantively successful. We currently serve more than 70 kids in this program. We also offer preK-12 scholarships that they can apply for and keep for until they attend college. At Koniag Education Foundation, we offer tuition assistance for anything from vocational education through Ph. D. We also offer what’s called the Anguyak Internship Program, which allows students of ours to gain professional work experience while supporting themselves and attending school.

**Sheri:** We have scholarships through the Chugach Heritage Foundation; we’ve been offering them for the last 20 years. We even develop incentives to move higher in the ranks as their education progresses.

**Ana:** We offer shareholder and descendant scholarships. We give bonuses for good GPAs. We pay for both vocational and 4-year programs. BNC also opened a movie theatre in Bethel, which gives us a chance to employ local youth and for educational development, since it’s a good profit-maker. We also help employ shareholders in construction contracts for schools. BNC wants to be empowering people to go to work and pursue positive futures for themselves.

**Sophie:** CIRI Education Foundation has been offering scholarships for over 20 years to shareholders and descendants. In total, we gave upwards of $22 million.

**Hallie:** Based on your experience, would you say that men are overtly or subtly resistant to women’s leadership?

**Ana:** That’s why I don’t dye my hair. I always worried that my youth would be seen as a disadvantage. I overcame that insecurity of what other people thought of me. I still don’t know what peoples’ impressions were when I first started out. You just have to be AWARE, be true to yourself, and stay consistent and informed.

**Sophie:** I want to echo Ana there. At times I have been looked at as a woman and not a leader. This even happens within compensation; compared to men, I am undercompensated. I truly believe that it is up to women to stand up for themselves and each other in the boardroom. The work is not over in this specific arena. There’s still some distance to go in societal improvement for women.

**Shauna:** I was lucky enough to be raised in a time where my opinion didn’t need to be validated by men. I owe this to the men that have helped raise me, as well as the strong women by which I was surrounded. Alutiiq women are STRONG. Traditionally, when the men were out hunting, women RAN the communities. Even as men served as talking heads for our communities, women were always the NECKS of our communities. Do NOT let men overpower you in the boardroom or anywhere; it is not our traditional way.

**Sheri:** It’s all about RESPECT. Women in our community support each other.

**Hallie:** What would you say to young people that are interested in pursuing a career in ANCSA but are hesitant in moving forward because of the inevitable politics of being in corporate leadership? How do you manage the politics that comes with interacting with villages and non-profits, as well as other ANCSA corporations? How do you keep your head above the water and continue to thrive?

**Sheri:** You can’t take the politics personally. The truth is, a lot of other people haven’t learned to be respectful. You have to develop techniques to just let it all go. Those things do eventually die. If you don’t give it energy, it goes away.

**Shauna:** It’s important to always seek to understand. Let bad things be water off a duck’s back. Your voice matters. Listen to others, but don’t forget to be an advocate. Always aim to lift each other up – we all only want the best for our people.

**Sophie:** Native politics can, in fact, be ruthless. I make a point to stay out of board elections because of conflict of interest. At shareholder meetings, we can see a vast difference in opinion, and it’s not always pretty. There’s role conflict there. People usually don’t mean any harm. They just are trying to be heard.

**Ana:** Seek balance in your life and remember that it really is just a job. Politics will happen no matter where you work. It’s a part of the scene, a part of the package. At the end of the day, go home and enjoy your family. I like to listen to audiobooks, too. Make a point to unplug from whatever could be overwhelming you, and pursue what makes you feel whole. Stay active in your Orthodox church. Maintain balance in your life; I can’t reiterate that enough. It’s the only thing that will keep you sane.