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Growing up in Bush Alaska

What do you expect to hear from someone who grew up in Bush Alaska? Honestly, I haven't given it much thought until just last night. Having grown up here all my life, I feel as if there isn't much to say about it. It's just a normal life in a normal village in Alaska... right? Then that's when it hit me, "Is it really that normal?" Let me share with you what is normal for someone in Bush Alaska by asking that very question. "Is it normal?"

Is it normal to wave at everyone you pass by in town? Sure it is... until you go to Anchorage. To this day, whenever I go back, I still accidentally wave at someone. It's engrained into me. And when you don't get that wave back, you realize.

Is it normal to live in such a cold place? Come on, it's not that cold. You learn real quick how to keep your house warm and how to use a wood stove at a young age. I remember always helping my dad to pack in wood during the wintertime. And it was my mom that taught me how to chop wood as well. I remember those long slow boat rides on the river because the boat is loaded with wood. Nothing is more satisfying than filling up your woodshed. You also got your winter gear and your winter boots; you're good to go. Little tip: Dress in layers because nowadays the weather fluctuates more often than so. What's my favorite winter memory? It might be riding the snow-machine (or what others call a snowmobile) to go trick or treating. That's normal though right? And besides, nothing beats an Alaskan summer. Ask the all the tourists. On second thought, ask someone from Bush Alaska.

Is it normal to spend so much time outside? Whether it's going for a walk, playing outside, going sledding, or even camping, hunting trips, fishing, also known as 'drifting', trapping, berry picking, swimming... I'm sure others can name so many activities that are done outside. It's very common to be outdoors, and very normal.

Is it normal to know everyone? Not just everyone in the village, but also up and down the river, and even other rivers, other regions.... cousins, relatives, all over, and not just family, but friends you met and made while growing up out here... Can you imagine introducing yourself by naming your parents, and then being met with hugs and praise? Do you spend time in people's houses for various events like a potluck, slaviq, or to support families in times of need? You don't realize how much of a close-knit relationship it is, until you travel to other places in the world where it's almost non-existent and everyone's a stranger to you.

Is it normal to live a subsistence lifestyle? Everyone eats moose and loves some muluq soup! Muluq is basically native caviar with fish eggs. Summer is usually busy with fishing season and berry picking. It's normal to spend days and nights getting as much kings, reds, chums, silvers, white fish, and even sheefish or smelts. People jar them, smoke-dry them, filet them, and store them away in their freezers. This summer's berries are more plentiful than previous years as well. Salmonberries, blueberries, blackberries, redberries, and even raspberries, families can pick by the gallons. Oh, and if you haven't tried akutaq yet, I encourage you to try it, or at least ask your students which is their favorite. Mine is blueberry. You can hunt moose, caribou, ducks, geese, ptarmigan; I know some even eat squirrels. There are so many ways to cook and use almost all of what you catch too. It's very hard work though and must be taught the right way, but it's also very rewarding. It's just a part of everyone's lives out here. So normal.

All and all, I think I've made my point by now that what we perceive as normal may or may not be the same as your perspective. Most of what we do, if not all, can come across as bizarre or even outrageous. Trust me when I say this that even I had those same exact thoughts growing up out here. There's this full and rich culture that is being taught out here, even to this day. Lessons, traditions, and values are all entwined into our everyday living. You can be taught how to live out here, if you are willing to learn and be open to our ways. The least you can do though, is to try to understand, and respect that, this is who we are. Many before you that did not understand and chose not to, did not do well out here. In fact, I've seen the most success in teachers when they fully embrace our way of living. The most simple advice I can offer you, is to listen more than you speak. After all, we are the experts and lived here all our lives. Realize those moments where you are the teacher, but also the student, because we have a lot to offer you. Welcome to Kuspuq and welcome to Bush Alaska.