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SUQPIAG STORYTELLER CINDY PENNINGTON, ON HER MOTHER

## MOTHER AND DAUGHTER DISCOVER LOST HERITAGE

**R**aising her children in Anchorage, Alaska, in the 1960s, Suqpiag Native Lucille Antowok Davis taught them nothing about their ancestry. “To ensure that we succeeded in American culture, she never even told us what Native culture we belonged to,” Davis’s daughter Cindy Pennington says. Years later, a whispered piece of family history would inspire Pennington to explore a little-known aspect of her ancestry and spark Davis’s reconnection to a culture she had been forced to abandon.

As program director for the Alaska Native Heritage Center (ANHC) in Anchorage,

Pennington was asked to create a storytelling performance for the New Trade Winds program, a cultural exchange between Alaska, Hawai‘i, and Massachusetts. Looking for a Native culture to focus on, she remembered an unusual conversation with her mother about their genealogy. “My aunt’s marriage had been arranged in the 1930s by my grandfather, the village chief of Karluk on

Kodiak Island. When I asked my mother about it,” Pennington remembers, “she leaned forward and whispered, ‘Elizabeth was betrothed...to a whaler.’”

Researching whaling traditions on Kodiak, Pennington created a performance in which she enacts the rituals of the hunt. “Whalers were intimidating men who were isolated from society half the year and could kill a whale alone in a kayak with just a spear.” More importantly, whaling was a very spiritual pursuit. Sitting in the front row at the debut performance in Anchorage, Davis watched her daughter don the whaler’s crab-like mask and costume. As Pennington danced, calling on the spirits of the sea and forest for their help, she could see her mother’s eyes fill with tears.

“She was so moved that her children were embracing and celebrating a culture that she had been made to feel ashamed of,” Pennington says proudly. After years of concealing her heritage for fear of persecution, Davis found the performance triggered memories of things she had never shared with her family. “My work at the ANHC,” Pennington adds, “is about honoring our shared ancestry as Alaska Natives. The New Trade Winds storytelling project gave my mother and me the opportunity to honor our own family’s history as well.”



Cindy Pennington



Through cultural exchange programs such as the traveling Storytelling Festival, the New Trade Winds Program helps communities have greater appreciation for their own cultures. New Trade Winds partners include the Bishop Museum, Alaska Native Heritage Center, Iñupiat Heritage Center, New Bedford Whaling Museum, New Bedford Oceanarium, and the Peabody Essex Museum.