

Excerpts from a conversation with Dr. Gary Ferguson, IREACH Faculty and Director of Outreach & Engagement

As told to IREACH Scientific Writing & Communications Lead, Susan McLaughlin, 3/3/21

GROWING UP UNANGAX/ALEUT

So I grew up in a small community in rural Alaska in the Aleutian region – we're an island community of primarily fishing peoples.

We're Alaska Native/Unangax, but we also have a lot of Norwegian, Russian and Swedish influences in our community - due to the rich marine environment that's supported generations with fishing, hunting bounty.

Unangax is how we refer to ourselves now as people – that's what we call ourselves, which means “the real people” in our Unangam Tunuu language.... We were called “Aleut” by the settlers from Russia, and so many of our elders still proudly say they are Aleut. So I always like to say – as I describe myself as a tribal member – that I'm Aleut or Unangax and am enrolled as a Qagan Tayagungin tribal member.

Out of my graduating class of 5, I was the only one who went on to attend university and finish with a degree.... I felt like I wanted to learn more, grow and be part of the change that needed to happen related to our region with education, leadership.

My passions lie in community well-being – I grew up in a community where folks really took care of each other, and it was a unique experience. Even if it's not your children, you will make sure kids are safe and chide them as a community if they're going astray. After you get off work, you would help people with their construction projects or the housing addition. People looked out for each other, and it was a social norm.

I believe in the importance of honoring where you come from and your ancestors; I deeply respect different cultural identities. I come from a world view of an Unangax growing up in the Aleutian Region of Southwest Alaska.

MOVING THE DIAL ON COMMUNITY HEALTH

IREACH is a part of Washington State University and – being a land grant university – we have a responsibility to serve the tribes of Washington and the surrounding states that have overlap with the tribes. So our first priority is to develop deep relationships and grow existing relationships with our tribes in Washington state. We also look to other initiatives, such as LatinX engagement, that spill over into all of our communities of color who experience health disparities – these are priorities for our Institute.

Our focus at IREACH is around the voices in the community, listening to communities' priorities to help them develop interventions and research that help move the dial on community health, well-being.

It's so important to engage communities and also share back with them information that we've gained through our relationship with them, so we have this amplification of information that IREACH has collected over the years, which will continue to grow into more projects as we share the work we've done in the past.

As I started to study health and healthcare, what impressed me was “bright-spots-based approaches” or really looking at what's going well in communities, how can we ‘grow the good.’ To me, my research angle is always – yes, we need to address the disparities that exist, and those guide us, but we also need to look at what is going well in a community to grow that. We then learn about these bright spots so we can share them with other communities to inspire them with practical ways to address sometimes difficult, recalcitrant challenges to well-being.

One of the ways this translated to my work was in leadership. I was at the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium serving as Senior Director of Community Health Services and was assisting with oversight of a project that developed maps showing suicide risk. And Alaska, given its demographics, has one of the highest suicide rates in the whole nation – specifically in the Alaska Native population with young males. I saw epidemiological maps with red indicating the highest suicide levels, and the goal in many of our grants is to identify the problems to get money to address the disparity. My question was: well, what communities haven't had a suicide in 25 years? What communities have high rates of high school graduation? What communities have other resilience factors that are helping them maintain that tight community feeling, even when faced with adversity? And to me that was really eye opening as I started to unpack the style of research which – it seems to be a no brainer – like everybody should think this way: let's focus on what's going good! Let's grow the good.

Being Indigenous to Alaska, being Unangax – we have a history in which we were the first to be colonized as far as a region, in the 1700s. When we look at our culture, we didn't have our dances for over 100 years because of colonization. We now have our dances back, and we have hundreds of Unangax dancers that perform the ceremonies of our ancestors. That is to be celebrated! And now we can ask: How did we do that? Other communities could be learning from our experience. How does our indigenous culture contribute to health and well-being? How is culture like medicine?

Sometimes I'm the only Indigenous face at the table for many gatherings and meetings, and it's a big responsibility to speak up for all

Indigenous peoples, and I have to give the

caveat: This is my perspective. I'm not speaking on behalf of all Indigenous peoples per se. But I do feel like my place at the table is important; we need more people who are at the table who speak from the communities being discussed. It's like the quote says, “If you're not at the table, you might be on the menu,” and I think it's really true.

DAILY DETAILS & INSPIRATION

My first career was in helping run an electric utility in rural Alaska, our family business. I have a CDL and I used to be a heavy equipment operator. I was also a commercial fisherman learning from my Grandfather Emil Gundersen before studying for university and going into healthcare. I am grateful for my rich life experience that helps me value even more the roles of the men and women who keep our power on and provide our sustenance from the ocean.

I live in Seattle with my husband Carlos and our son, George Martin. I love being in nature, being physically active, singing, playing music, hanging out with elders, hunting and fishing – I grew up doing that. I'm big into nutrition and am a foodie. Pretty much every evening, you'll find me in the kitchen for a couple hours cooking. However, I don't enjoy cleaning as much as I love cooking!

I have especially enjoyed learning how to prepare a variety of traditional foods from our Alaska Native cultures – lots of fish for sure. I can make a pretty mean seal stew!

One of my favorite quotes of all time is from one of my mentors, Dr. Rita Pitka Blumenstein, who is a Yup'ik Tribal Doctor.

We are free to be who we are – to create our own life out of our past, and out of the present. We are our ancestors. When we heal ourselves, we also heal our ancestors – our grandmothers, our grandfathers, and our children. When we heal ourselves, we heal Mother Earth.

Dr. Blumenstein's words on healing are incredibly inspiring to me.



Dr. Gary Ferguson serves as Faculty and Director of Outreach & Engagement at WSU's IREACH. Formally trained as a Naturopathic Physician, Dr. Ferguson is passionate about promoting healthy communities using a population health approach. His past positions include providing clinical services to his home region at Eastern Aleutian Tribes, serving at the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium as Wellness & Prevention Director and Senior Director of Community Health Services and as Chief Executive Officer at the Rural Alaska Community Action Program.