

Christmas as a JV in Bethel, Alaska

By Tom Manning, Bethel, Alaska '76-'77, & JVC Northwest board member

I was placed in the Bethel Group Home to serve as a counselor. Two other Jesuit Volunteers lived with me in the home: my roommate, Mike Kirby from Albany, New York, and Sheila Fogarty, from Portland, Oregon. Margie Guinn from Bethel, was the paid Director of the group home and shared a room with Sheila. Our house consisted of four native boys and four native girls who were either Yupik Eskimo or Athabaskan Indian. They had been removed from their homes because they were no longer safe to live in due to violence and alcohol and were now wards of the State of Alaska. They lived in the group home and attended school at Bethel Regional High School located nearby. What was unique to our placement is that we lived with the people we served.

What I remember most about my Christmas in Bethel was the darkness and the solitude. The town of 3,000 had no shopping centers, little traffic, no crowds and few lights. Bethel was not connected by road to any other town or village in Alaska. The only way in or out was by plane or by barge. During the Christmas season it grew dark by around 3:30pm and the morning light did not appear until 9:00am. From our back window in the group home, I could peer out into the dark tundra and see no lights in the distance.

Christmas in Bethel was quiet. Most of our young residents were allowed to return to their villages after school had let out for Christmas vacation. As a result, the sounds of eight teenagers living with four adults in our bustling little group home were gone. Two of my fellow Jesuit Volunteers left for Christmas, adding even more solitude to my holiday. I remember walking across the frozen tundra to midnight mass at Immaculate Conception Parish. There was little sound except for my boots crunching into the snow-covered frozen tundra and a dog barking in the distance. Because the native people of Alaska are quite introverted, masses tend to be pretty quiet as well.

I walked back to the group home in silence over frozen ponds covered with snow. The only light came from the twinkling of a thousand stars in the dark sky above. I remember now, "o silent night!"