

CHA Spotlight – Herbert “Herbie” Demit

Sometimes you go looking for a job, and sometimes the job finds you. Herbert “Herbie” Demit never had any intention of becoming a health aide. He’d been a carpenter, a trucker, a heavy equipment operator, and a village public safety officer, but learning precise details about the body and then applying that knowledge to diagnose and treat humans had never entered his mind.

“This lady in the Tanacross village office was telling me about the job being open and all the benefits it offered, but how hard it was to fill the health aide positions. As a laugh my big mouth said, ‘Well, if no one applies, put me down.’ Two weeks later I was notified that I’d gotten the job. I didn’t intend to, but I got interested in it real quick.

It was so challenging, learning how the body works and then using what you know to help people. And there is so much variety in the work.”

The job had come at just the right time for Herbie, who had become a single parent to six children and needed the more regular routine the health aide position offered. As he says, “It can be hard to find a permanent job in rural Alaska, let alone one that is so interesting, pays well, and has normal hours. We do respond to emergencies around the clock, but I share the workload with another health aide, Kara Jonathan, so we trade off being on call on nights and weekends.”

When not at the clinic, Herbie is surrounded by children. Over the three years he has been a health aide, Herbie’s oldest three children have started off on their own lives. However, his three youngest have been joined by another sibling, the daughter of his new partner, as well as a group of youngsters that he informally mentors. The area surrounding Tanacross, a village of about 170 people located on the south bank of the Tanana River, about 12 miles from Tok, offers an abundance of opportunities for passing on traditional skills and knowledge to these children. This past summer, Herbie and his family, sometimes joined by other children, were home only three weekends; the rest of the time they were camping, fishing, hunting, and learning how to use what they’d gathered.

“Last weekend, six kids came over and we all butchered a moose leg and then turned it into soup. It was so much fun to watch them master these skills. It is so much easier to go to the store to buy something to eat than it is to find and put up traditional foods. I worry that the techniques our grandparents used are not being taught to the younger generation...Of course, there is some self-interest on my part, too,” Herbie says with a laugh. “When I am too old to do this stuff for myself, I want to be sure there are younger people who can harvest and share their food with me!”

Herbie, who is also the Chief of Tanacross, is leaving the health aide job that he loves so much. In October he was elected to the executive board of the Tanana Chiefs Conference, and the



bylaws prohibit board members from being employees. His new position will allow him to serve his community in other ways but he won't soon forget his experiences as a health aide. He is full of praise for his co-worker Kara, as well as all the other members of the health aide program.

"The CHAP family is filled with great people who are willing to help you every step of the way. I could not have asked for a better group to work with. Just a few weeks ago my niece asked me about becoming a health aide and I told her 'Go for it! You will not regret a minute of it.'"

Angela Lucien, Herbie's supervisor is sorry to see him leave but knows he is not done helping his community. As she said, "The CHAP program is very grateful for Herbie Demit's commitment and service over the last three years as a Health Aide in Tanacross. We will miss his jovial attitude and caring demeanor, but are very excited for him to start in his new role on TCC's Executive Board representing the Upper Tanana region. We have no doubt that Herbie will continue to make great contributions!"

© 2021 Tanana Chiefs Conference | 122 1st Ave Fairbanks, AK 99701