SHARING STRENGTH
Lorena Hegdal turned a life of challenge into a life of abundance she shares with everyone around her.

By Lynne Snifka

The sink in Lorena Hegdal's kitchen is bright yellow — crazy yellow. It's just a sink, but in Hegdal's otherwise traditional kitchen it stands out like a red spot on a Dalmatian. The kitchen is on the north side of her Fairbanks home, and "I wanted it to always be bright and sunny," Hegdal said. Paint seemed ephemeral. Towels not enough. A sink, however, feels permanent. "I had to order it special," she said.

On a Sunday morning in early November, the smell of sourdough pancakes and fresh coffee filled the kitchen. At 9:30, the first shift of breakfast — two friends staying with Lorena and her husband, Ian — was finished and headed home to Anchorage. The second shift, including Hegdal's sister, Ruth, had just arrived.

"Take some water," Hegdal said to the travelers as she followed them to the door. "Do you want some chips or anything?"

"She likes to give," Ruth said. "I tell her, 'You know, you can come over to my house and not bring anything.'"

Hegdal returned to the kitchen, a red apron tied loosely at her waist. With her wide eyes, weathered hands and natural blush on lightly freckled skin, she seemed like an average woman in her 50s, which is what Hegdal insists she is.

But she's also been the director of engineering at Alyeska Pipeline Service Company. She's a one-woman support system for college students from villages across Alaska. She's raised two sons. She's the first Native woman to graduate with a civil engineering degree from UAF. She's a skin sewer, berry picker, hunter, fisher and role model...
model. She is all these things despite circumstances that would have crushed a lesser woman. What’s more, Lorena Hegdal is, by most accounts, magnanimous beyond compare.

“She’s always done exceptionally well at whatever job she’s been doing, and she’s been a homemaker and mother on top of that,” said Chuck Coyle, Hegdal’s longtime friend and former supervisor at the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities. “And she takes care of everybody. Not just family. Friends, people she gets to know. I’ve never known anybody like that.”

**Smart enough**

Hegdal grew up in Nome, in a family of nine children. She remembers summers at fish camp on Salmon Lake, 40 miles north of Nome, as the best of times. There, Hegdal learned to hunt and fish and pick berries. She spent weekdays with her grandmother, Kayagosee, often wondering why Kayagosee sat on Salmon Lake’s gravel beach every day, staring at the mountains.

Hegdal’s childhood friend, Barb Earp, sometimes went to Salmon Lake, too. They were outdoorsy, Earp said, “not into girly ‘frou-frou’ stuff. We were more about getting out on motorcycles, snowmachines, crabbing and fishing.”

At home in Nome, things weren’t as bright. Lorena and her five older brothers were treated differently by their stepfather. There was alcoholism, and abuse was part of that.

“Anything that you can imagine in a Bush community that was bad probably happened in that family,” Coyle said.

Young Lorena spent much of her time with her Aunt Matilda, her mother’s adopted sister, often sleeping in the same bed, always absorbing her aunt’s wisdom. Auntie Mutt taught her about generosity, understanding and patience.

“She disciplined me, but she never hurt me or hit me,” Hegdal recalled. “Alcohol was always an issue [in Nome], but my aunt only drank once a month or once every two months. But still she never hurt me.”

As she got older, Hegdal thought about college. She wanted an education, and to stay near her family and Salmon Lake. At first she thought her only option was teaching. Then she remembered the highway department. They didn’t have to bring people from Outside to build roads, she thought. She could do that! So Hegdal enrolled in engineering courses.

“I wasn’t real smart,” she recalled. “But I was smart enough.”

At UAF, some professors and students were supportive. Hegdal remembers Professor John Zarling as being particularly encouraging. Still, it was the 1970s, and women — let alone Inupiaq women — weren’t common in the engineering program.

One professor told her that she wasn’t going anywhere in life. Hegdal ignored her detractors. “I thought, I’ll show you!” she said. She did. Hegdal graduated from UAF in 1977 and headed back to Nome, where she worked for DOT&PF as an engineer.

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Perspiration, motivation, inspiration

Hegdal worked for DOT&PF for 24 years in Nome and Fairbanks before going to work at Alyeska. Recently she left her position as engineering director to become director of right of way and emergency preparedness and compliance. As engineering director, she traveled nearly every week, always visiting schools in Bush communities to talk about careers like hers.

“But I did it my way,” Hegdal said. School officials wanted her to speak only to certain classes, conference only with the most gifted students. She refused. “I wanted to talk to them all, tell them they could all do this if they wanted to.”

Now she mentors Native students at UAF. The Hegdals have regular barbecues and dinners for Bush students at their Fairbanks home, complete with a “muktuk bar” that offers the traditional delicacy cooked and raw in a variety of preparations.

“You never have met a more caring person, you know, just concern for people,” Ian, her husband, said. “And great concern for helping other Natives succeed.”

The Girl Scouts named Hegdal a Woman of Distinction in 2008, in part because of support from nominations from current and former students.

“She naturally moves people to action,” one wrote. “She inspires me, in and outside of the workplace,” another said. “Her kindness and compassion have made an indelible mark on my life.” “The world needs more people like her …”
Finding a place of peace
In Hegdal’s crowded sewing room is a “parka” she’s working on to keep her propane tank warm. It’s the only project she can show off. She’s given the rest away.

It’s a choice she makes, this giving. It sustains her, as does the photograph of Salmon Lake that hangs in her Alyeska office. It reminds her of the place where she feels most grounded. She knows now, that’s what Kayagosee was doing staring at the mountains all those summers. It was a place of peace for her grandmother, an immovable spot — not unlike that crazy yellow sink in her own kitchen.

In 2007, the American Indian Science and Engineering Society named Hegdal its Professional of the Year. There was a big awards dinner in Arizona and Hegdal was asked to give a speech. She showed slides of Alaska so people could understand her home, she said.

“I encourage and challenge each of you to cherish your past while embracing the rapidly changing future,” her speech reads, in part.

“Be respectful and honest, learn how to make the right choices, how to love and care for yourself so that you have the strength to love and care for others.”

Editor’s note: Hegdal received a 2008 UAF Alumni Achievement Award for Business and Professional Excellence.

Lynne Snifka teaches journalism at UAF. When she’s not in the classroom, she enjoys freelance writing, travel and being trained by her Jack Russell terrier, Bailey.