**Albertson does it all as Bethel’s lone Extension agent**

By Debbie Carter

On any given week, Leif Albertson might present programs on canning fish, improving indoor air quality or eradicating bed bugs.

It’s all part of his job as the sole Cooperative Extension Service agent in Bethel. He is a health, home and family development agent, but he responds to diverse community requests and needs for educational programming in Southwest Alaska.

Albertson got involved with bed bug eradication when he realized there was a problem in rural Alaska and few resources existed for people trying to get rid of the persistent insects. Albertson, who has a background in public health and worked in an insect lab during college, studied up on bed bugs, gave presentations at state health conferences and co-authored an Extension publication on the subject.

As a new Extension agent, in 2008, he consulted with other Alaska agents about the kind of programs they were doing. He was advised to assess the needs of the region and to offer research-based programs to meet those needs.

Albertson said food preservation seemed like a good place to start because of the price of food.

“It’s much more expensive in Bethel,” he said.

Extension home economists showed him how to preserve foods and adjust pressure canner gauges. Interest in food preservation classes has remained high, he said, in part because of diminished fish runs some years on the Kuskokwim River. He offers classes in canning meat, fish and vegetables, pickling techniques and making yogurt. He also has taught classes on butchering moose and chickens.

Before coming to Extension, Albertson earned a master’s degree in public health policy and management from Harvard, and he managed more than 40 health clinics for the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corp. As “the public health guy” in Extension, he provides programs on a number of health issues that affect rural Alaska, including indoor air quality, diabetes and tobacco use.

Albertson became interested in indoor air quality after he realized that children in Western Alaska younger than age 5 have some of the highest rates of respiratory illness in the world. It is the leading cause of hospitalization in the Yukon-Kuskowim area, he said.

“It seemed like a need because there were a lot of sick kids,” he said.

A lack of ventilation in homes, high rates of smoking and living in close quarters all contribute to the problem in rural Alaska, he said. Albertson undertook training through the National Environmental Health Association to become certified as a healthy homes specialist, the first in Alaska. That led to a number of programs in Southwest Alaska and presentations at statewide conferences. He also became certified to train others, and a number of Alaskans now hold that certification.

Albertson grew up in Anchorage. After he graduated from college, he moved to Bethel in 2002 for a job as a health program associate for the state, providing educational outreach to individuals about HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. When he left Bethel for graduate school, he said he didn’t plan to return but found that he really missed it.

He has many ties to Bethel now, but his first community connection came almost by accident. Shortly after he moved to town, he started volunteering with the Bethel Fire Department simply because it had the best gym in town, he said. He has volunteered with the department for nearly 15 years as a firefighter and now as a paramedic.

He also served on an energy committee affiliated with the Bethel City Council for several years before getting elected as a city councilman in 2013 and re-elected two years later. Another public role he has is coordinating the community garden, with the help of an advisory board. He assigns plots and sometimes offers gardening programs on soils, growing potatoes or handling root maggots.

Although Albertson’s district covers more than 60 communities in Southwest Alaska, a limited travel budget means that he often works with other agencies to travel to communities outside of Bethel. He also coordinates with Extension staff in Bethel, who provide nutrition education and work with the 4-H program and youth.

You won’t find Albertson in his office very much. He’s usually out doing programs and has his office phone forwarded to his personal cellphone. Because people know he’s the Extension agent, opportunities for community engagement present themselves often, at the grocery store, the airport or just around town. He gets questions on a wide range of issues, sometimes from people in the middle of canning salmon. Albertson likes taking those calls and finding answers.

“I like the flexibility and the variety and that any day someone might call me and ask a question that I don’t know the answer to,” he said.

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Cutline:

*Cindy Andrechek photo*

*Extension agent Leif Albertson helps coordinate the community garden in Bethel.*