

Part One

The Denali Story

What happens when a person receives their heart's longing? What happens when a person gets what he says he wants? In my case, after elation came a struggle that required me to let go, listen, and learn. The process of letting go, listening, and learning all began with just one simple but profound question.

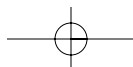
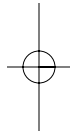
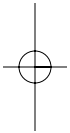
The nine stories in this section are all a part of one larger story, a story about my work at Denali Elementary School in Fairbanks, Alaska. It's the story of a school community finding its vision and creating a learning community; it's about building a team of leaders and celebrating the effort. Here, I tell the stories as a narrative and save most of my commentary until Part Two.

In earlier versions of these stories, I referred to them as "stories that make your heart sing." Such stories are ones that resonate at a deeper level than the narrative in words would seem to convey. Some are stories that our intellect may find to be sensible. But because they relate to the human condition, they also evoke our experience and our wise insight about ourselves, the groups we belong to, and the needs of the world. Sometimes these stories don't make sense to our minds, but they bring us to say, "In spite of everything, yes!"



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I've heard it said that the future belongs to those who give the next generation a reason to hope. My wish is that these stories might give you a reason to work, with a sense of committed and realistic hope, toward truly good schools that are created by people who take the time to ask one another evocative questions and to build community from the ground up.



Chapter One

Stumbling into the Question

When this story began, I was a professor in the school leadership department at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. It was good and interesting work, especially because it involved visiting teachers and principals in small, so-called bush villages many miles from the university. Traveling on six-seat propeller planes out to “village Alaska” was always an adventure, and once I arrived in the isolated, rural communities, there was always a lot to learn. So life was good.

Finding the Right Fit

And life wasn't good. My work involved serving as a teacher and mentor to school leaders whose daily lives involved life issues and work obstacles that I'd never experienced. While it's true that I'd been an elementary principal in the Midwest in the 1970s, I'd never been a principal in Alaska. Increasingly, I was concerned that I didn't have appropriate and relevant ideas or information to pass along to my students. I worried, thinking they'd write me off as a “know-nothing college professor,” just a hurdle to be jumped as they checked off the classes needed for their administrative license.

So at every opportunity, I began to beg for what I called “a substitute experience.” While attending statewide educational conferences, I'd butt into the conversations that superintendents were having with what became my standard line: “If you ever need a substitute principal, let's say for six weeks or so, please give me a call. If someone is out on maternity leave or called back home, please don't hesitate to call on me. I need the experience.”

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The superintendents responded politely, but I never received a call. I think they thought I was simply wanting a “village adventure”—something that would put more vitality into my college lectures. And perhaps that might have been part of my motivation.

At any rate, no one called. So I put that dream to bed and went about my university work. Since getting firsthand experience of the type I desired seemed to be out of the picture, I tried to figure out how I could contribute to what was going on in the public schools of Alaska, from my position as a university-based educator. Perhaps I could share research findings. Perhaps by getting more involved in the work of the schools, even if not as a principal, I’d find a niche that was right for them and right for me. While not what I really wanted, it would be a step in the right direction. So I began attending as many public school meetings as I could, with the intent of finding the right fit.

Until We Can Find a Real Principal

In late August 1988, as a university person attempting to find my niche, I was sitting at a table in the back of a middle school in Fairbanks as its new principal greeted her faculty for the first time, saying: “I’m pleased to be with you as we move into this new school year. We’re going to have a good school year. However, I begin with one deep regret; I’m really sad that the school I’ve come from has not yet found a replacement principal. It’s a bit unsettling for me that there’s no leader at Denali Elementary.”

I remember that moment, and it was unsettling for me, too. Denali Elementary, of all schools, deserved a fine leader. Denali Elementary was the original school in town. It had been such a proud place; it had been the center of the community for many years. Its history paralleled the growth of Fairbanks from its beginning as an early gold mining town through its years as a military outpost and then as the commercial center for the Alaskan interior. As the town grew and other schools were built in outlying areas, Denali

Elementary became less the community center and more the place where no one wanted to be. It had become a rather sad, forlorn, and dreary place. Indeed, its early glory days were gone. Its nearest neighbors were the Salvation Army and a house where illegal drugs were sold.

Denali Elementary was the school attended by many Alaska Native children living in Fairbanks. Many of their families moved back and forth from outlying, rural villages, where they hunted and fished for subsistence, to town, where they worked in the cash economy. Denali Elementary was attended by children of military families as well. Noncommissioned officers and enlisted folk as well were told not to bring their families to Fort Wainwright because there was not enough housing on the base. But families came in spite of this directive and often found dilapidated trailers and substandard rentals off the base for the couple of years they'd be in town. Often these families awaited transfer papers promising better times and warmer weather in Georgia or Hawaii.

A shelter for battered women stood just a few blocks away. Mothers and children who called the shelter home also called Denali Elementary their school. But of course they would have preferred to be in safe homes of their own along with schools in a better location rather than the shelter and its neighborhood school. In fact, lots of people who were at Denali Elementary really didn't want to be there. There were twenty other schools in town. Often parents cleverly pretended that their child lived in another part of town so that any other school could be home. As well, many Denali teachers wanted to be at any other school. It just wasn't seen as a great place to be by many teachers and families.

I thought about Denali Elementary as the meeting began. It was sad that they had no principal there. But during the course of that August meeting, I went on to concentrate more on how I might introduce my "college person's point of view" to the Fairbanks North Star Borough School District. On that orientation day, I just sat there at the table at the back of the room.

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At the end of the meeting, I went out to my car and drove back to the university. I went up in the elevator, got off at the seventh floor, and moved toward my office door. As I fumbled with my keys in the lock, I could hear the telephone ringing. Upon entering, I picked up the phone, saying, “Good morning, this is David.”

“Good morning to you, David,” was the reply. Then the caller declared, “I’m calling your bluff.” It was Harry Brady, the school district’s assistant superintendent, who continued, “You’ve told us for years that you want to gain some principal experience in Alaska. Well, we’re going to give you that experience. I want you to be acting principal at Denali Elementary. You’ll be the principal there—until we can find a real principal. So what do you say?”

“I’ll do it, Harry!” I said, hanging up the phone.

Then I realized that I already had a job. So I practically ran to the dean’s office and announced, “Dean, we have this great opportunity to truly connect with the public schools” (and I went on to explain the situation).

“Great news, David,” he said. “Go for it. You certainly won’t have to worry about any conflict with what we do here. A principal’s job is basically eight in the morning until three in the afternoon, and what we do here is basically four until ten in the evening. So I say, ‘Go for it!’ This sounds very good all the way around.”

I accepted the dean’s “Go for it!” almost as would a little boy receiving permission to go outside to play. After all my waiting, what I had wanted for so long was now mine. I was to be the principal of an elementary school (grades K–5) with about thirty staff members and a student body of about four hundred (later to rise to about five hundred during my tenure), of whom at least a third were students of color, representing Alaska Native, African American, Asian American (for example, Filipino), and Hispanic families. Socio-economically, these families reflected the Fairbanks community but were predominantly working-class folks. Little did I know it at that moment, but bewilderment and exhaustion would soon be mine as well.

I'd forgotten to ask Harry when I needed to report, so I called back. "Well, school starts tomorrow morning, David. Need I say more?"

I said, "No, sounds good to me." And then my head began to spin. I realized in a split second that wanting to do something and knowing how to do it are two completely different things. But I appeared at the school at 7 A.M. the very next day. Very few people there had the slightest clue about either my identity or my assignment. As I think about it now, I see that I was a bit unsure about both of these matters myself.

When I got home at the end of that very long first day, I looked into the mirror and asked myself, "Hey, David, what have you gotten yourself into now?"

"Hey, David, What Have You Gotten Yourself into Now?"

Those first few weeks were some of the most difficult and exhausting weeks of my life. Looking back on it now, it all seems like quite a blur. Generally, teachers at the school wanted to be told what to do. They frequently asked me, "Can I . . . ?" and "Do I have your permission to . . . ?" I was just the acting principal, apparently just taking care of formalities. Still, to be brutally honest, I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I tried to draw on the ideas and strategies that I was teaching in the graduate-level principal licensure courses I taught, ideas and strategies about organizational and fiscal management, as well as curriculum and program development. I wandered around, attempting to look like I was in charge, and gathered an increasingly long list of teacher's questions to which I'd replied, "Sorry, I don't know the answer to that, but I'll find out and get back to you."

I was particularly bewildered during those early days by the gift of a whistle that I received from someone in the central office. "Here you go, David, this will get you going in your new work," the

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person told me with a sly smile. “You’ll really need this whistle at Denali. Carry it wherever you go and all the time.” Why on earth did I need a whistle? Was this whistle to define my work?

Not much time had gone by in my new work, but I was beginning to understand experientially what I had known intellectually before—that there was quite a gap between what I’d been teaching in my graduate school courses and real life in an actual Alaskan school setting. At this point, my earlier experience as a principal seemed long ago and far away. In so many instances in my new work, I simply didn’t have a clue as to what to do or how to do it. I was truly quite lost and feeling very alone in the work. “Maybe this wasn’t all that great an idea after all,” I sadly whispered to myself late one afternoon as I closed my office door and prepared to go to my other job at the university.

A Surprising and Simple Question

In the hallway, I spotted Sally, Peter, Carol, and Lois. I was exhausted. What could I have to say to these two parents and two teachers at the end of this excruciatingly long day? Actually stumbling into their midst, I said, “Hi! I’ve been thinking about something. Mind if I ask you a new-principal type of question?”

Peter replied, “Sure, go ahead.”

I blurted out, “What do you want for your children, here at Denali School?”

There was absolute silence for a really long time. So I asked the question again. “What do you want for your children, here at Denali School?” Determined to get some sort of answer, I waited. I waited for what felt like three minutes—an eternity—in the semi-dark dungeon of a hallway that was painted gray, nearly black.

“Well, you know, David,” Lois, the mom of a primary-level child, finally murmured, “no one has ever asked us a question like that. As parents, we talk about it at the Safeway and as we watch the kids play hockey, but we’ve never talked about it at school before.”

I was amazed. I was even more amazed when Sally, another parent, proclaimed, “You know, this is a first. We grouse and complain a lot when we see each other in the neighborhood, but I can’t remember talking about what we truly want for our kids here in the school. Maybe this is my only chance, so let me tell you this: I want my kids to be just as interested in exploring and learning inside the school as they are outside of it. With the river right here and the woods so close to our house, my kids just love to build forts and run around through the woods, checking things out. They just love Fairbanks and Alaska and this neighborhood. But then they enter this dank, dark place—what a letdown! My kids like the other kids in this neighborhood, but I have to tell you this. I think they hate the school.”

The teachers, looking very surprised, then asked, “So what do you want for your kids?”

With a strong hint of annoyance, Lois called out, “Sally told you what we want. We want our children to be explorers *inside* the school. We want them to be ‘discovery kids.’ We want Denali School to be an exciting place where kids inquire, investigate, and explore.”

The hallway conversation went on this way until after dark. Fully energized, we all wanted more talk like this. “What’s next? I finally asked us all. “Shall we talk about this at the next PTA meeting?”

They all laughed at what they obviously considered an absurd question. “If you want to drown this idea, David, that’s a sure-fire way.”

Embarrassed, I tried again: “So how do we do this? When do we meet?”

Unsuccessfully playing the calendar game for about five minutes (“What about 4 P.M. on Thursday? What about 8 P.M. on Wednesday?”) caused Sally to smile and declare, “I’ve got a deal for you all. Come over to my house for breakfast at 6 A.M. on Tuesday. Is there anyone here with totally urgent business planned for next Tuesday morning at 6 A.M.?” We all laughed and moved toward the parking lot.



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On the way to my “night job” at the university late that afternoon, I felt more energy than I’d experienced in six weeks. My hopes for the school became much more focused. My thoughts about what I had to offer these people became much clearer. I felt that the organization that was Denali Elementary School was somehow inviting me to listen to it. I believed that the school was asking me to help it come alive. In my car that afternoon, I talked to myself, saying something like this: “David, you know how to do this. You know how to listen to people as they talk about what’s important to them. You know how to help this organization determine what it wants to be. You *are* in the right place at the right time.” On that afternoon, I felt at home in the school—and at home with myself. For the first time since the start of school, I couldn’t wait to get back to school the next day.

