

“I always wanted to be a welder...”

Richard L. Johnson Jr. – his friends just call him Lee – has lived most of his life in Nelson Lagoon on the Aleutian Chain, population 70. He’s fished most of his life – 30-some years fishing salmon, mostly sockeye, including 22 seasons in a row as a crewmember on crab and cod boats. He bought his own commercial boat for salmon fishing, the 32-foot “Cynthia Jane.” Some years he’d fish year-round.

Johnson, 41, said fishing was his life – until he figured out there was no future in it for him after salmon prices bottomed out about five years ago and deckhands were making about a quarter of what they used to make.

“About three years ago, I figured out I just couldn’t make it. It was an eye-opener. I met my wife in King Cove,” about the same time, Johnson said, and together, they decided to try Anchorage.

“I always wanted to be a welder,” he said. “I grew up helping my uncles build stuff.”

Johnson said he went to the Aleutian Pribilof Islands Association, a nonprofit corporation and federally recognized tribal organization, to see what they could do about helping him get into welding school, then approached the Gambell Job Center in Anchorage and the Aleutian Pribilof Island Community Development Association.

“I had never done anything like that before – fundraising. It was a challenge. It was tough,” he said. There was a ton of paperwork.

But he did it. The job center and the two organizations together paid for his tuition at a welding school in Anchorage, the Testing Institute of Alaska Inc. – about \$15,000 altogether.

He started his welding classes in April 2005, went to school for a month, took the summer off to fish, and then continued his classes from September to the first of December.

Johnson earned six welding certifications, learned the intricacies of welding and how to read blueprints. He landed a job Jan. 24, working with five other welders at the Automatic Welding Company in Anchorage and making \$17 an hour plus overtime, nine hours a day, five days a week. Pretty soon they’ll go to six-day weeks. He said lately they’ve been building conveyors for the Pogo mine and a rock-screening machine for another company.

“I learn something new everyday.”

He said getting the money for welding school absolutely changed his life. “It’s taken a lot of getting used to, living in the city, the food.” He said he misses the peace and quiet of Nelson Lagoon, the beachcombing and the hunting, but he and his wife probably miss their families out on the Aleutian Chain the most.

“But I love every day,” Johnson said, about his new life.

“Every morning, when I go out and walk to my car, I sniff the air. I tell myself, ‘I’m living



Richard Johnson (above left) in the photo that the Testing Institute of Alaska Inc. took for his certification paperwork. A welder at the Automatic Welding Company in Anchorage since January, Johnson (above right) welds in March.



in Anchorage and I've got a job.' A lot of my friends [from Nelson Lagoon] dream of living here and making it, of getting a good job.

"I get a chance to be with my family everyday, instead of being gone for a month at a time when I was fishing," Johnson said. He and his wife Fredrica have two little girls, a 1-year-old and a 3-year-old. "It's a nice, stable life. I'm going to be able to give my kids more than I ever had."

Kari Colver, a community development specialist at the Gambell Job Center, was Johnson's case manager. She said the money for the job center's share of Johnson's tuition came from a National Emergency Grant, which is federal money that's channeled through the Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development for people in the salmon industry when there's been a downturn in the economy.

Asked if Johnson's case is typical, Colver said no. "Every client is individual. Every client has different issues. We have a lot of different programs," she said, to help people get training, and the National Emergency Grant is just one of them.

Colver said she and her colleagues at the Alaska Job Centers throughout the state do a lot of vocational counseling to make sure the route that a client chooses is one that fits him or her best. She said the job centers also do or help arrange all types of training, whether it's on-the-job, or to get new skills or upgrade current skills. It's helpful, she said, when the job centers can "co-fund" a client's training with another group or agency, because that helps the money go further to help more people.

"There are varying levels of service available at the job centers," Colver said. "When customers make use of job center services on their own, we consider that 'core' or self service. Core services consist of providing basic information primarily intended to assist individuals in conducting job searches or accessing training or other services on their own."



Richard Rounds, a welding instructor at the Testing Institute of Alaska Inc., performs a gas tungsten arc weld at the school in March. Richard Johnson, the subject of the article, earned six welding certifications at the Anchorage school and completed his coursework in December 2005. The school usually has about 10 students.

Colver said where there is greater staff involvement than is typical for core services, it's considered "intensive" services. "The focus is still on providing participants with guidance or information they need to make informed choices about their careers," she said.

The staff at the 24 Alaska Job Centers throughout the state provided intensive services to 66,725 people in 2005, and of those, 40,485 got jobs,

according to a quarterly report released recently by the U.S. Department of Labor, as well as the Alaska Department of Labor & Workforce Development. Although the job centers provided intensive services to 5 percent more people in 2005 than in 2004, 30 percent more people in 2005 got jobs after intensive services than in 2004. That year the job centers gave intensive services to 63,260 people and 31,221 of them found work.

Johnson said that when he was going to school full time, his wife was working, but sometimes the money still got tight. One month the job center even helped him pay their rent.

"That was a godsend," he said.

He said Colver and the job center helped him with more than just the money for school.

"Kari taught me a lot. I had never owned or ran a computer," he said, other than the radar, plotter and depth-sounding equipment he used for fishing.

"She taught me that [computers], how to get a job, where to go, what to say," he said.

Johnson said Colver, plus Jan Carolyn Hardy at APIA and Laura Gilman at APICDA, really made it all happen.

"They gave me the direction to the future. I owe it all to them," he said.

"Sure, I put in all the effort [going to welding school]. But thank you to those three ladies. I've got a good job and a good future now, thanks to them."