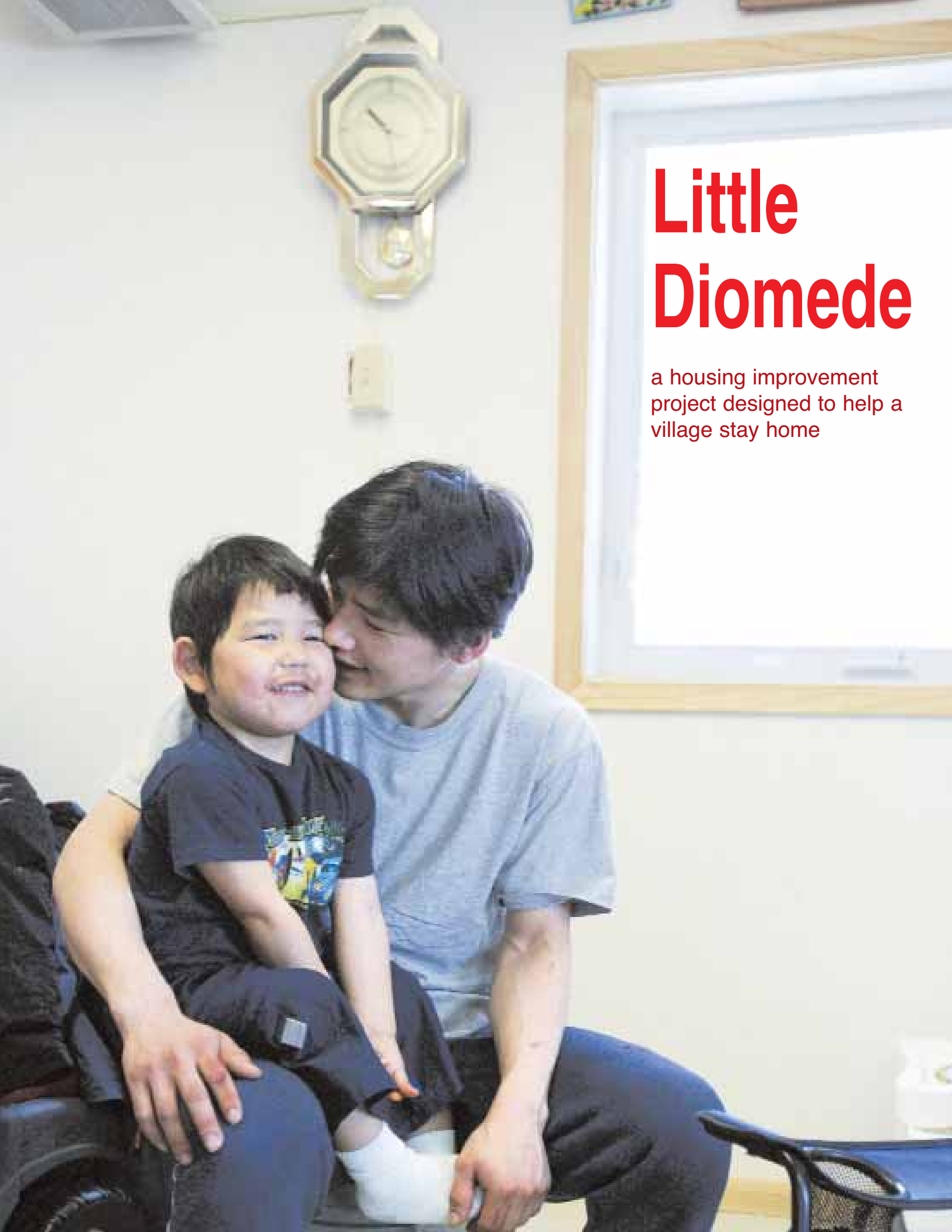
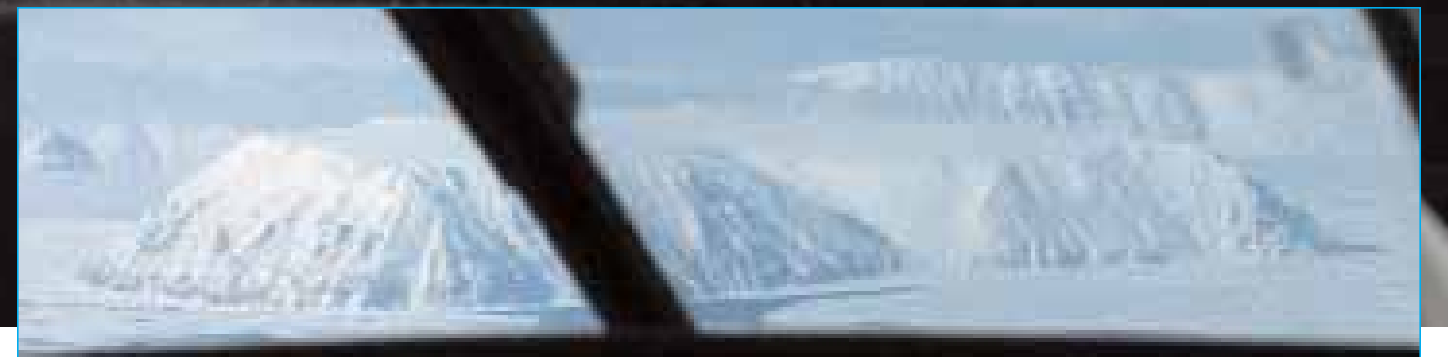


# Little Diomedede

a housing improvement  
project designed to help a  
village stay home





## Little Diomedede

finding the way to  
keep home, home

Located a rifle-shot away from Russia, right next to where the International Dateline slashes the Bering Strait, Little Diomedede may well be the most difficult community in America in which to construct modern housing. The village hangs on the side of a two-and-half square mile rock island scattered with boulders, where a slope of 45 degrees is considered gentle. There is no place on the island for an airstrip or a dock. Channeled by the edges of two continents that jut out towards each other to separate the Bering from the Chukchi sea, the wind is near constant, strong, and cold.

Mail and passengers are brought in by small helicopter once a week, but visitors lucky enough to get a seat must understand that bad weather could keep them here much longer than they had originally intended. In the wintertime, an ice-runway is plowed out on the narrow strip of water that separates the island from its Russian counterpart of Big Diomedede, but despite real temperatures of 45 below, a warming sea and thinning ice means that the runway is only FAA certified for larger planes for about two to three months of the year. Once

building materials actually reach the village, there are no roads; only foot trails link the houses together. Then there are the regulations: Little Diomedede is both a national bird sanctuary and archeological site and no work can be undertaken that will disturb a bird's nest or corrupt an archeological site.

Little Diomedede is called home by some 200 people whose families have lived on the island since time immemorial. "This is a very, very, special place," says Mayor Pat Omiak. Walrus, whale, polar bear, ring and bearded seals converge here, as do fish, crabs and birds of many species. It is a dry village and the problems caused by alcohol and drugs are not as severe as some places.

Yet, just a few years ago, the villagers cast votes to see whether they should remain on the island, or instead relocate to Lost River on the Seward Peninsula. Most wanted to stay, but their modest housing was deteriorating and there seemed to be little hope that it would be replaced or rehabilitated anytime soon. That's when a host of public service organizations, with RurAL CAP taking the lead, answered a plea from the village and stepped in to help.

***Inset:*** Little Diomedede Island as seen through the wind screen of an approaching airplane. In the background is Big Diomedede Island, part of modern-day Russia. Not so long ago, the big island, where the people are now forbidden to visit, was part of their traditional hunting territory.

***Cover:*** Ronald Ozenna Jr. with son Ronald III in rebuilt house.



## A packet of Polaroid snapshots

In the winter of 2001-2002, Paul Sanders was at work in Nome when a pregnant mother from Little Diomed stepped into his office, clutching a packet of Polaroid snapshots. Sanders had recently been hired to serve as Housing Improvement Program Director for Kawerak, the non-profit corporation serving the Bering Straits Region. Although he was aware that the village had received no housing assistance since the early 1970s, when the Bureau of Indian Affairs had built a number of tiny, foam-board houses to stand in place of some of the traditional sod and stick frame houses built by village residents, he didn't fully appreciate how bad the situation could be.

The mother spread her pictures across Sanders' desk. "I was shocked," he recalls, "What she showed me was so bad I almost wept. I saw the living conditions for a family of seven. They were all living in a 16 x 20 house; I saw mold growing behind the couch. I saw a house with no closets, no doors. The outside door to their house was made out of two pieces of plywood nailed together with two by twos and two by fours, and just a little piece of wire for a latch; this in a place where it can be 45 below zero with the wind blowing from 60 to 80 knots, for weeks." The family had already lost one child to respiratory problems. "She asked me for help. I told her I would do anything in the world that I could to help her - and anyone out there. Number one; that was my job. Number two; it was a matter of common decency, of respect for individual human rights. Yes - decency, dignity and the health of children."

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*"I almost wept. I saw the living conditions for a family of seven. They were all living in a 16 x 20 house; I saw mold growing behind the couch. I saw a house with no closets, no doors." - Paul Sanders*

Sanders then contacted Etta Menadelook, tribal coordinator for the Native Village of Diomedé IRA Council and asked her to send someone about the village to photograph the houses, inside and out. She did. He also contacted Wayne Mundy, then head of the Bering Straits Regional Housing Corporation, and Mitzi Barker, RurAL CAP's director of Housing and Planning.

"Wayne and I had already been talking about this for a couple of years," Barker recalls. She had also spoken about the matter to others, such as Mimi Burbage of the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation, who oversaw State Weatherization efforts and Ralph Lee, RurAL CAP's Weatherization Director. All had seen the need and knew it needed to be addressed, but seemingly insurmountable obstacles stood in the way. "No one organization had sufficient resources to mount a project that would achieve the scale necessary to make a real improvement in the housing and to overcome the island's logistical challenges," Barker explains.

After hearing Sanders' plea, they decided it was time to solve the problem.

"Paul is very passionate. He was the catalyst," Barker recalls. "He said, 'These people are going to abandon their island because the housing is so bad! We need to do something about this!' I'm not used to looking at something and saying it's impossible and writing it off. I don't tend to look at these things with a whole lot of skepticism, so my response was, 'okay, you called up, let's figure out how to do it.'"

Sanders put together a project scoping paper and a meeting of several agency representatives, along with the Diomedé IRA Council and Evergreen Helicopters, was held in Nome. All parties agreed that a housing



**Ernest Iyapana, better known to villagers as Analook, with his dog and his house, before and after it was rehabilitated.**

*"What's really critical to making it work is we got so many people persuaded to buy into this thing nobody wanted to be the deal breaker. Everybody thought it was worth doing and was committed to the project and nobody wanted to be the one who would sink it by saying 'no,' so people found a way to make it work. We had federal regulations waived; we pushed margins here and there."* - **Mitzi Barker, RurAL CAP**

*Inset photo by RurAL CAP staff*

improvement project must be undertaken. While a new housing project would have been ideal, on Diomedes, even a modest structure of 1000 square feet would cost in excess of \$300,000 – if there had even been a place to construct such a project.

The problems facing large scale housing projects would have taken years, perhaps decades, to solve. By then, the village might well have been abandoned. Instead, RurAL CAP and Kawerak calculated that the existing structures could be rehabilitated for about \$75,000 each, which would cover materials, shipping, and labor costs. They calculated a total cost of \$2 million to renovate approximately 25 houses, and gave themselves a year to raise the money and plan the project. All wanted to succeed, but they knew that if each agency struck out to do its own thing, the whole project would fall, so RurAL CAP was designated to be the lead agency.

“We had to figure out which funding sources were potentially available and then, frankly, do some pretty creative finagling with the different funding sources to figure out how to make them work together,” Barker recalls.

“We had Indian-specific funding from HUD, and then we had non-Indian funding from HUD. The Indian money comes with restrictions about procurement,



Otto Soolook shovels snow from the entrance to the arctic entry way of the newly rehabilitated house of his mother-in-law, Effie Ahkvaluk. *Inset:* the same house before the work began.

*Inset photo by RurAL CAP staff*

*“Basically, we sat down with the funders and said ‘ok, here are some ideas about how to make this work.’” - Mitzi Barker*



## Barriers Addressed

- **Indian employment preference** – ICDBG funding paid for all on-site labor
- **Indian procurement preference** – NAHASDA grants went directly to homeowners
- **Non-Indian funds** paid for RurAL CAP site supervisors, professional services, materials, freight
- **Timeliness** – scoped 3 years for a 2 year project

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In the evenings, Little Diomedé women often gather in the council room of the Native Village of Diomedé IRA to sew. On one such night, Alice Soolook gives instruction to Sophie Milligrock and then observes as Milligrock sews her first kuspik.

Indian preference in hiring and the requirements between them are incompatible. So, basically, we sat down with the funders and said ‘ok here are some ideas about how to make this work.’”

One idea was for RurAL CAP to assist the Diomedé IRA council in securing an Indian Community Development Block Grant, which could be used to hire and train a local Native work force to be hired by the tribal government.

“Nobody wanted to be the deal breaker,” Barker says, “everybody thought it was worth doing and was committed to the project and nobody wanted to be the one who would sink it by saying ‘no,’ so people found a way to make it work. We had federal regulations waived, we pushed margins here and there.”

An example is “very strict” HUD quality standards, regulations that dictate what a house with HUD money in it must look like upon completion. “It is a very urban standard, one that assumes you have access to some kind of community sanitation system. HUD realized that this was a very unique case and that we were doing was preserving very precarious housing stock in a place where it would cost huge money to build new.”

Income requirements was another stickler. Although they certainly could not be considered rich and could not afford to import materials into Diomedé and hire labor on their own, four families with homes in need of rehabilitation had incomes high enough to disqualify them from access to some program money, such as weatherization funds.

“With HUD’s help, we found a pool of non-Indian specific money that was extremely flexible and could be used for many purposes, including certain upgrades to the homes of a handful of over-income families,” Barker said.

At the end of the year, four major funding sources had been secured, totaling \$1.9 million. RurAL CAP and the Alaska Housing Finance Corporation’s Weatherization program could ante-up to \$500,000, which would be used to provide the field supervisor, project management and for materials and freight. A HUD Rural Housing and Economic Development grant of \$400,000 - the most flexible grant - was awarded to RurAL CAP to cover material, freight and supervision costs. Another \$500,000 in HUD NAHASDA funds was set aside by BSRHC to be granted directly to individual homeowners. The IRA Council of Diomedé received the ICD Block Grant and with it hired 20 local residents to do the work, with onsite training to be staged by





## Final funding Recap - Diomedé Housing Improvement Project

• RurAL CAP/AHFC (Weatherization) <i>Field Supervisor, project management, materials and freight</i>	\$235,000
• HUD Rural Housing & Economic Devt <i>(Grant to RurAL CAP)</i> <i>Materials, freight, travel</i>	\$400,000
• Bering Straits HA (NAHASDA) <i>Materials and freight</i>	\$500,000
• ICDBG (Grant to Diomedé) <i>Labor, tribal grant administration</i>	\$500,000
• Kawerak <i>Job Training</i>	\$60,000

Bobby Ahkinga opens a drawer of his new kitchen cabinet while helping Ralph Lee create a punch list. David Hardenbergh, Executive Director of RurAL CAP, is reflected in the mirror. *Below: Lee and George Ahkinga, in the home of George's father, Philip Ahkinga.*

Kawerak with \$60,000 in Denali Commission training program funds.

The village land is all owned by Inalik, Diomedé's ANCSA village corporation. Under the direction of Inalik President Philip Ahkinga, Inalik entered long-term, \$1.00 per year leases, with every homeowner in the village, which resolved site control issues required by the funders.

In the fall of 2002, RurAL CAP's Ralph Lee traveled to the village to meet with the community. Thirteen families signed up for the first season. Lee then met with each individually to determine what needed to be done to make their homes more livable. While most were structurally sound enough to be rehabilitated, a handful were in such poor condition that they needed to be torn down to the foundation and rebuilt.

In early 2003, Kawerak sent a teacher and carpenter to the village to train potential village workers. As part of the training, the carpentry students erected a small building.

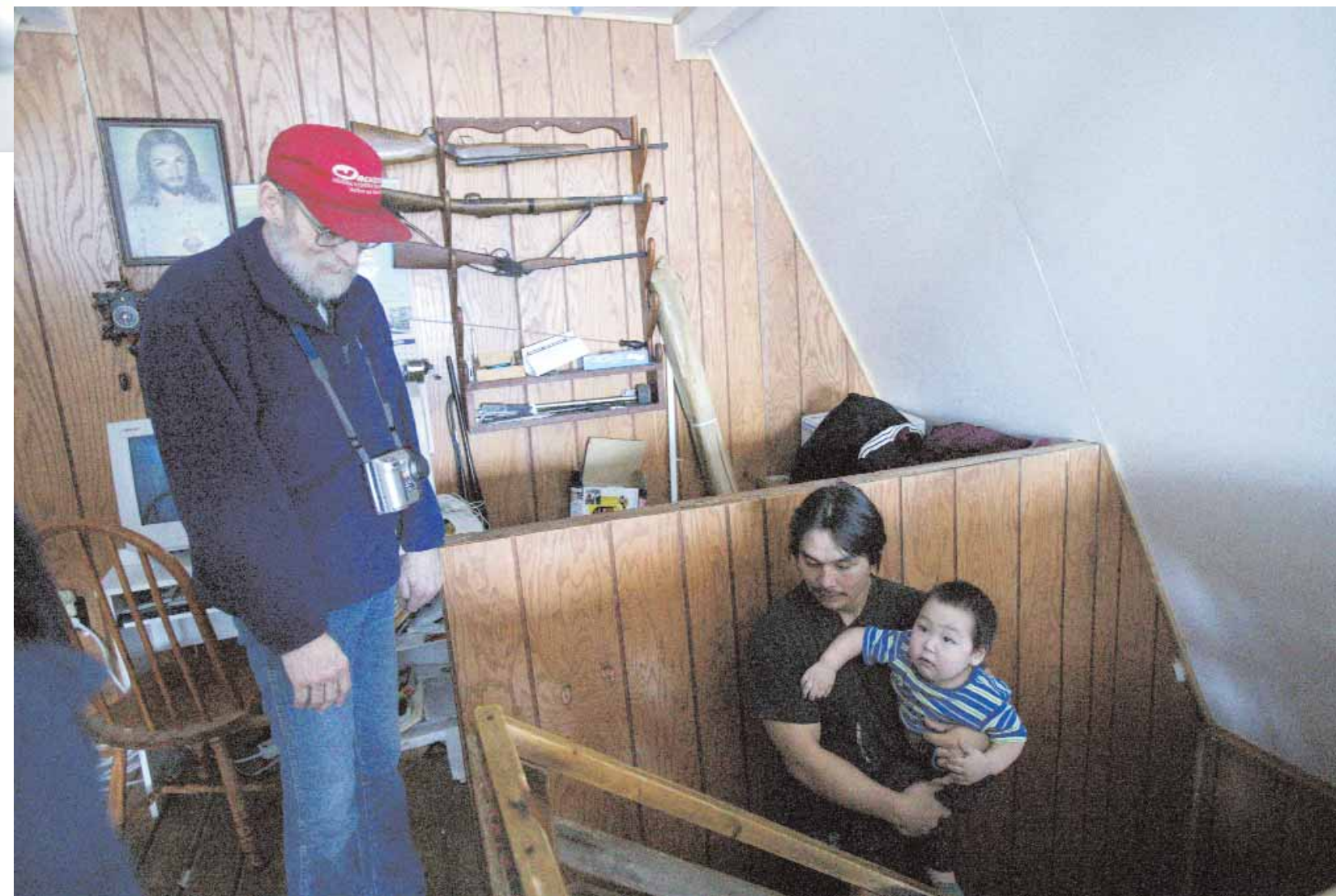
In the meantime, RurAL CAP managed the purchase of building materials - everything from nails to doorknobs, plywood, foamboard, cabinetry and light fixtures - from suppliers in Anchorage and Seattle, arranged for transport

to Nome and was seeking the means to transport it all to the island. One possibility was to sling it out by helicopter, which would require many trips and cost as much as \$400,000, severely reducing the amount of rehabilitation that could be done. As a training exercise, the National Guard had volunteered to sling the materials out from the mainland by helicopter for just the price of fuel, but a winter airlift by fixed-wing aircraft that could land on the ice runway seemed the best, although this was still a very expensive option.

Fortunately, Lee learned of a landing craft that would be doing business in White Mountain and hired it to make a run, once the ice cleared out.

In June of 2003, the first load of building materials was unloaded from the craft onto the boulder-strewn shore that fronts the village. The first construction season began. Like everything in Diomedé, it presented workers with many unique challenges. All materials, from four-by-eight foot sheets of plywood to boxes of nails, had to be packed up the steep trails - this in a place where a windless day is a rare thing.

Much of the work was done from scaffolding that rose



as high as 20 feet over the sharp grade of rocky earth dropping steeply away below. Yet, by early fall, as the weather steadily grew more harsh, most of the outdoor work was done and full attention was focused on the interiors. At about the same time, the phone system in Diomedes went down, and remained down for nearly three months.

Even so, the first 13 houses were completed. In June of 2004, the process began all over again and, before the next winter set in, a total of 32 homes had been weatherized and rehabilitated, five of which were rebuilt.

In March of 2005, Ralph Lee returned to the village, along with David Hardenbergh, Executive Director of RurAL CAP. The two visited the homes completed in 2004, where Lee crated a "punch list" detailing loose ends in need of completion, or problems to be corrected. They heard both praise and complaint, but the consistent message was that houses were warmer, and that stoves were burning close to 50 percent less fuel than they had before.



Jerry Iyapana had just returned from a polar bear hunt when Ralph Lee stopped by to check on the work. Iyapana, his wife, and eight children had been living with an uncle in a tiny house, but was able to buy this building, a former church house, from the IRA Council for \$1.00. "I lucked out," he says. "I wrote a good letter." As he spoke with Lee, Iyapana was busy describing a variety of defects that he

felt needed to be dealt with on the punch list when suddenly he stopped mid-sentence. "But hey!" he said. "I'm thankful, I really am." He extended his hand to Lee, "Thank you! Thank you!" he said. His daughter, M.J., (right) smiles as the puppy at left, stands in a closet, safe from the cold air outside.





## How the work was done



Photos by RurAL CAP staff; scaffold photo by Mitzi Barker

### The construction process:

*Starting above, moving counter clockwise:*  
1. The landing craft brings building supplies. 2. The supplies are unloaded, 3. then organized on the beach. 4. With no roads or vehicles to help them, workers had to pack all building materials up the steep slope. 5. Much of the work was done from scaffolding by a hardworking crew. With the exception of two RurAL CAP supervisors from the mainland, the crew was made up entirely of Little Diomedes men and women.



*“There are a lot of problems trying to build on this island. It’s steep and you can’t scrape if you are going to disturb a bird’s nest.” - Philip Ahkinga*

## Young family has more room to live

There were six of us living in a little house with one room, about the size of this,” Ronald Ozenna Jr., 27, gestures at the living room, about 12 x 16 feet, that surrounds him. His son, Ronald III, snuggles happily on his lap. Two doorways in the opposite wall empty into two separate bedrooms. A Laser 30 Toyo stove sits by a door that opens into the arctic entry that protects the interior from the cold blasts of Arctic air.

Two vents, one with a quiet electric motor that drives a fan and the other, static, conduct moisture outdoors to help prevent mold. A low energy fluorescent light fixture hangs on the ceiling and a smoke detector stands ready to sound the alarm, if needed.

The tiled floor, walls and ceiling are all heavily insulated and a nice, wood-finished cabinet hangs over a new kitchen counter.

Double-paned windows built for Arctic conditions look out on the village,

“We were really crammed in. The six of us would be sleeping in that one little room. There wasn’t much else we could do.” Now, Ozenna and Donna Ahkvaluk share one bedroom with their three-year old while the three older children share the second. Compared to what they had before, it is spacious.

Theirs is one of five houses that were rebuilt. “I’m glad,” Ozenna says. “We got our own place now. I’m happy we got our room, and our kids can play in their own room.”

Besides getting a house, Ozenna was part of the labor force hired to do the work. He began by taking carpentry training, with some electrical and plumbing thrown in, at the National Guard Armory, and then helped build the new interiors in many of the homes, including his own. He and his coworkers had to haul the plywood sheets, foam boards and other materials up the hill themselves. If the wind was not too strong, he could carry a 4x8 foot sheet of plywood up by himself; on windier days, it took two workers and when the wind got too strong, it couldn’t be done.

By mainland standards, the Ozenna home is still a small one, but he is happy with it and foresees the day when he will add on and make it bigger. He hunts daily and has no plans to ever abandon Diomedede for a life on the mainland. “I love it here,” he says. “I’m here for good. I plan to be an old man here.”





David Soolook, Sr. is warm in his new house

**I**t's pretty good," David Soolook, Sr. says of his house, rebuilt high-up on the island. "It's a lot warmer. There's more room. The old house was small, it sat on the edge of a bluff and it got cold." It was one of the older houses in the village, possibly dating back to the 19th century, thought to have been built by Yankee whalers who used the island as a way station. Although it was left standing, it was not a good prospect for rehabilitation, so Soolook was moved to a new location higher up the slope. "It's a real good view from up here," Soolook says, "you can see all over the place. In the summer time, auklets come around. I can't set a net to catch them. I use a long stick, with a net on the end, to catch them."

**F**ollowed by RurAL CAP's Ralph Lee, David Soolook, Sr. walks up the hill from the ANICA store to his new house. After settling down in the warmth of it, he pours coffee for his visitors and himself, then helps Lee fill out his punch list. While there are some minor problems that can be easily fixed, Soolook has no complaints and expresses only pleasure with his improved living condition.



# Warmth in a very special place

**M**ayor Pat Omiak (right) is pleased with the improvements to his house. “They did the ceiling and under the floor. It’s a lot warmer now,” he explains. “My one Monitor (oil stove) used to burn five gallons of fuel in three days. Now, five gallons lasts about one week.”

Omiak teaches at the school, carves ivory at home, is a whaling captain and a leader in Diomedé’s traditional dance group. He started life out in a small sod house with windows made of walrus intestine, where he lived with a family of 13. “It was warm,” he remembers. “No electricity, just two seal oil lamps.” A 25 year veteran of the National Guard, Omiak left the island as a youth to attend Catholic school at St. Michaels, returning intermittently and moving back for good in 1978.

He never again wants to live anywhere else. “This is a

very, very special place,” he says. “It’s dry and people are happy. I like it here. I eat what I want to eat: walrus, ring seals, bearded seals, whales. In the summertime, birds come - auklets in the latter part of May. We would be crazy to move to Lost River. If we moved there, we would be hungry all the time. We would say, ‘I miss my food from Diomedé Island.’”

He describes the rehabilitation project as “a very good program,” and expresses his thanks. Yet, Omiak wants one day to see a full blown housing project come to the island, like those he has seen on the mainland. “I’m happy in my little house and I would not apply, but I would like to see it for the young families. I hope to see it happen while I still walk on this earth.” BSRHA plans to build up to five houses in the village in the near future.

## Corporation store sees big reduction in fuel sales



**T**here are a lot of problems trying to build on this island,” says Philip Ahkinga. Ahkinga is President of Inalik, the village corporation. “It’s steep and you can’t scrape if you are going to disturb a bird’s nest.”

When plans were being made to bring the housing improvement program to Diomedé, Ahkinga did his share by working with the villagers to ensure that all homeowners were able to get a \$1.00 a year lease for the land their house sits on, thereby bringing them in compliance with regulations necessary to qualify for federal funds.

“It’s doing a lot for the village,” he says of the improvements. “We really slow down on the oil sales. Last month, my son burned 20 gallons of fuel to heat his home. He used to burn 10 gallons a week. Sales are way down, but it’s good for the village - especially what fuel is going to cost next winter.”

**Philip Ahkinga (left) at his desk in the Inalik store. Patrick Omiak (right) works on ivory in his home.**





**Some of the housing improvements:** New, heavily insulated walls, floors and ceilings • tiled floors • outdoor siding • electrically efficient fluorescent light fixtures • safe electrical wiring and connections • new cabinets • kitchen counters • double paned arctic windows • electrical and static ventilation systems • smoke detectors • rustproof roofs • slip-resistant stairways with wooden rails • arctic entries with double doors

*“We had sod houses when I was young. Sod houses were warm.”*  
- Eileen Ozenna



Little Diomed elder Eileen Ozenna drinks coffee with her guests as she sits at her table by a one of her new, double-paned arctic windows, from which she has an excellent view of Russia. The project did not escape without a few problems. Anthony Ozenna, her son, stands beneath the electric vent (directly above him) and the static vent (on the right) which, in winter, opens into a snowdrift. This was noted on Ralph Lee's punch list, so that the problem could be corrected.

## Ahkinga appreciates having a warmer village

I'm 68. I was born and raised here," says Orville Ahkinga, Sr. "I grew up in a house that was about half wooden, half sod and dirt. Some of it was driftwood. My father made it. It was warm. We heat it with two seal oil lamps. It is hard work. We have to hunt everyday. We put the seal in the meat hole. When we need it, my mother pounds the frozen blubber with a hammer and then when it melts, the oil oozes out.

"It don't last long, the dirt gets damp, the wood just rots."

In the 1970s, Orville and his wife Dora moved their family into what was then a brand new, 16 x 20, BIA built house. "It was not very big for my family – there were eight of us." So Orville went to Nome, where the old hospital had just been torn down, purchased building materials from the salvage for \$125.00, boated it back to the village and built a bedroom, the first of two add-ons.

Even so, the house was colder than he would have liked and so he and Dora applied for help with the housing rehab program. Dora works at the school and is the agent for Bering Air; Orville has his retirement from his career as the school maintenance man.

Their income prevented them from qualifying for anything done with Weatherization funds, but thanks, to the flexibility of the HUD RHED funds, they were able to at least get new roofing and insulation in the bedroom walls.

"I think this is a good program; I'm very glad. It make the people save energy, sure helps. Makes the buildings a



lot warmer. The village probably saves 50 percent on fuel."

Ahkinga was also part of the workforce, doing interiors. Some of the wiring that he saw in the old houses was dangerous, posing both fire and electrocution hazards.

"The electrical is so much better now. I think RurAL CAP is doing the best job out here. Keep up the good work!"

**Orville Ahkinga checks the flying weather from his home (left). It is good, so soon he is down on the sea, towing school children to a plane that will take them to Gambell.**

*"This is a very good program. It put people to work. I see new boats, new snowmachines. People are happy - ones that didn't have snowmachines have snowmachines now. It helped the community store go higher. It keeps these young boys busy. That's real good training for them."* - **Orville Ahkinga, Sr.**



## A growing village

Happily, for the present, talk of moving the village to the mainland has fallen off. Babies continue to be born and the village is growing. As RurAL CAP's David Hardenbergh and Ralph Lee were preparing to leave the village in March, along with photographer Bill Hess, a brand new resident, Marcus Kobe Okpealuk exited the plane, hidden beneath the warm parka of his mother, Jamie Ahkinga, who came holding hands with new daddy Lane Okpealuk. Later, with help from tribal coordinator Etta Menadelook, they emailed the inset picture of baby Marcus.





### Accomplishments:

- Assembled nearly \$2 million from several funding sources
- Rehabilitated and weatherized 27 homes
- Re-built 5 homes
- Exceeded project goals by 7 homes
- Provided employment to 20+ villagers
- Completed project on time and within budget

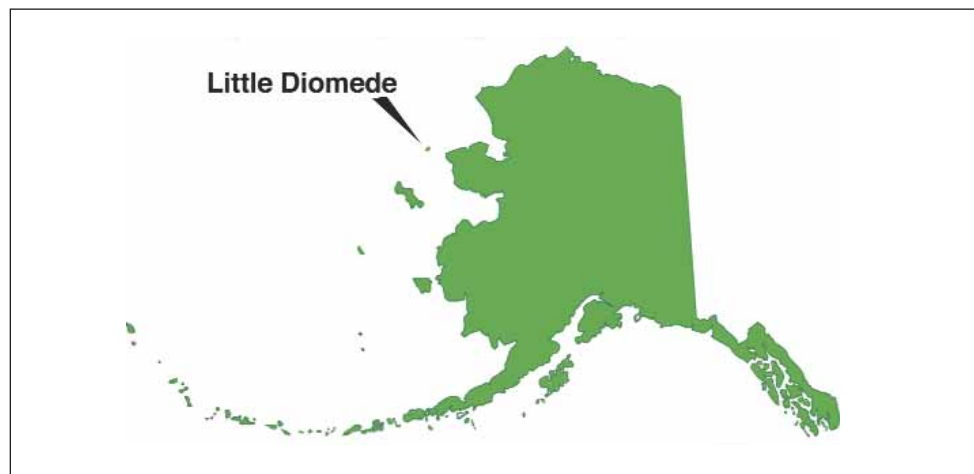
***“What made this project a success, despite almost overwhelming challenges?***

***Here’s the short list:***

• *Designation of a lead partner, and each partner’s willingness to trust the lead partner to act in a way that would achieve the project’s goals, respect the needs and limitations of the various partners. This was huge!*

• *Accurate cost-estimating, project scoping on the front end, coupled with conservative budgeting for logistics. We were blessed with favorable weather and access to a landing-craft barge service, which greatly reduced costs, but we budgeted for a winter airlift. The cost savings resulted in additional work on the homes, and six additional homes receiving services.*

• *Involving funders in figuring out how to coordinate the funding. Each funding source had its own delicate set of requirements, some of which conflicted. Once we had the funding commitments secured, RurAL CAP convened the funders and the partners to lay out these issues and develop a strategy to overcome them. Because everyone had already bought in to the project, there was real incentive to make it work – everyone wanted to be associated with the project, and no one wanted to be the agency that said ‘no.’” - **Mitzi Barker***



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