

# Hope for Broken Hearts

by Shawn Strannigan

When a fun carnival turned deadly in Alaska's interior this spring, God opened doors.



Interior Alaska's spring carnival looks more like winter!



Wilson Sam [far right] helps start the race.

Every spring, folks from Alaska's interior villages of Hughes, Huslia and Allakaket/Alatna come together to celebrate. The Koyukuk Regional

Carnival rotates between the villages as the locals gather for dog-sled races, snowshoe races, dancing and just catching up with friends and relatives.

The 2008 carnival commemorated Huslia musher George Attla's 50 years of dog-sled racing. Attla, known as the Huslia Hustler, won the Fur Rendezvous World Championship in



Spring carnival is fun for all ages.

1958 and has since become the most successful sprint racer in history.

InterAct's Don and Brenda Ernst, missionaries in Huslia since 1990, joined in the festivities. Although they left the racing to the younger crowd ...

"I could have participated in the Old-Timers race", admitted Brenda, "but when I saw how far they had to run on snowshoes, I decided to just be a spectator and cheer them on instead!"

According to the Ernsts, the days are packed with competitions and visiting, while the evenings are filled with food and dancing. Unfortunately, alcohol and drugs are also a part of these celebrations.

This year, a drug-related murder brought the spring carnival to a sobering halt.

“Two brothers were high and got to fighting,” said Brenda, “and one accidentally killed the other. We got a call at 4 a.m. and rushed to the house.”

Brenda stayed with the women who sat by the body (waiting for the State troopers to arrive), while Don stood outside with the men. Brenda felt led by the Holy Spirit to move around the room and pray for each person. She prayed against nightmares, for strength to get through this tough situation and for peace.

She also shared the reason for her hope in times of despair:

“I’ve got a great big God who can get me through these great big problems,” Brenda encouraged her brokenhearted listeners. “I lean on Him, and so can you.”

The day after the murder, Don and several men from the village built the casket in his shop. Then, unexpectedly, he was asked to perform the funeral and

felt that the Lord gave him a special message for that day.



Don and a friend line the casket they built in Don’s wood shop.

The young man who was killed had been recently reading his Bible and had even penned Ezekiel 18:21 on his living room wall: *But if the wicked turn away from all the sins they have committed and keep all my decrees and do what is just and right, they will surely live; they will not die.*

Tying that verse in, Don spoke to the mourners in the packed room about their need to turn from their sins and to follow the living God.

“I used an illustration straight from their culture,” Don explained. “In our culture, when couples go for a stroll, they walk side-by-side. In Athabaskan culture, the man leads and the woman follows in his footsteps. Even if she thinks she knows a better way, she follows his trail. That’s how we need to be with God.”

Don ended the service, offering hope to his hearers from Jeremiah 29:11: *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”*

“We heard lots of people talk about the message afterward,” said Brenda.

“Because of the tragedy, the people were really listening.”

“In the midst of tragedy,” added Don, “there are always opportunities. I’m grateful God gave me the opportunity to share His Word and I pray that we will soon see results.”



Brenda and Don Ernst have served the Lord for the past 18 years in Huslia. Recently they have emphasized a special ministry to young couples.