



COURTESY ZEBEDEE NUNGA

ESKIMO MAN, INTERRUPTED

RIPPED FROM HIS PARENTS’
ARMS IN NUNAVIK AND
RAISED IN STERILE OTTAWA
SCHOOLS, ZEBEDEE NUNGA
CAME BACK TO THE INUIT
PATH FOR REDEMPTION

BY MARGO PFEIFF

In the crowded Puvirnituq Community Centre during the March Snow Festival, two teams of seven – a mix of elders, adults and students – clad in opposing red and black *silapaaq* parkas are sparring in a competitive new Inuktitut word game. “What does *qairmingaq* mean?” asks the moderator. After a buzz of consultation, eager hands pop up across the room, then a collective “ah” when the correct answer is exclaimed: “Seal leather used in last year’s kayak!” At the end of the friendly competition, points are tallied and prizes awarded.

This is the inaugural game of *Uvangaqqaq* – “me first” – aimed at demonstrating and rejuvenating the Inuktitut language in a fun way, especially among young Inuit whose vocabulary has been steadily shrinking. “It’s a kind of Eskimo Jeopardy,” chuckles Zebedee Nungak, the game’s creator and moderator, “and I’m the Alex Trebek of the North.”

Nungak has been a lot of things in his 60 years and this game is just the latest project in a remark-

able lifetime of standing up and fighting for the rights, language, traditions and dignity of Nunavik’s Inuit. By 19 he was the eloquent voice of the Northern Quebec Inuit working for the federal government in Ottawa and he remained a feisty fixture in politics over the next three decades. In the ‘70s, he was a negotiator for the James Bay Agreement, in the ‘80s, he was deeply involved with the aboriginal rights constitutional conferences, and in the ‘90s, served as both vice president and president of the Makivik Corporation. “I’ve crossed antlers with prime ministers, premiers and Québec separatists,” he says. Now, he’s an award-winning magazine writer, broadcaster and international speaker, whose sharp wit, unflinching honesty and keen ear for satire, brings often-thorny issues to public attention.

Born into a traditional Inuit family in Saputiligait, south of Puvirnituq, Nunavik, in 1951, Nungak grew up in igloos and summer tents. Then, at the age of nine, he and two other young boys, selected for their high IQ by the federal government, were whisked to Ottawa to receive a southern education and live in Anglophone family homes. The idea was to expunge them of Inuit culture and groom them to become northern leaders with a southern way of thinking.

Nungak excelled in every subject in the schools of what he calls “the Dick and Jane world of the Qallunaat.” His fellow Inuk student, Peter Ittinuar, remembers Nungak as an “odd boy.” “He was



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