Foundation announces 2020 Sabbatical Award recipients

One said she’s never had a real vacation. Another is looking forward to building a steam house and taking his family to Disneyland for the first time. Leaders of five Alaska nonprofit organizations and two tribal governments have been named as recipients of a 2020 Rasmuson Foundation Sabbatical Award.

Each recipient will have three to six months in the coming year to unplug from demanding jobs and rest, reflect and rejuvenate. The $40,000 awards go to the individual’s nonprofit or tribal employer to help cover the leader’s salary and costs of travel and other experiences during the months off work.

The Rasmussen Foundation Sabbatical Committee, which includes prior recipients, recently met to select the 2020 awardees.

Each recipient brings a long history of community service. They work at a senior center and a sexual trauma center, in public broadcasting and in healthcare. Three are from villages in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.

They demonstrated a pressing need for time away and established that their organizations will benefit by allowing others to step up.

“This group of nonprofit and tribal leaders is truly exceptional,” said Cathy Rasmuson, Foundation board vice chair and head of the Sabbatical Committee. “Their dedication to challenging jobs impressed the committee. The time away will allow them to return to work stronger than ever.”

[Read more about the sabbatical program at www.rasmuson.org/grants/sabbatical/.]
The 2020 recipients are:

Lenora Hootch, executive director of the Emmonak-based Yup'ik Women’s Coalition for the past 14 years and before that the founder and long-time executive director of the Emmonak Women’s Shelter, the only village-based domestic violence shelter in Alaska. She says she’s traveled for work, for medical issues and to fish camp but hasn’t been on a typical vacation. She plans to travel with her husband and some of their grandchildren and also do parka sewing. And she intends to get a different cell phone number so she can unplug, one of the requirements of the program.

Nancy Merriman, executive director of Alaska Primary Care Association in Anchorage for almost seven years and before that a senior program manager with the Denali Commission. She’s looking forward to spending time with her only daughter before she starts college, putting together photo albums and developing more advanced photography skills. “Mostly, I think my brain and body need to relax and reset,” she wrote in her application.

Keeley Olson, executive director of Standing Together Against Rape, the Anchorage-based intervention and advocacy organization. She’s worked at STAR 12 years, leading it since 2015. She plans to travel in the United States and to Europe. She expects that her time away will allow her executive team to build new skills and better prepare the organization for change.
**Tracy Simeon**, tribal administrator of the Native Village of Chuathbaluk, northeast of Bethel, for more than five years, and an Indian Child Welfare Act worker for many years before that. She says the tribal administrator’s job is taxing, the hours are long, and she needs time to recharge. She wants to spend more time with her family including her young son. She expects to go on a much-needed vacation.

**Michael Stevens**, tribal administrator of the Oscarville Traditional Council for a dozen years. Stevens has been a leader in a multi-partner effort to improve the infrastructure in his small village, which is near Bethel. He and his wife just completed a new home there for their family. He wants time to put in landscaping, build a steam house, make a new fish camp and do more hunting, fishing and berry picking. He is thinking about bringing the family to Disneyland. “We have done one other Seattle trip as a family vacation and multiple Anchorage trips for fun and shopping, but nothing big like going to California,” he wrote in his application.

**Darlene Supplee**, executive director of the North Star Council on Aging, which operates as the Fairbanks Senior Center. In her years there, the organization’s revenue and reach have expanded dramatically. That “requires an intensity and singular focus that are professionally challenging,” she says. She plans to spend time in Hawaii and “rediscover the full force of the personal passion I have for the business of seniors.”
Michael Wall, general manager/executive director/program director of the Kodiak Public Broadcasting System since 2003. He wants to step back and provide opportunity for others to try new approaches and test their own ideas. He plans a long bike trip with his wife to Ireland and Wales, Lower 49 travel and time with grandkids. He plans to stay with the radio station long term but eventually would like to settle back into being a full-time program director creating content.

Under the terms of the Sabbatical Program, each must commit to returning to their job for at least a year. Research shows that sabbaticals usually lead to much longer commitments to nonprofit work. Of those who have participated in Rasmuson Foundation sabbaticals, a 2016 survey found that most still worked for their same nonprofit organization five years later, and 70 percent still were working in the nonprofit sector, even if they changed jobs.

About the Foundation
Through grantmaking and initiatives, Rasmuson Foundation aims to promote a better life for all Alaskans. Main funding areas are the arts, housing, homelessness, education, healthcare and organizational development. The foundation was created in 1955 by Jenny Rasmuson to honor her late husband, E.A. Rasmuson.