

Northern Innovators



Jack Hébert The Homesteader

Outside the FlyByCafé in Bethel, Alaska, the ravens are flying backwards. A biting wind tolerable only to them is grounding the more advanced species and the machines that carry us.

A brewing ground blizzard in this Southwest Alaska hub is making it difficult for Jack Hébert to get to Atmautluak, a Yup'ik village of less than 300 people here on the flats of the Kuskokwim River Delta. Hébert, president and founder of the Cold Climate Housing Research Center in Fairbanks, is travelling to Atmautluak because members of the village's tribal council called him for advice. The villagers want to build their own homes and set up their own construction company.

Though they probably don't know it, the Natives are seeking help from a man who has homesteaded in a place so remote it makes their boardwalked village seem like a city, a guy whose energy made him the favorite interview of a big-time author who wrote one of the most controversial profiles of Alaska.

That man is Jack Hébert. Along with Aaron Cooke, an architectural designer with the center, Hébert will partner with the people of Atmautluak as they have assisted others in remote places like Anaktuvuk Pass, Quinhagak, Crooked Creek and Point Lay. In Anaktuvuk, center staffers have already helped design and build low-cost, fuel-sipping, semi-subterranean houses that meshed with the landscape and the lifestyles of the locals.

Working with Alaska Natives on sustainable building projects makes up a small percentage of the work Hébert and Cooke do for the center, but meeting with the inhabitants of Alaska's villages is their favorite task.

On this day, so stormy that school has been cancelled in Atmautluak, about 15 miles of open tundra away, a TV set in the Bethel café blasts an episode of Friends as other delayed travelers eat grilled sandwiches and sip coffee. Outside the window, small aircraft rock like babies, saved from blowing away by nylon straps tethering their wings to the ground.

Awaiting word on the status of the flight to Atmautluak, Hébert uses a pen to mark a report about a retrofit for a multi-apartment building in Unalakleet, near Nome on the coast of the Bering Sea. On his computer, Cooke has a few images of building styles that might work for Atmautluak.

Hébert and Cooke have traveled to Atmautluak before. In the summer, they stayed for three days, sleeping in a loft with cardboard padding beneath their sleeping bags.

"We asked them, 'What would you like to change about your houses?'" Hébert says. "We don't want to do it for them. We try to give these guys ownership of their projects."

With an easy smile and a gift for relating to people, the 65-year old Hébert looks a decade younger. About 30 years ago, Joe McGinniss featured Hébert and his then-wife Beth in his 1980 bestseller "Going to Extremes."

"I was 22 years old," he told McGinniss, "and I had always been a really restless person, and I had always hoped to find a way of life that might satisfy that restlessness. When I saw that country around the (Ambler River in the western Brooks Range), that was it. The restlessness just vanished and I felt instead a really deep inner piece. I knew right away what I wanted to do. I wanted to come back the next summer and build a cabin on the land and live there with Beth all winter long."

And that's what he did. In one of the coldest, hardest-to-get-to places in Alaska, Hébert honed his sense of appreciation for shelters by sleeping four winters in a 12-by-16-foot cabin hand-built with sod and logs. There, he developed homespun innovations like window shutters made of caribou skins and learned that dirt floors not lined with plastic will exhale water vapor all winter.

Later, as the owner of Taiga Woodcraft, he designed and built homes from the ground up in Interior Alaska. All the while, he wondered what houses designed for Seattle were doing in Alaska villages, and why there was so little research on northern

building techniques and materials. This curiosity became an obsession.

In the late 1990s, Hébert gathered a group of Alaska builders and established a nonprofit center in which people study housing techniques and materials designed for places like Alaska. He became president and CEO of the Cold Climate Housing Research Center at the same time he was building homes. He still has the passion to design and build, he says, but his company has not created a new home in three years.

That's because he's been in places like the Fly By Café. With the wind strengthening, Hébert and Cooke's afternoon flight to Atmautluak seems unlikely. Finally, the call comes from the regional air carrier that the flight to Atmautluak is cancelled. Hébert and Cooke decide that Cooke will stay overnight in Bethel and try to reach Atmautluak again tomorrow.

Hébert has to return to the city, with a commitment to speak at a meeting in Anchorage the next day with regional leaders from Southwest Alaska and Sen. Lisa Murkowski. There, he will show his skills for relating to people whether sleeping above their washeteria on cardboard or sipping coffee served on a platter covered with white linen.

His message: Alaska's extreme location on the globe is not the disadvantage most people think it is.

"Because of our low population numbers and vast land, we have room to expand up here," he says. "There are some pretty restless and creative folks up here. And if you combine that with the wisdom of people who have lived here for thousands of years, it's quite a combination."

"The people who were here first, they knew how to live here. I just want to set the stage for a lot of creativity."