

Atlla

VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE



George Attla (L) and his grandnephew Joe Bifelt (R)

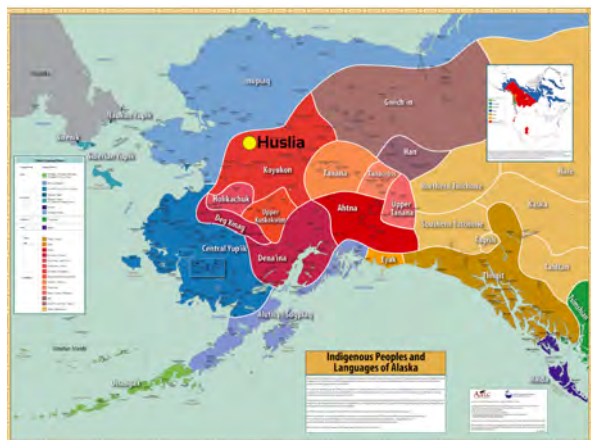
IN THEIR WORDS

"I realize that it's not about me, I'm not doing this for me, I'm doing this for my community, for my family, my friends, my nieces and nephews - for them to have someone to look up to, someone to root for."

- Joe Bifelt (Koyukon-Athabaskan)

"I never had any doubt in my mind that I could win dog races or come out on top of anything, if I put my mind to it. I had a lot of confidence in the way I was brought up. My dad was the type of man that you couldn't tell him I can't do it. He said there was always a way. You have to believe in yourself, you have to be proud of where you came from."

- George Attla (Koyukon-Athabaskan)



Huslia, Alaska. Alaska Native Language Center. Map source: University of Alaska Fairbanks, <http://www.uaf.edu/anla/collections/map/>

PROGRAM SYNOPSIS

ATTLA tells the gripping but little-known story of George Attla, an Alaska Native dogsled racer who, with one good leg and fierce determination, rose to international fame and became a legendary sports hero. Part dog whisperer, ingenious businessman, and teenage heartthrob, George defied characterization during a unique period of history when Western education, economies, and culture penetrated the Alaskan village lifestyle and forever changed the state with the discovery of oil in the late 1960's.

ATTLA interweaves George's story into the final chapter of his life, as he emerges from retirement to train his twenty-year-old grandnephew, Joe, to restore a village tradition by competing in the world's largest dogsled sprint race that in recent years has few Native racers. The increasing rates of substance abuse and suicides in George's village and others across the state drive George's desire to bring resilience to his community in the way he knows best - dogs. Joe demonstrates a resolve to learn from an aging village elder while also revealing the challenges of balancing a Native identity within a Western system of education and work in the remote, harsh interior of Alaska.



Huslia, Alaska; 260 miles northwest of Fairbanks & 60 miles south of the Arctic Circle; population 266.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I first learned about George Attla while reading an Alaskan newspaper, and was immediately intrigued. Here was this 80-year-old who had dominated his sport for decades, was considered a rockstar-like, living Alaskan legend, and yet, was just beginning a new chapter of life. After years in the spotlight, Attla had returned to his village of Huslia, Alaska, and had founded a program in his late son's name to introduce a new generation to dog mushing. This was a unique form of cultural revitalization and I wanted to know more.

What I found out soon after was a filmmaker's dream: That very year, George would be training his young grandnephew, Joe Bifelt, to compete in the same race where George's career had begun. Their time together over the next few months was touching - it was an honor to document such a unique intergenerational relationship.

When George passed away, Joe, George's partner, Kathy, George's family, and the entire team supporting George and Joe's dream of racing came together to ensure that Joe would make it to the championship race. And he did!

Though the film touches on loss and hardship, ultimately *ATTLA* is about finding one's identity; from a young George, returning to his village in 1951 as a TB survivor and discovering dogsled racing as a way to realize his ambitions; to a young Joe in contemporary Alaska, exploring the same sport as a means to forge a closer relationship with his elders and their shared cultural traditions.

Throughout, I've been struck with how the economic and cultural forces of colonization in Alaska that have occurred in the span of George's life are reflected in every stage of his career. Working with state archives, launching a community campaign for archival footage, and conducting extensive interviews with family members and colleagues has been central to exploring these themes in a way only film can.



Catharine Axley



Filmmaking team and participants at Attla's Premiere in Fairbanks, AK: Evon Peter, Kathy Turco, Amanda Attla, Catharine Axley, Joe Bifelt.

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BY THE NUMBERS



(L) George with his dogs at Fur Rondy, 1970. Photo by Maxine Vehlow. (R) George coaches junior dog mushers at the 2014 New Year's Youth Races in Huslia. Photo by Leona Starr.

1. Born in 1933 into a subsistence lifestyle in interior Alaska, George lived through a childhood bout with tuberculosis that required him to be hospitalized for 9 years and left him with a fused kneecap. His leg and cultural isolation from family and community made the transition back into subsistence living challenging, but Attla soon discovered a niche in racing dogs.
2. When George was a boy growing up in Huslia, there were 15-20 dog teams in the community. When Attla was filmed, the number of dog teams in Huslia had decreased to just 4 teams.
3. The village of Huslia raised \$600 to send George to his first race in Anchorage for the Fur Rendezvous World Championships in 1958. He won! He waited and trained for 4 years until he returned in 1962 to win again. He went on to win another 8 times between 1968 and 1982, becoming the musher with the most wins to date (10 total).
4. George also won 8 North American World Championships and 9 ISDRA unlimited class medals. His book, *Everything I Know about Training and Racing Sled Dogs*, is still considered the musher's bible. In 2000 he was awarded the Best Musher of the 20th Century and voted No. 2 Alaskan Athlete of the Century. In 2007, he was inducted into the first Alaska Sports Hall of Fame. 2008 marked his 50th year of competitive sled dog racing. In April 2011, at the age of 78, he won the Bergman Sam Memorial Koyukuk River Championship in Huslia. He raced his last race-Huslia's Old Man's Race--at 80 years old!

Attla

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BY THE NUMBERS, cont'd

5. In the last years of his life, George founded the Frank Attla Youth & Sled Dog-Care Mushing Program in collaboration with Huslia to introduce a new generation to dog mushing as a sport and cultural activity. Attla worked with the community and youth in Huslia until his death in 2015. A new youth dog mushing program inspired by Attla, A-CHILL (Alaska Care and Husbandry Instruction for Lifelong Living), was launched in 2016 in interior Alaska. The program provides young people with hands-on experience working with sled dogs under the guidance and mentorship of experienced mushers and Native elders. Teachers collaborate with community members and through A-CHILL have impacted hundreds of K-12 students in 16 schools across two school districts. For more information on these programs, visit the Resource section.
6. In 2020, Joe accepted a job teaching 4th grade at the Jimmy Huntington School in Huslia. He's excited to continue racing dogs and inspiring students in his "mushing-themed" classroom.



(L) Huslia's Jimmy Huntington School A-CHILL students taking young sled dogs for a walk on a frozen lake in 2018. Photo by Mickey Kenny.
(R) Eagle School A-CHILL students learning how to canicross with Tok dogs. Photograph by Ira Hardy.

Lesson 1: Identity Mapping

Estimated Time: 1 class period

Essential Questions

- How is one's identity formed by life experiences?
- How can I create something to celebrate my identity?
- How does sharing with others help me to value our commonalities and differences?

Understanding Goals

Students will understand that:

- the hardships that an individual faces can make them stronger
- we can know others and ourselves more fully by celebrating our achievements and unique identities
- the ability to persevere in the face of challenges is essential to success

Visible Thinking Routine: Step Inside

Before watching the film, show students the Visible Thinking Card of the image of George with his dogs, and have students "Step Inside" the character of George, using the following questions to guide their thinking:

*What might this person perceive (be aware of)?
What might this person know about or believe?
What might the person care about?*

Class Activities

After viewing the film:

Activity 1

- Break students into pairs or small groups, and hand out the **Identity Snapshot Cards**. Each card features a character from the film, and a quote that illuminates a personality trait, event, success, and/or hardship that helped form George's **identity**. Have students read and discuss their quote using this guiding question: *What does this quote tell you about George's identity? Explain your thinking.*
- Next, as a whole group, have students share their ideas from the Identity Snapshot activity to discuss: *What aspects of George's life do you think made a big impact on his identity?*
- Using **George's Identity Map template**, have students brainstorm character traits, people, and events to build a web of the different aspects of George's life that may have contributed to his identity. Have students explain their thinking, drawing on evidence from the film and the quotations from the Identity Snapshots.
- Ask students: *Which details from the map may have contributed to George's success? Which details from the map describe a hardship or challenge? Do you think the challenges George faced made him stronger? Why? How did George show **perseverance**?* Discuss with students the idea that the ability to persevere in the face of challenges is essential to success.

Materials (in Supplemental Resources):

- Step Inside Visible Thinking Card
- Identity Snapshot Discussion Cards
- George's Identity Map template
- Student Identity Map template
- Circle of Identity Activity description
- "I am From" poem template

Vocabulary

perseverance
identity



Lesson 1: Identity Mapping, cont'd

Activity 2

- Next, have students create a concept map of descriptors of their own lives that have contributed to their identities using the **Student Identity Map template**. It may be helpful for the teacher to model how to create his/her own Identity Map before having students create their own.
 - Students should write his/her name in the center circle. Outer circles are grouped into three categories for students to write a word or phrase that captures elements of his/her identity:
 - **Personality/Physical Traits:** Students list attributes that helped shape them and how they interact in the world, such as gender, race, cultural or ethnic background, personality or physical traits. For example, one circle might contain the word "girl", another the word "tall", another might include "brave". As an additional step, students may be asked to include words or phrases that other people use to identify them.
 - **People:** Students list people that have inspired or shaped their identities. These could be, family members, role models, mentors, friends, teachers...
 - **Events:** Students list important events that have happened in their life, both exciting and challenging. (E.g. moving to a new school, enduring an injury, meeting their best friend).

Encourage students to add additional circles if they need to!

Activity 3

- Have students share their concept maps with one another by using the **Circles of Identity Activity** (see Supplemental Resources for activity description).
- Debrief the experience. Ask students, "Did you learn something new or surprising about one of your classmates? About yourself?" Discuss with students how sharing with others can help bring value to our commonalities and differences.

Extensions: Have students create a piece of artwork that celebrates their identity. Using the "I am From" poem template, have students create a poem exploring the specific contributing parts of their identities. Students can illustrate their poems, or turn them into a short book, iMovie, or piece of visual art.

Lesson 2: Building Knowledge Pathways

Estimated Time: 1 class period

Essential Questions

- How can relationships become stronger by learning a new skill?
- How does important learning take place outside of the classroom?
- How does learning something new impact the wellness of an individual or a community?

Understanding Goals

Students will understand that:

- teachers can be community members, family members, Elders, and other “non-conventional” educators
- traditions are preserved by passing down knowledge from human to human
- by learning new things, we strengthen individual and community wellbeing

Materials (in Supplemental Resources):

- See, Think, Wonder Visible Thinking Card
- Building My Knowledge Pathway worksheet

Vocabulary

traditions
values
wellbeing
non-conventional

Visible Thinking Routine: See, Think, Wonder

Before watching the film, show students the Visible Thinking Card of the image of George and Joe, and have students use the following questions to to guide their thinking:

What do you see?
What do you think about what you see?
What do you wonder about?



Discussion Questions

While viewing the film, pause to ask the students:

- (Video Clip 00:03:25-00:05:20) - Here we see Joe on a plane to Huslia, describing his decision to go and learn to “run dogs” that winter. *What reasons does he give for wanting to go? What does his decision say about what Joe **values**? Do you agree with his decision?*
- (Video Clip 00:05:26-00:06:44) - In the film Joe says, “Schools nowadays, they didn’t really teach about our culture, instead learning about somewhere thousands of miles away. Back in the village, we are losing a lot of knowledge & stories, our history.” *What does this statement say about what Joe values about education? Why is it important to learn about culture in school? Explain.*
- (Video Clip 00:21:34-00:22:54) - Here we see Joe and George in a community meeting, where community members express their concerns over the repercussions of drugs and alcohol coming into the village. Joe talks about the loss of cultural traditions. By showing interest in the tradition of dog mushing, Joe is taking the initiative to strengthen his connection to his people and culture. *Why and how can the learning of a **tradition** help strengthen a community or family? How might learning a new tradition contribute to the **wellbeing** of individuals and communities?*

Lesson 2: Building Knowledge Pathways, cont'd

Class Activities

After viewing the film:

- Share and discuss these quotes from the film with students:
 - Jackie Wholecheese (Huslia community member speaking during the community gathering):
"We have elders here, that if you sit down with them, talk to them, one-on-one, they'll tell you what happened a long time ago, what they used to go through. We have to keep and cherish our traditions." [Time Stamp: 00:22:19]
 - George Attla:
"I learned everything I can by listening - listening to the greatest dog men out of Huslia, like Jimmy Huntington, Bobby Vent, Cue Bifelt...I had a lot to learn, you know. So the way to run dogs was handed down from one person to the next. That's how you learn how to run dogs, from somebody else." [Time Stamp: 00:26:18]
- Ask students: *Can you think of a skill or tradition that has been passed down in your family?*
- Give students time to share their ideas, and then ask: "If you could learn more about a tradition or skill, what would you like to learn? Who might you be able to learn from?"
- Discuss the idea of "**non-conventional**" sources of knowledge- for example, an individual who helps learning take place outside of the school walls, who might not work at a school, but who is an expert at something and likes to share that knowledge with other people.
- Using the **Building My Knowledge Pathway worksheet**, students will identify someone in their family, extended family, or community that they would like to learn something from and outline a plan to develop a pathway with this person.
- They will then spend time learning something new, and will share their learning with others by creating a product that celebrates their new knowledge gained from the lengthened relationship.
 - Examples: Slideshow, Podcast, Digital Story, Video, eBook, class book
- Celebrate your students' hard work by hosting an Open House, where students get to share their projects with families and the school community.

Lesson 3: Caught Between Two Cultures

Estimated Time: 1 class period

Essential Questions:

- How does culture shape our identity?
- How and why do cultures change over time?
- What is cultural assimilation? What is cultural resilience?

Understanding Goals:

Students will understand that:

- Cultures change, develop, evolve, and adapt over time.
- Cultures are made up of characteristics that are more easily observed, such as dress, language, and foods, and underlying characteristics, like values, family roles, and beliefs.

Visible Thinking Routine: Looking 10 x 2

Before watching the film, use the Comparison Cards in Resource section, and have students carefully observe the two images on their card:

- 1) After 30 seconds of looking, make a list of 10 words or phrases about any aspect of the picture.
- 2) Look at the image again for 30 seconds and list 10 more words or phrases.

Materials (in Supplemental Resources):

- Looking 10 x 2 Comparison Cards
- Picture Comparison Venn Diagram template

Vocabulary

assimilation
resilience
preservation



Discussion Questions

While viewing the film, pause to ask the students:

- (Video Clip 23:50-24:54) - Here we see a clip of George talking about how dog teams were used in Huslia when he was a kid. He says, "[Dogs] were necessary to get through life." *In what ways did people use dog teams? (Haul wood, go out in the country and trap). Why were dogs especially important to George?*
- (Video Clip 24:58-26:39) - In this clip, we learn more about the arrival of the snowmachine to rural Alaska. Snow mobiles (called "snowmachines" in Alaska), changed the way of life and mode of transportation for many people. Put yourself in the shoes of a person from Huslia when snowmachines were gaining popularity. *Would you choose to use the new technology--the snowmachine--or stick with the traditional technology--the dog team--for transportation? Explain. What reasons does George give for wanting to continue mushing dogs when others started switching over to snowmachines?*
- (Video Clip 00:21:34-00:22:54) - In this clip, the community of Huslia is gathered for a community meeting. Joe talks about the loss of cultural traditions and his own inability to speak his language (Koyukon-Athabascan) fluently. Tell students that **cultural assimilation** is the process whereby individuals or groups of a different cultural heritage are absorbed into the dominant culture of a society. In Alaska, this assimilation was forced upon the Indigenous people by Westerners, resulting in the loss of language and traditions amongst Indigenous peoples, and introducing other problems with drug and alcohol as we see the community discussing in the film. Ask students: *Do you, or does someone in your family, communicate in another language? Brainstorm: What does language help us do? (communicate, learn, teach, tell stories, pass on history, joke, describe). How do these factors help us to understand the significance of language loss within Indigenous communities? How might Joe's experience learning from George be different if both men hadn't been impacted by the loss of their language?*

Lesson 3: Caught Between Two Cultures, cont'd

Class Activities

After viewing the film:

- Have students use their observations from the 10 x 2 visible thinking routine that they completed before the film by adding details to the **Picture Comparison Venn Diagram template**. It may be helpful to model how to compare and contrast the images before having students work independently.
- Debrief each image pair - Planes, Boots, and Dog Team/Snowmachine - as a class, having students share what major details they compared and contrasted between traditional and modern.
- Ask students: *Which characteristics from these three image pairs have stayed the same? Which have changed? What might this tell us about how a culture may change, evolve, and adapt?*
- Show students the Iceberg Analogy image (link available in Resource section). Explain that some characteristics of a culture are more easily observed by an outsider, such as dress, language, and foods, while other underlying characteristics, like values, family roles, and beliefs, may appear "below the surface." Have students categorize the ideas that came up from the Picture Comparison activity.
- Next, show students the Athabascan Values poster (see below, or find link in Resource section) and discuss the meaning of each value.
- Ask students: *Can you think of examples from the film that illustrate each value?* (For example, both George and Joe demonstrate the value of Hard Work in how they both are determined to reach their goals. Joe is learning traditional knowledge from George, demonstrating the values Respect for Knowledge, Respect for Elders, and also Family Relations and Unity.)



Athabascan Cultural Values

- Self-sufficiency and Hard Work
- Care and Provision for the Family
- Family Relations and Unity
- Love for Children
- Village Cooperation and Responsibility to Village
- Humor
- Honesty and Fairness
- Sharing and Caring
- Respect for Elders and Others
- Respect for Knowledge & Wisdom from Life Experiences
- Respect for the Land and Nature
- Practice of Native Traditions
- Honoring Ancestors
- Spirituality



Source: <http://ankn.uaf.edu/ANCR/Values/athabascan.html>

Lesson 3: Caught Between Two Cultures, cont'd

Class Activities

- As you discuss the Athabascan values, explore what they have in common with the various cultural backgrounds and value systems of your students.
- Return to the idea of cultural **assimilation**. Ask students: What could be done to combat the loss of knowledge, stories, language and traditions of the Indigenous people of Alaska?
- Discuss cultural **resilience**--how an individual or group may respond to adversity and overcome negative situations by tapping into their culture's traditional ways of living and being. Ask students: How does the story that is told in the film show cultural resilience?
- Help students understand that while certain aspects of a culture will evolve, change, adapt, and develop by staying grounded in cultural values and drawing upon the knowledge of Elders, that traditions can be **preserved** for generations to come.

Extensions:

- Have students explore their own cultural values in a more in-depth manner by doing a Value Continuum or Magnetic Statements activity (see links in Resource section).
- Have students illustrate a value important to their community, family, or culture. Make a class quilt.



(L) Nulato's Andrew K. Demoski School A-CHILL students taking care of sled dogs in their yard in 2017. Photo by Amy Graham.
(R) Walter Northway School A-CHILL students running 2-dog teams in Tok in 2019. Photo by Doug Richards.

RESOURCES

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS:

- Alaska Film Archives at the Rasmuson Library - <http://library.uaf.edu/film-archives>
- University of Alaska, Fairbanks - <https://www.uaf.edu/>
- Alaska Humanities Forum - <https://www.akhf.org/>
- Alaska Moving Image Preservation Association - <http://www.amipa.org/>

More about George Attla & his legacy:

- Making of a Champion - <https://attlamakingofachampion.com/>
- Alaska Sports Hall of Fame - <https://alaskasportshall.org/inductee/george-atla/>
- Frank Attla Youth & Sled Dog Care Mushing Program - <https://attlamakingofachampion.com/frank-attla-youth-sled-dog-care-mushing-program>
- A-CHILL (Alaska Care & Husbandry Instruction for Lifelong Living) Program - <https://www.achill.life/>

Educational Resources referenced in this Discussion Guide:

- Project Zero Visible Thinking Routines - <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/visible-thinking>
- School Reform Initiative's Circles of Identity Protocol - <https://schoolreforminitiative.org/doc/paseo.pdf>
- Iceberg Analogy - <http://ankn.uaf.edu/IKS/iceberg.html>
- Cultural Resilience Resource Guide - <https://tribalcollegejournal.org/14-4-cultural-resilience-resource-guide/>
- Magnetic Statements Activity - <https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/d9908066f654727934df7bf4f50761bf>
- Human Values Continuum Activity - <https://www.ufic.ufl.edu/pd/downloads/ici-Activities/human%20values.pdf>
- Alaska Native Knowledge Network- Athabascan Values - <http://ankn.uaf.edu/ANCR/athabascan.html>

RESOURCES, cont'd

Lesson Handouts in Supplemental Resources:

- Lesson 1 - pages 1-10
- Lesson 2 - pages 11-12
- Lesson 3 - pages 13-16



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This Viewer Discussion Guide was developed by Robin Child, Assistant Professor of Elementary Education at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. A dedicated K-12 educator in rural Alaska for many years, Robin is passionate about connecting children with their community, identity, place, and culture.

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For more information, please visit www.visionmakermedia.org.

Educational resources for this film are available at

<https://www.visionmakermedia.org/films/attla>

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