

# FINDING REFUGE

## VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE



**Top:** Isabella Blatchford (Sugpiaq/Alutiiq/Inupiaq), Gary Blatchford, and Alex Sugak (Alutiiq) cross the land that connects Refuge Rock to Kodiak Island. Photo by: Torsten Kjellstrand/Dog Mountain, LLC.

**Above:** Old Harbor, Alaska, the small village nearest Refuge Rock. Photo by: Torsten Kjellstrand/Dog Mountain LLC

**Right:** Isabella Blatchford near Refuge Rock off the coast of Kodiak Island. Photo by: Torsten Kjellstrand/Dog Mountain LLC



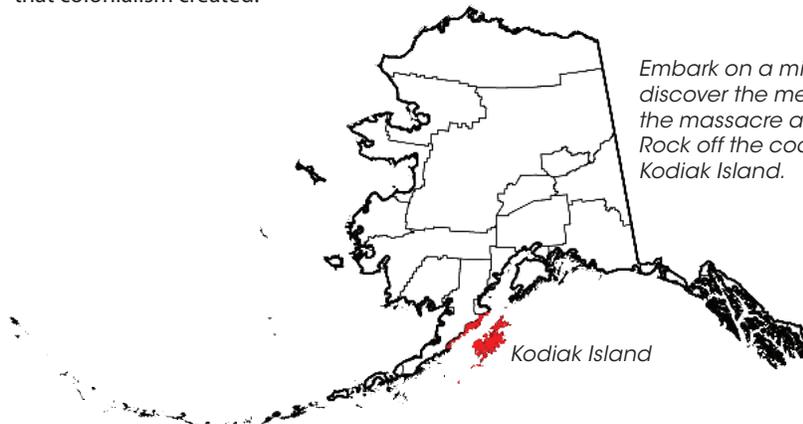
### Program Synopsis

The efforts of one dying woman to preserve her Native culture don't end when she passes, but prompts a renewal in finding pride in that culture. She confronts the violent event over two centuries ago that began the destruction of her people and the shame that colonialism created.

### In Their Words

“Shame is such a big word. In any Alaskan Native culture, you're born with it. And I still have a hard time understanding how you can have this innate feeling and it goes back for generations.”

—Isabella Blatchford,  
(Sugpiaq/Alutiiq/Inupiaq)



Embark on a mission to discover the meaning of the massacre at Refuge Rock off the coast of Kodiak Island.

## Producer's Notes



### Torsten Kjellstrand

We were completely taken by Isabella's strength, courage and pride as she confronted Stage IV breast cancer, as well as the deep wounds of a brutal massacre of her Sugpiaq ancestors some two and a half centuries ago.

As we got to know Isabella, she told us about Refuge Rock's role in her people's history. She also told us why the events of 1784 still haunted her and got in the way of the Sugpiaq peoples' efforts to live with pride in their heritage.

She then told us that she was going to make the difficult trip to remote Refuge Rock so that she could reclaim, for herself and her people, the island and the pride that she felt was lost there. We knew that her story needed to be told, and that we were going to tell it with a grace and honesty that honored Isabella's heroic struggle. We hope she's proud of our efforts.

## By the Numbers



*On location in Alaska. Photo by Christian Glawe.*

1. Kodiak Island is a part of the Kodiak Archipelago, or "group of islands," that spans approximately 177 miles and is about 30 miles from the mainland in the Gulf of Alaska. Kodiak Island is the second largest island in the United States.
2. In 1784 the Russians, under the leadership of Grigory Ivanovich Shelekhov, arrived at Refuge Rock with two ships armed with cannons and weaponry, and they attacked the Alutiiqs, many of whom had come to Refuge Rock to hide. Hundreds of Sugpiaq/Alutiiqs were killed (reported deaths vary between 500-2,500) and others were taken hostage and put into servitude.
3. During the 1800s the Kodiak Archipelago was home to over 13,000 people living in 60 Alutiiq villages.
4. Russians named the people of the Kodiak Islands "Aleuts," but the people identify themselves as Sugpiaq or Alutiiq.
5. There are 10 federally recognized tribes within the Kodiak Archipelago and 229 in Alaska.
6. In 1867 the United States purchased Alaska from the Russians for \$7.2 million dollars. The deal was called "Seward's Folly" by many after the then current Secretary of State William H. Seward who was the driving force behind the purchase.
7. Following the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1993, the Kodiak Area Native Association (KANA) received a \$1.5 million grant from the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill Trustee Council to develop a state-of-the-art repository, a place where artifacts from the spill area could be cared for, and a regional research facility.
8. Breast cancer is one of the leading causes of death among Native Alaskan women.
9. Today, more than 4,000 Alutiiq (many of whom prefer to be called by the ancestral name for their people: Sugpiaq) people live in 15 rural villages, five towns and each of Alaska's major cities. There are about 1,800 Alutiiq/Sugpiaq in the Kodiak Archipelago.

### Discussion Questions

1. *Finding Refuge* traces the journey of two people, Sven Haakanson and Isabella Blatchford, as they try to understand how history has shaped their current lives and what it means to be Alutiiq. Explore and discuss the differences in how each individual approached this journey and what they learned.
2. Central to the story of the film is the story of Isabella's struggle with Stage IV breast cancer. Why do you think this diagnosis led her to confront the shame she has felt about being Native? Consider your life or the lives of your loved ones. Have there been any similar life-threatening events that led to some unexpected change in the course of life for you or a family member?
3. Isabella said she wanted to go to Refuge Rock to "bury the shame of the past." As a group or individually, consider how this journey helped her to put this shame to rest. What did she learn? How did she use the past to help her deal with the present and future?
4. The Russian Invasion of Kodiak Island in 1784 has rippled through the generations of Alutiiq people for more than 200 years. As a group, explore and discuss some of the cause and effect implications of this historical moment. What happened? What changes did the Russians bring? What has contributed to this ongoing sense of shame in being Alutiiq?
5. On the Alutiiq Museum website, the museum states, "We also believe that accurate knowledge of the past is essential to the health of modern communities." Consider this statement and, as a group or individually, explore and discuss how you think knowledge of the past can bring about a greater health and well-being to the communities that have suffered from such historical trauma.

### Suggested Activities

1. Create a timeline of Russian activity in the area of the Kodiak Archipelago. Why did they come? What did they do? What were the long-term results?
2. Create a similar timeline of known archeological evidence of the presence of early Alutiiq ancestors on Kodiak Island and the surrounding islands. How did they live? What was life on Kodiak Island like prior to colonization by the Russians?
3. Examine the differences between the early lifestyles of the "first people" of the Kodiak Islands and then compare them with how people live today. What are the similarities? What are the differences? Consider housing, economy, cultural practices, family and social systems, etc.
4. Historical trauma can have very adverse effects on the generations of people to follow. Conduct research on the current health and well-being of the Kodiak Island Alutiiq. How are the people doing? What steps are they taking to ensure the health of future generations?
5. Do an Internet search for historical reports of the Russian arrival on Kodiak Island. Print three or four accounts of the event that took place on Aug. 14, 1786. Study the language used to learn more about how history can alter based on who is reporting that history. What differences do you see in the language? How are terms like invasion, hostility, massacre, etc. used? A simple example is, how can an area be "discovered" when people are already living there?



Alex Sugak (Alutiiq) talks with Isabella Blatchford (Sugpiaq/Alutiiq/Inupiaq) after they walked across to Refuge Rock, also known as Awu'ak, where Russian fur traders massacred Alutiiqs in the 1780s. Isabella felt that reaching the island was crucial to her personal discovery of her Alutiiq heritage. Photo by: Torsten Kjellstrand/Dog Mountain, LLC.



Alex Sugak (Alutiiq) holds a Kodiak Brown Bear skull he found as he was leading Isabella Blatchford (Sugpiaq/Alutiiq/Inupiaq) to Refuge Rock. Photo by: Torsten Kjellstrand/Dog Mountain, LLC.



Isabella Blatchford gets quiet and contemplative during her trip to Refuge Rock. For years, she'd been dreaming of replacing her sense of shame with one of pride, in part by going to Refuge Rock, where her people were brutally massacred during the colonization of Kodiak Island by Russian fur traders. Photo by: Torsten Kjellstrand/Dog Mountain LLC.

### Resources

#### About the Film

<http://www.visionmakermedia.org/films/finding-refuge>

#### About the Tribes

<http://alutiiqmuseum.org>

#### History & Education

<http://www.koc.alaska.edu/library.asp>

<http://www.city.kodiak.ak.us/library>

<http://www.nativevillageofportlions.org/>



Much of the history of Russian movement onto Kodiak Island can be found at the Baranov Museum, where Jamie Francis filmed objects from the time of the massacre at Refuge Rock.



Old Harbor sits on a shelf at the southeast end of Kodiak Island, reachable only by boat or plane. Life here still revolves around fishing, hunting, the weather, and the turn of the seasons. This is where Isabella met resident Alex Shugak, and they left from Old Harbor to get to Refuge Rock. It is also where Sven Haakanson grew up.

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This Viewer Discussion Guide was developed by Jamie Lee, an author and former instructor at the Oglala Lakota College, where she taught for five years. Lee has a Master's in Human Development and has been a communications trainer and an educator for the past 30 years. Her stories and articles have appeared in *The South Dakota Review*, *Winds of Change Magazine* and several other anthologies. She has published three non-fiction books along with one novel and a collection of writings from Oglala Lakota College students. Her first novel, *Washaka: The Bear Dreamer*, was a PEN USA finalist in 2007. Lee has written over 70 documentary programs including Public Radio's landmark 52-part Native music series, *Oyate Ta Olowan: The Songs of the People*.

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Educational resources for this film are available at <http://www.visionmakermedia.org/films/finding-refuge>.

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