

## 3 A gapper's first-hand account

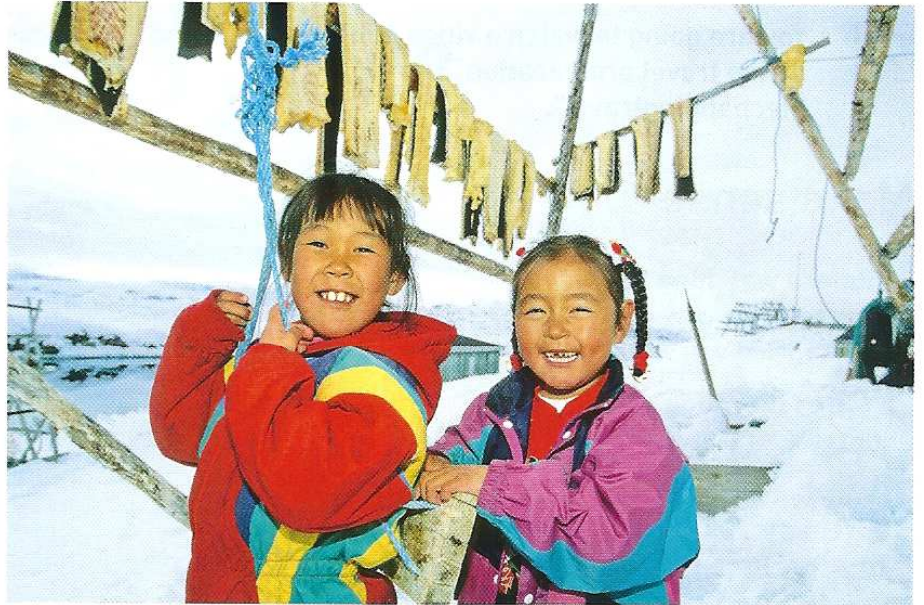
### Postcard from the edge

Jennifer Davies from Wales spent her gap year in a village in the Canadian Arctic Circle. She is now studying medicine in London.

After 20 hours' travelling on three different planes, I was finally nearing my destination. From up in the air I searched for any sign of civilisation in the hundreds of miles of lakes and trees. I nearly missed Aklavik, which from the plane looked the size of my thumbnail.

It was here in Aklavik, a remote village in the Canadian Arctic Circle, with its 350 inhabitants, one grocery store and the snowy, bitter-cold wilderness as the only distraction, that I first became interested in medicine.

I had won a place on a gap-year programme to help out at the local school. The village of Aklavik is surrounded by breathtaking beauty, but is plagued by high levels of unemployment and by drug and alcohol abuse. As a teaching assistant, my job was to help out with everything from science to PE lessons, but in practice I found myself teaching. I also offered one-to-one tutoring for students with special needs. Many are suffering from the effects of foetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), a big problem within the Inuit and Gwich'in community. Foetal alcohol syndrome is the name



Inuit girls playing amidst drying pieces of shark flesh

given to the physical and mental damage caused to babies when women drink during pregnancy. The high unemployment rate here leads many people to turn to alcohol and drugs, and their children are affected.

I tutored one girl who had the condition quite severely. At 13, she had a reading age of just six. I worked with her on practical skills such as cookery, finance skills and sewing. She was amazing. It was rewarding to watch her grow, but sad to see how something that could be prevented continued to affect people throughout their lives.

During that year I learned a lot about the community and their way of life, but also about myself. The town offered little entertainment, so we would read, play guitar and play board

games. We went for walks. You only had to walk for five minutes and it felt like you were at the end of the world. The simple life is one of the best.

Since I didn't have the right A-levels to apply for a medicine course, at the end of my gap year I applied to do a law degree. But something inside me knew it was the wrong move and I changed my mind. I went back home to Wales and spent a year doing a chemistry A-level, therefore opening the doors to a career in medicine.

In Aklavik I learned to be more versatile<sup>1</sup> and resilient<sup>2</sup>. The small things don't bother me anymore because I know there are bigger problems. It's my dream to go back to Aklavik and work as a doctor.

*The Guardian*, August 16, 2008

1. capable of doing many things competently

2. (of a person) recovering easily and quickly from misfortune or illness