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Dreamers and Doers

TOURISM BUSINESS HELPS COMMUNITY

October 01, 2010

“It is true of the nation, as of the individual, that the greatest doer must also be a great dreamer.”

—Theodore Roosevelt

Lawrence Gaffaney’s commute to work is filled with soaring mountains, crystal clear water, and majestic bald eagles—a far cry from the view on his way to work in Manhattan a year ago. “It’s a much more enjoyable commute rather than staring into someone’s armpit on the subway or at another building outside the window,” says the CEO of the Huna Totem Corporation in Juneau, Alaska.



Lawrence Gaffaney, left, and Tyler Hickman rely on Alaska Natives to staff their tourist destination.
Photo: Ian Wagreich

Gaffaney, who was the managing partner and CEO of a private equity firm for seven years before moving to Alaska, runs an Alaska Native village corporation owned by approximately 1,300 shareholders with ancestral ties to the Huna Tlingit tribe. The company’s largest operation is Hoonah-based Icy Strait Point—a private cruise ship destination focused around Tlingit culture and history and Alaska’s wilderness.

Icy Strait Point has been a lifeline for the community, providing a much-needed alternative source of income for locals afflicted by a downturn in fishing and logging. Huna Totem invested more than \$35 million to build the port and refurbish buildings, including the salmon cannery built in 1912.

The 23-acre Icy Strait Point opened in 2004 and bills itself as an “authentic Alaskan experience.” Visitors can shop, eat, see untamed wilderness, be exposed to native culture, and take part in more than 20 different tours—everything from whale or bear watching to riding the world’s largest and highest zip line.

One of the immediate issues facing Gaffaney is declining traffic because of the cruise ship industry’s pullback in Alaska. Visitors from 63 ships will stop in Icy Strait Point this year, down from 69 in 2009 and well below the high of 80 ships in 2007. In addition, since the cruise ship industry plans two years out, recent improvements in the regulatory and economic climate will take a few years to become evident. Hickman and Gaffaney have been working to improve guest offerings and operational efficiencies and market Icy Strait Point as an alternative to larger ports.

Another challenge is finding staff. Ninety percent of Icy Strait Point’s 147 employees are indigenous Alaskans. But Hoonah has a population of only 900. “A lot of other tourist companies have imported workers from other parts of the country, but our guides grew up here,” says Tyler Hickman, vice president of Icy Strait Point. “We rely primarily on Alaska Natives. Importing workers is not an option.” Instead, Hickman uses employees in multiple roles and has gotten smarter about scheduling.

To share your Dreamers and Doers story, e-mail Greg Galdabini at ggaldabi@uschamber.com (<mailto:ggaldabi@uschamber.com>) or call 202-463-5563.

Member Facts

Company: Huna Totem Corporation (Icy Strait Point)

President and CEO: Lawrence Gaffaney

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Chamber Member Since: 2008

Founded: 1973

Number of Employees: 147



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