In June of 1998, the Alutiiq Word of the Week, a short lesson in Alutiiq vocabulary and cultural traditions, debuted on KMXT Public Radio in Kodiak. The goals of the show were modest. KMXT sought programming of interest to the Alutiiq community. The Alutiiq Museum wished to share Alutiiq heritage beyond its walls and assist the Alutiiq people with language preservation. By pairing Alutiiq vocabulary with a brief cultural lesson, the program would share the sounds of Alutiiq and provide a context for remembering words.

At the time, no member of the museum’s staff spoke Alutiiq. Moreover, there was no active Alutiiq language instruction in the Kodiak community, no weekly language club, no language programming advisory groups, and no New Words Council. There were no regular gatherings of fluent Alutiiq speakers to provide assistance. In fact, a survey conducted by the Alutiiq Museum in 2002 would later show that there were fewer than 50 first language speaker of Alutiiq remaining in the Kodiak Archipelago and most of them were elderly, with an average age of 72 (Hegna 2004). In academic terms, the Kodiak Alutiiq language was severely threatened, although its preservation remained of central importance to the Alutiiq community. Alutiiq people ranked reawakening their ancestral language among the most critical tasks of the cultural heritage movement (Hegna 2004).

After pitching the Alutiiq Word of the Week program to KMXT public radio and receiving an enthusiastic response, I approached Alutiiq Elder Florence Pestrikoff. An Alutiiq language speaker and a strong supporter of heritage education, Florence liked the idea of the program and agreed to help. Together Florence and I set out to create a year’s worth of lessons. It was not easy. Alutiiq is traditionally a spoken language, but the Alutiiq Word of the Week program required both spoken and written formats. Although University of Alaska linguist Jeff Leer had produced an Alutiiq alphabet, very few people knew how to write in Alutiiq. After selecting 52 words to feature, Florence and I worked together to produce the first year’s lessons, ordering the words in a seasonally meaningful way. Florence wrote a sentence for each lesson, consulting other Elders like Jenny Zeeder about word choices and pronunciation. I tackled the lessons, researching each subject with the help of publications, colleagues, and community members. The final step was recording at the KMXT studio. This took enormous courage from Florence.

Florence Pestrikoff did not grow up speaking the Alutiiq language. Like many Alaska Natives of her generation, English was the dominant language of her childhood—spoken at school and by loving adults who sought to protect their children from scorn. Elders tell painful stories of the ridicule and physical punishment imposed by teachers who forbid them to speak Alutiiq in school (Counceller 2010). During her youth in Akhiok and Old Harbor, however, Florence often heard the words of her ancestors. In private, her parents spoke to each other and to their friends in Alutiiq. Alutiiq sounds filled the air at happy, safe times, infusing Florence with a love of Alutiiq speech and respect for her parents’ language. Florence began perfecting her Alutiiq speech as a young adult, speaking with her fluent first husband. After being widowed, she continued practicing with her fluent second husband. Both men helped her advance her speaking skills. Practicing Alutiiq in private with friends and family felt comfortable, sharing Alutiiq speech on the radio did not. The Alutiiq Word of the Week program presented a new challenge, sharing the language in a very public way. Florence resolutely shed her shyness and spoke up to preserve Alutiiq tradition. Her bravery made the program possible.

Initially, the show aired three times a week on KMXT and copies of the lessons were available to museum patrons in a notebook. The Alutiiq Word of the Week soon outgrew this format. Within weeks, the museum was inundated with requests for lesson copies. To fulfill the demand, staff members developed weekly fax and email broadcasts, and posted the lessons around town with the help of other organizations. About six months after its debut, the Alutiiq Word of the Week began appearing every Friday in the Kodiak Daily Mirror, the local newspaper.
The program gained popularity in its early years. People compiled the lessons in notebooks, pinned copies to bulletin boards, cubicle walls, and refrigerators, and emailed them to friends. The program also received essential support from grants and gifts, and acclaim. In 2000, the Alutiiq Word of the Week was one of three Alutiiq Museum programs recognized with the National Award for Museum Leadership, an honor given annually to just three American museums by the Institute for Museum and Library Services. This award recognizes exemplary outreach activities, undertaken with community support. In 2003, the growing group of speakers who stepped forward to advise the program won an Honoring Alaska’s Indigenous Literature Award from the Alaska Native Knowledge Network at the University of Alaska for their contributions, and a paperback edition of the first season’s lessons.

Two major advances in the Alutiiq Museum’s resources helped the Alutiiq Word of the Week thrive. The first was the development of the Qiktarmiut Alutiiq (Alutiiq People of the Island) Language Program, an intensive, systematic effort to document, teach, and reawaken the Kodiak Alutiiq language (Counceller 2010). Through this program April Laktonen Counceller, a museum staff member and one of the first members of her generation to attain fluency in the Alutiiq language, began coordinating the Alutiiq Word of the Week. She recruited additional Elders to help with word selection, research, and recording.

Sophie Shepherd became the program’s Alutiiq voice in 2002 (Figure 2). Sophie is a fluent, first-language Alutiiq speaker who grew up in Karluk, and has lived in Larsen Bay and Kodiak. Since 2002, she has participated in many Alutiiq language programs, acting as an instructor and an advisor. She is well known for her clarity and confidence in recording and is one of a few first-language speakers who can also read in Alutiiq.

Nick Alokli added his voice to the Alutiiq Word of the Week in 2004 (Figure 2). He is a first-language fluent speaker, born at the Alitak Cannery at the south end of Kodiak Island. He grew up in Akhiok, and has also lived in Old Harbor and Kodiak, spending many years as a commercial fisherman. Like Sophie, Nick has collaborated with other speakers to teach the Alutiiq language, consult on the development of new words, and provide guidance for Alutiiq language programming.

Together Sophie and Nick helped the Alutiiq Word of the Week to flourish, and worked with the Alutiiq Museum to address the demand for access to pronunciation assistance. The Alutiiq Museum has never published phonetic version of the lessons’ Alutiiq words or sentences, despite numerous requests for such a resource. There are sounds in the Alutiiq language that do not appear in English, making it impossible to correctly phonetize all Alutiiq words for English speakers. Rather than teach people how to mispronounce Alutiiq words, the museum opted to create audio resources for Alutiiq language learning. To aid this effort, April led the Sharing Words project in 2003. Through Sharing Words, she developed an Alutiiq alphabet poster and an accompanying CD Rom with detailed information on letter sounds, Alutiiq grammar, and the history of the language. The CD also held an archive of Alutiiq Word of the Week lessons, with their associated audio files. This allowed fans to listen to first language speakers and practice their own pronunciation by repeating words and sentences.

The second important advance was in the museum’s technological capabilities. As the museum’s Internet resources grew, so did access to the Alutiiq Word of the Week. In 2007, the museum launched a new web site, where the Alutiiq Word of the Week could appear weekly, and where older lessons and audio files were archived with language learning information. In 2010, the museum began posting weekly lessons to its Facebook Page, and in 2011, all weekly Internet postings and email broadcasts included a link to an audio file.

Today, the Alutiiq Word of the Week reaches thousands of households across Kodiak, Alaska, and the world, sharing Alutiiq traditions with a broad, enthusiastic audience. The feature continues to air on KMXT, to be published in the Friday edition of the Kodiak Daily Mirror, to appear on the museum’s Internet sites, and to reach hundreds via email. More importantly, this program is now a small part of a much larger community effort to document and teach the Kodiak Alutiiq language. Major language preservation programs are underway at the Alutiiq Museum, the Native Village of Afognak, and Kodiak College. The changes since 1998 are dramatic. Today there is a cadre of young people working with Elders to learn the language. There are language learning resources: games, songs, posters, education boxes, books, videos, and websites.

Figure 2. Nick Alokli and Sophie Shepherd at a meeting of the Kodiak Alutiiq New Words Council. Alutiiq Museum archives, photograph by Peter Boskofsky (AM605).
Groups of speakers meet weekly to converse in Alutiiq, monthly to forms new words for the language, and biannually to advise on preservation projects. Many of the participants have become important resources for the Alutiiq Word of the Week.

The Alutiiq Word of the Week is now one of the Alutiiq Museum’s most enduring programs. Why has it remained popular? Reliable information on Alutiiq traditions can still be difficult to find and yet, there is a growing recognition that a full understanding of Kodiak’s history requires a firm knowledge of Alutiiq heritage. The Alutiiq Museum and other organizations have advanced awareness of Alutiiq traditions and illustrated the value of an historical narrative that embraces all of the archipelago’s citizens. The Alutiiq Word of the Week contributes to this effort. By summarizing knowledge from a wide variety of community sources: the knowledge of Elders, archaeological research, community stories, local recipies, archival documents, museum collections, and publications; the program helps Kodiak discover its past, explore its cultures, and awaken pride in its first people—every week.