On April 21, 2018, the Dr. Albert Conference Hall at Ilisagvik College was transformed into a stage for a unique kind of performance. A performance meant to honor. Ourselves, our communities and our connections to something greater.

At 7:10PM, four slightly terrified and entirely courageous students took their places in the front of the room, ready to honor an aspect of their cultural identity through live performance. They had been working for nearly three months – designing, creating, writing, researching, and rehearsing – and were finally ready to perform new artistic narratives about who they are, today.

“I think that we perceive things to be good or bad in a moment, but not in our whole. We can use bad things to create good in our lives.”

I AM had begun. One by one, each student took their positions on stage, speaking directly to the audience. The students, who had not had time to rehearse it entirely even once before performance night, flowed through each line like seasoned actors. Their voices were clear and strong, even when they stumbled. Tears flowed freely, as did smiles as they journeyed through their stories, one by one and in some scenes, together – supporting each other as the performance progressed.

They weren’t expecting it to be perfect. But, in letting go of what they thought it should be, and embracing their work and themselves, it was.

The performance ended with a poem, spoken in Inupiaq and then English, line by line. Three of the four students were Inupiat. But the poem wasn’t about blood. It was about community and over the course of the semester, that’s what we’d become.

A community of artists, sharing new ways to see and understand the world with our larger communities.

One audience member emailed this in the next day: “It is a rare opportunity in Barrow to get to watch a thought provoking original performance... It was wonderful and inspirational and captured the spectrum of the human experience in such an original way.”
This poem, written by Raymond Ipalook, was read by the whole cast at the end of the performance:

Iñupiaquraŋa.
I am an Inupiaq person.

Iqñauruŋa, paniuruŋa.
I am a son, I am a daughter.

Tutaatuuruŋa sivulliimniŋ.
I am a grandchild of those who came before me.

Iñuguqtauuruŋa suamaruaniŋ, pilļuataqtuaniniŋ, piqpagnaqtuaniniŋ
I am the product of a mixture of a strong, thriving, amazing people.

Kįñuniitka uvamni ittut, aullatigaanŋa avlutuaqama sivunniuŋamalu.
My ancestors and those that came before me, are always present, guiding each footstep and decision I make in life.

Iqñiŋma allalu qaiyumaaqtauat, qiñiŋniaŋaich savaavut.
My son and those that will come after me, will see the work that we have done.

Iliisimanaiqtut savautiravut. Pilļuatqummigivut, tallimat malgüt kįñuniivut, tallimat malgüt kįnuvaavut.
And they will know that it was for them. That we are hopeful they too, are successful.

Kiikaa suamaniaqtugut, sayyaaqiglutu, pimmaaqiglutralu.
7 Generations before us, and 7 Generations after us.
We will continue to be strong, vibrant, and thriving people.

Aniŋniqaqtusraurugut Iñupiatun. Atuqtuksraurugut Iñupiatun
We must Breathe in Iñupiaq. We must Sing in Iñupiaq.

Qiarausraurugut Iñupiatun. Iqlaqtuksraurugut Iñupiatun
We must cry in Iñupiaq. We must laugh in Iñupiaq.

Nakuaqqutiaqtuksraurugut Iñupiatun. Iñuuniaqtusraurugut Iñupiatun.
We must love in Iñupiaq. We must live an Inupiaq life.

Iñupiaqurugut
We are Inupiat.

QUYANAQPAK (BIGN THANKS) to Iḷisaġvik College students, faculty and staff; The Tuzzy Library; Brad Manuluk Stevens; Pati Hernandez; Dr. Kathryn Lively; and the Edwardson Family for your support and enthusiasm for this project.

Aaluk Edwardson taught Iñupiaq Studies 118 and directed the performance final, I AM. Brad Manuluk Stevens supported the performance as the assistant director.