Rebecca Burke: This is Dr. Rebecca Daniel Burke, your host for the American Counseling Association’s 2015 podcast series. Today we are speaking with Shawnie Olson on Counseling in Alaska. Shawnie Olson, M.A. L.P.C., lives in Homer, Alaska, where she has a private practice and sees clients with a wide variety of presenting problems. Shawnie was recently presented with the President’s Award by Dr. Susan Hammonds-White, president of the American Association of State Counseling Boards.

Olson is recognized for her time and energy on behalf of AASCB where she has been involved since her appointment as chair of the board of professional counselors in Alaska from 2005 to 2013. Olson is the owner of Shawnie Olson Counseling Services, is a licensed professional counselor and has served on the Alaska Board of Professional Counselors, acting as the chair for eight years. She also has served as a president, secretary, consultant, and educator for the Alaska School Counseling Association, and continues to serve as the group’s marketing liaison. Welcome, Shawnie.

Shawnie Olson: Thank you so much, Rebecca, and thank you so much for having me. What a treat.

Rebecca Burke: Thanks. It’s going to be a treat for us to learn all about counseling in Alaska, and I’m going to dive into the questions. The first question is: We, in the lower 48, think of Alaskans as very rugged. Is it hard for these rugged people to admit that they might need some counseling?

Shawnie Olson: What a good question. We, in Alaska, like to think of ourselves as rugged, and I think that might be a misnomer for those of us living in the cities and the towns, but Alaskans, who live in rural communities out in what we call Bush Alaska – Bush is anywhere in Alaska that you can’t get to without an airplane or a boat – so there are a large, inordinate number of villages and communities in Alaska that require transportation other than a car or a truck, because there is no road system, connecting them.

Because of that, the isolation of Alaska and the fact that it is so incredibly large – it’s about 1/3 of the entire United States – when you look at such a large landmass with people, settled all across it, it makes it very difficult to have resources, so Alaskans not only are a little resistant to go into counseling, if you will; difficult to admit that there’s a problem; these people are tough, they brace the elements, they’re fishermen, they’re trappers, gold miners. It’s a very rugged place and, consequently, the mentality is, “We’ll take care of our own problems, thank you very much,” or, “We won’t admit that we have problems.” I think Alaska does have some issues there, although, in my personal practice, I see everything including fishermen and people that make a living on the sea and in the mountains etc. A difficult question to answer. I think I talked around it, but I guess I’m basically saying, “Yes” just because of the way we’re laid out in our isolation issues.
Rebecca Burke: What about native Alaskan populations? Do people, who come for counseling from those populations, do they face some kind of stigma?

Shawnie Olson: I don’t know that I would use the word “stigma”, not to correct you, but culturally I feel that these people are very reluctant to become engaged, because Alaska’s not a very old state. We acquired statehood in January 1959 and, consequently, we’ve not been around real long. The LPC license came through in the year 2000 and there are so few LPCs or social workers or MFTs or anything in Bush Alaska, so these people don’t have the familiarity, and those that do, the native culture does not lend itself to outsiders.

And Caucasians, much as a Caucasian can be dearly loved by a village because they lived there a long time and they’ve become part of the culture, the rest of us are seen as outsiders, and they don’t take their issues to outsiders, Rebecca. The community life there would cause them to keep their issues within the community, within the family, or not deal with it, or use poor coping mechanisms. The native population doesn’t metabolize alcohol well, and Caucasians brought alcohol to Alaska, and natives, generally, very generally speaking, don’t metabolize it well, so it’s become a bad coping mechanism for folks.

Rebecca Burke: You mentioned LPCs in Alaska. What are the requirements to obtain an LPC license in the state of Alaska?

Shawnie Olson: A license here, one has to first get an application, and there are available online, which is wonderful; you go under ‘State of Alaska’ and ask about licensing and the application pops up, you pay a fee, of course; two letters of recommendation, and we do require a background check; must be 18 years of age, of course, and not under any kind of investigation; not have a license revoked, suspended or have anything odd or unusual happen to a license somewhere else; you must have passed a written national exams, several of which are accepted, and have completed a Master’s or PhD program, and then 2,000 hours of supervised experience.

And if the school isn’t accredited; let’s say you go to a wonderful college outside, but it just doesn’t happen to be regionally accredited, then you have to meet eight out of ten course work criteria standards. And that’s basically the application. And I know it sounds complicated; it’s not all that bad. If you’re applying for a license anywhere, the steps are very similar to the lower 48, but credential then – if you’re coming in from another state with a license, again, the application is online, you pay a fee, and the verification of the license in another jurisdiction is very important, because we have to be able to verify that you did indeed or do indeed hold a license there, so a documentation of that license is required; again, there’s a background check.
And Alaska doesn’t have any transitional license; a lot of states do; we do not. There was a brief time period shortly after the license was accepted in the year 2000 and we did accept transitional license, meaning someone had X-number of things to finish, X-number of hours, perhaps to finish with a supervisor or something, and we granted a transitional license. That is no longer available.

**Rebecca Burke:** Interesting. So somebody comes there, they can’t work as an LPC while their licensure is going through, if they have an LPC in another state.

**Shawnie Olson:** That’s correct. Not until they receive a license from the state. The good thing, the flipside of that – I’m not trying to be terribly defensive here about how our board does it – but the flipside of that is that the board meets three times a year, and if someone is in dire straits, these documents can even be scanned out to board members who are given a 10-day period to respond. The board has been known to respond very quickly if someone is in a desperate situation.

The maximum someone would have to wait if their application was in and everything was completed, would be four months. And I’m saying that you could get it done much quicker than that if you really needed to. The board is very flexible. Alaska has to be flexible. When you live in the middle of nowhere and you’ve got communication issues just because you can’t get from point A to point B, transportation issues, product and commodity issues, you have to be flexible. I think the board is an example of that kind of flexibility.

**Rebecca Burke:** It used to be that you would hear often, “I’m going to Alaska because I can make a lot of money up there,” and I haven’t heard that in a while. What’s that about?

**Shawnie Olson:** When I moved here, 37 years ago, Alaska was the number one payer of school teachers in the nation. Alaska has sadly dropped down. I’m guessing they’re somewhere in the teens or 20’s now. They are no longer at the top of the pay scale. We had the gold rush a long time ago, the Klondike Gold Rush, but then after that we had oil fields and that kind of thing, and we still have oil fields, and now we have a major natural gas find, but I think the ability to come here and make lots of money has drastically changed just over the last decade and it isn’t the case anymore. It used to be that people were paid a fee to go into Bush Alaska to teach; they could get all of their student loans forgiven if they gave X-number of years back to the state. There was some wonderful deals. There are still a few deals available, but it doesn’t look anything like it did 20 years ago.

**Rebecca Burke:** I know this is a difficult question, but can you describe the cultural diversity of Alaska to us?
Shawnie Olson: I would say the cultural diversity here is incredibly unusual. As I mentioned before, this is a huge state. It has pockets of culture, if you will. Anchorage, our biggest city, carries about, I would guess, half the population of the state, and Alaska is incredibly multi-cultured. We have a large Samoan population, many other Asian nations are represented; we have African-American population, native populations, some of whom live in Anchorage, Hispanic population, a large Caucasian population. It’s a genuine melting pot. And then about another quarter of the population of the entire state live in Fairbanks, which is the second largest city, and that’s a blend of Native and Caucasian people with a few other cultures mixed in. When you leave Anchorage this is the odd, odd factor about Alaska that actually took me several years to put together psychologically.

When you leave the big city there is a profound geographical separation. The towns of Alaska are primarily, predominantly Caucasian. I taught at Homer High School; I was in counseling department there for 19 years, and my students were almost all Caucasian. It was very unique to have a Native student, an African-American student, a Hispanic student; they were in such a minority here. And yet, when you go to Bush Alaska it flips. Out in the native villages they are by far predominantly Native people, and whether they are Aleuts or Athabaskans or Eskimos, you might find a handful of Caucasian people. For example, half of the teachers at the schools that I had some affiliation years ago, half of them were Caucasian, half of them were Native.

Homer, my little town, southwest, 220 road miles southwest of Anchorage, is unique in that we have three Russian villages here. All of them have their own school and are allowed to observe their holidays and are part of our school district, but have their own school schedule that is unlike the rest of the district. And then we have three native schools, what we call “Across the Bay”, Homer sits on Kachemak Bay, and these three villages are across the bay from us, and these are almost primarily Native schools across the bay. So we have these little isolated pockets of different cultures, which is very unusual in a state, again, given our size, given our location. This is how it came down.

Rebecca Burke: What are the geographic challenges of being an LPC in the state of Alaska? I can imagine that, probably, some of the positions require home visits, correct?

Shawnie Olson: Yes, they do, although I think it depends on where you locate your practice, because Alaska is so huge, and I think I said it was 1/3 the size of the United States; I think that’s 1/5, I want to correct myself. I think it’s more like 1/5. I live in a town that is 70 miles away from anything. I have to drive 70 miles to buy underwear. You can’t buy them downtown. There used to be a lady’s clothing store that no longer exists, so going anywhere in the state is incredibly expensive. It can cost people from Bush Alaska more to fly from their Bush community into Anchorage than it does for someone, who lives in Anchorage, to fly to the lower 48 and back, which is what we call “the Continental United States.”
They can fly to Seattle and back for a lot less than they can fly from, let’s say, Nome to Anchorage and back. Because of this, the geographical challenges are just profound, and yet, if you live in Alaska, you go into a clinician. I have a girlfriend, who is a clinician in Anchorage. She is in high-rise, which is unusual, because for years and years the state would not allow anything above two stories, because of all of our earthquakes. But after a while they figured out that as long as they would earthquake-proof their high-rises they could go ahead and build more stories. So my girlfriend is in a high-rise, she has a normal working office, she has a beautiful view of the city, she runs on the 50 minute hour, and people come to her. She does not make house calls; there is no uniqueness about her practice, compared to somebody having a practice in Chicago or downtown Oklahoma City.

It is the same as it would be anywhere else. On the other hand, I’m in a small community of about 5,500. My practice is in my home. One of the reasons for that is because it’s a small town, everyone knows everyone. And my house is located on the top of a small mountain in a neighborhood that has land around it. So we all have an acre or two or three, so we’re not on top of each other. We have a lot of space between us, and people like coming to an office that offers a lot of confidentiality and has this seclusion. That said, if I have a client, who has an hour for lunch, I’m ten minutes from town. I will often go down, pick up the client and have a session in my car.

Or I will go down and pick up the client and we will go to a location where we can have privacy to have their session. I have to be, I choose to be extremely flexible, because if I’m not, I probably would have about half the business I have. It is a geographical challenge, and people in Bush Alaska – it’s even worse for them, because they’re up the river or they’re a plane ride away. I worked in a village for a brief period of time several years ago, and it took me three airplane rides to get there from Anchorage. So imagine that. They might have a social worker that’s on a circuit who comes maybe for a few days once a month or something like that, and they may have an office or they may make house calls. But we are still incredibly disconnected in many ways when it comes to the geographical challenges.

**Rebecca Burke:** I lived and worked in Hawaii for a while for a big counseling agency, and our person, who was in Maui, had to take a ferry over to Lanai when they needed some kind of mental health, so I understand it. It’s very unusual. I was coming from San Francisco and was like, “What? You’re taking a ferry to Lanai to help somebody who had a crisis?” And that’s exactly what was happening.

**Shawnie Olson:** If I could add just one more comment, we also have a lot of people who work on, we call it, The Slope, and this is where the oilfields are in northern Alaska, and, consequently, these people take several flights and go to their job and they’re gone for two weeks at a time, because of the distance and the cost of going to work. They work for two weeks, and then they have two weeks off, so we call it “two and two.”
That's just an amazingly difficult lifestyle, you can imagine. And I often have many, many clients who do the “two and two”, and in doing that, I get to see them twice in a roll, and then I don’t see them for three weeks. It is a very difficult situation.

Rebecca Burke: I was wondering: Are there a certain group of presenting problems that you see? I know you see a wide variety of them, because we’ve talked about the DSM-5, you and I before, and I know you see a wide variety of presenting problems, but I know at one point somebody in Juno was trying to hire me, and they flew me in and they said that it’s almost entirely domestic violence and alcoholism and drug addiction, and I was so surprised it was those two of all the presenting problems, but then I don’t know the Alaskan world. Is there a group of presenting problems that you’re most likely to see and, if so, what are they?

Shawnie Olson: What a good question. It’s difficult for me to answer that, because, in a way, my world is isolated just like all the geographic locations in Alaska are, although I have several colleagues in Anchorage, and we compare notes periodically to what are you seeing a lot of, what’s coming in, and I don’t find that to be the case. I rarely see domestic violence in Homer, and because we have Cook Inlet Council for Drugs and Alcohol, located right here in our town, I don’t see a lot of alcoholic and drug addiction people, although I do periodically. Most of my clients are what I would consider to be basic client-counselor issues such as, “I’m grieving,” “I’m anxious,” I’m having panic attacks,” “I am dealing with OCD,” “I’m dealing with a little bit of bipolar,” “Trying to get my medications balanced”; depression, of course.

We do see some S.A.D., we do see some issues, especially in the winter when we don’t have a great deal of light. But, again, I’m in Homer, and because the state is so enormous, the people way north in Nome might get an hour of light in the middle of winter, whereas we just have shortened days here on the Kenai Peninsula. Light might start between 9:30 and 10:00 AM, and then it might start getting dark around 4:00 PM, but that’s at the very height of the winter solstice and it quickly passes, because when you start having additional light in six minutes a day it takes no time at all. Right now our days are much longer than anyone else’s.

We do go through a period of darkness, if you will, that does bring on a form of light deprivation depression, and we do see some of that as well, but I wouldn’t say that’s what comprises my business in the winter. I would say that’s in two of the folks that I see. And just everyday challenges, “I’m in this bad marriage. I need some help,” “I’m in this divorce. I need guidance. How do I go through the process of disillusion?” “I’m in this family structure. We’re not getting along,” “I have this teenager I don’t know that to do with her or with him,” that kind of thing. I think of what I do as being rather normal in the counseling world and I love the mix that I seem to draw. I just love it.

Rebecca Burke: Yes, I think it’s nice to see a wide variety of presenting problems.
Shawnie Olson: I love that. I really do. I'll get into something. Years and years ago I started drawing a lot of people from the gay community and I was so humble. I knew so little, and then I took a bunch of classes and gave myself as much exposure as possible, and then I started drawing PTSD and, again, I didn't seem knowledgeable, so I took some classes, one of them from ACA. I just feel so fortunate that the variety keeps coming and I have to keep learning, and I think that's what makes a clinician a whole lot more valuable to the community they serve is if they're willing to do their homework, because none of us can know everything. It's impossible.

Rebecca Burke: I remember when I used to have a private practice in Oregon, and I remember somebody would come in and I would think, "Oh boy, I've seen just about everything now," and then somebody would walk in and I would say, "No, I haven't seen everything."

Shawnie Olson: Exactly, what a good observation, just when you think you've seen it all, and I grew up in a funeral home, so I already have a rather tilted view of life anyway. My dad was a phenomenal grief counselor. That's probably why I do what I do. I share this periodically with the appropriate client who comes in, and I think that I do have a little different tilt on things, a slightly different perspective, and it usually serves me well. Maybe I'm deluding myself.

Rebecca Burke: You also have a counseling assistant in your practice. Tell us a little about Skipper and his role in your counseling business.

Shawnie Olson: What a joy. I have a 30-pound Lhasa. His name is Skipper Doo Homer and from the time we got him, he was three months old, he decided that he was going to be part of my counseling business, and he is not formally trained, but Skipper meets my clients at the entryway, he waits for them, I would turn to him and I would say, "Skipper, client," and if it's someone he's seen many times, I will say their name. So I say, "Skipper, client," and the name of the client, and he will go out and sit on the rug and face the door that has little windows in it and wait for the client to appear.

Many of my clients stop at the door and peer through the window to see if he's waiting for them. they come through the door, they greet him, he greets them, some of them bring biscuits, imagine that, and then they walk in around the corner and there's coffee and tea, and he stops and waits for them to get something if they wish, and then he walks ahead of them down a short hall and opens the door for them and enters them into the counseling room, and then he monitors them; he waits to see how they are. If they seem very hyper, if they seem very sad, if they're in tears by this point, he positions himself according to where he thinks he needs to be, and it's fascinating to watch him over the last 11 years decide where he wants to be in relationship to the client.

And if the clients seems very stable and very emotionally together and they're coming in to discuss a career change or something, Skipper might-- I have two sofas in the room,
and Skipper might jump in the opposite sofa and have a nap. But if they seem distressed, if he decides that they need him, he will go and he will wait until they invite him. If they invite him, he’d walk and sit next to them or he will sit at their feet and, perhaps, lean against their leg. I’ve watched him break panic attacks, I’ve watched him jump down off the sofa and go to a client having a panic attack, and the minute they start stroking him, the panic is interrupted.

The first time this happened I thought, “Okay,” I was bolting out of my chair, which is on wheels and I turn it toward wherever the client is, and I have a small table on wheels as well, so I was pushing everything out of my way, standing up; he jumped off the sofa and I thought, “Okay, he’s out of here. He doesn’t know what to do. He’s leaving the room.” And instead he did the opposite. He went right to that client. He got there before I did. And they started petting him and the panic was over, and I thought, “You are worth your weight in gold.”

Rebecca Burke: He is. When a client really starts decompensating and just starts freaking out, how does he handle that?

Shawnie Olson: I have had people come in here and yell and shout and wave arms and legs around, and Skipper usually-- if he is with them on the same sitting arrangement, he will jump down, go on the other one and jump up and observe them. And if he gets really afraid, he’ll hide behind my chair. He would just come right behind my chair until whatever it’s finished. I have had the rare client, who doesn’t like dogs, in which case I will escort him from the room and close the door. When I open the door he is laying right outside the door, waiting for the door to open.

He doesn’t bark at these people. I didn’t mention that, and he’s not a barking dog anyway, but he seems to understand I’m expecting these people, these are our guests, we treat them with great respect and we don’t cause any kind of commotion. And he understands that, and I don’t know why he does, but I find him to be amazing. I never cease being impressed. Someone’s sobbing, they often reach out to him and he will go to them. He loves to comfort and he seems to understand this person is having a hard time and I can help.

Rebecca Burke: He’s a true assistant to you.

Shawnie Olson: He is so vigilant. I can’t imagine running the practice without him just because he is so good at what he does.

Rebecca Burke: And I would think in Alaska where it’s all about the animals; there are so many beautiful animals in Alaska.

Shawnie Olson: I think we’re great animal lovers here, especially with our dog and our moose. I have moose in my yard over the year. We have black bears that come through
in the spring and the fall. We have squirrels running all over the place right now, of course, I’m sure everyone does. It’s amazing to me that I would say 90% to 95% of my clients absolutely adore him, and I feel very lucky that it’s worked out that way.

**Rebecca Burke:** I’m sure some of them are-- That’s a part of them coming to see you. It just becomes ingrained.

**Shawnie Olson:** Sometimes I wonder if they’re coming to see me or if they’re coming to see Skipper. They’ll come sit and make a big fuss of him and gets down on all fours with him, and Holly will look up at me and say, “Hi, Shawnie,” and we’ll leave off and come in the room together and he sits right up close to this client, because that’s where he feels comfortable.

**Rebecca Burke:** If there are Alaskans listening too, which there, certainly, may be, you served on the Alaskan Board of Professional Counselors. How does one become a member of this board?

**Shawnie Olson:** The board is wonderful. It’s a small board. The board comprises of five people, one of them being a community member, and then other requirements, they like to find someone who is working in a nonprofit and they like to find someone who’s working in a large clinic, and then they like a couple of private practitioners. So the state makes an effort to keep it a balanced board, and the process of becoming a member is really quite simple. One way: to letter to the state commissioner on boards and just says, “I am interested and here are my qualifications and why I think I would be a good board member.”

These letters are then reviewed by the commissioner and they have to be approved by the governor, and if you are selected, they contact you and notify you that you are selected, and then the board meets three times a year, as I’ve mentioned before, and the board usually meets in Anchorage, and your transportation and accommodation are paid for through the board itself, because there are 47 in the state of Alaska and they all manage their own finances as far as financing their own board needs, which is very nice. And I think the board is a phenomenal experience. I would encourage anyone, anywhere, in any state, if they have the opportunity to become a board member, it does get a bit political at times, but it is an amazing learning/growing experience, and I think all of us gained so much by being on a board and learning how things work, and statutes and regulations, and it makes us better at what we do; it makes us more acutely aware of things that are outside the ethical realm, and what a good protocol for an LPC is.

I love it. The board that I served on did a lot of reviewing, writing, and supporting, of course, of statutes and regulations, and we made a lot of licensing decisions. The board is the bottom line as to whether or not someone gets their license approved to get a license in the state in which the board serves. It also proves CEUs. Some of the things
people try to get approved as CEUs are really interesting, and one has to be very, very careful, because in our state there are cultural issues that come into play. For example, there’s a huge Native conference every year, and things that might be very valuable for an LPC, working in a Native community, may not be very valuable for me, sitting in Homer. We have to be ultrasensitive to: Could this possibly apply to the counseling setting? And if it could, we definitely approved it.

My least favorite thing on the board was dealing with disciplinary issues. People filing complaints and saying something untoward happened with their counselor or their counselor did something untoward, and then there is a very sophisticated process that this complaint goes through and we wanted to be very fair to the public and to the clinicians, so there was a lot of time spent on disciplinary issues. I don’t think any more than anywhere else. We only have, maybe, I’m guessing at this point, I haven’t been on the board for several years, but I think we have around 550 LPCs in the state, so we’re not talking about an inordinate number of people, nor are we talking about an inordinate number of complaints. It was probably my least favorite part of the job, because it was negative, rather than positive.

**Rebecca Burke:** What kinds of disciplinary issues arouse among your licensed counselors in Alaska when you served on the board? What types of disciplinary issues might you see?

**Shawnie Olson:** I think, in that respect, we're just like everybody else. In comparing notes with the board members I had opportunity to meet it at ACA and AASCB functions. A counselor would often just become too familiar with their client and especially in male-female-- not to make everything heterosexual, but especially with male-female things in our state, and also people got careless about keeping notes and sometimes people got a little careless about renewing their license every two years. These were primarily the things we dealt with, and breaches in confidentiality. And some of them were done unwittingly, and some of them were done knowingly, but, again, not a large number of anything, but the things that we saw were pretty typical of how ethically we can accidentally step outside the box.

I have to be so careful, because in a small town you can’t not know your clients, and having been at the high school for almost 20 years, I am seeing a lot of former students constantly. I love it. I feel so fortunate. And then I might turn around and be sitting next to them in church or sitting next to them in the theatre, and there’s nothing I can do unless I want to become a recluse, which I don’t. Consequently, in a village it’s even worse. Everybody knows everybody else’s information, so confidentiality is sticky, and I am incredibly conscientious about that. The board encourages everyone to be very conscientious about that, although it’s much easier in a city. If you have an office in a big building in a city and people come to you, the chances of you knowing someone in a population of 250,000-- you’re in a lot better position, than in a town of 5,000 where
you’ve been here so long and you know everyone. There is always the confidentiality piece, always.

**Rebecca Burke:** I remember that when I had a practice many years ago in a small town in Oregon I do remember going to a restaurant and there would be a client near me, and going shopping, having client’s parents come up and ask me about how they were doing in the middle of the grocery store. So it was really important to- in the informed consent, very early on in counseling- to say to the client what are we going to do if we see each other on the street; are we going to talk to each other; are we not. Do you do that in your informed consent?

**Shawnie Olson:** I say ‘Hi’ to everybody and I tell them when I see them in here, “If I see you anywhere, I will great you like I’ve always greeted you.” I’m very, very friendly. I’m also a hugger, and I expect some day that will get me in trouble, but I’m very physical person and I will ask my clients as they are exiting - not when they walk through the door for the first time, I don’t scare them to death, I’ll say to them, “Would you like a hug?” I ask permission, and if they say, “Yes I do,” we’ve probably put something in motion, because the next time they’re done with their session they open their arms.

**Rebecca Burke:** I think the important thing is asking just because there are so many clients who have been sexually abused or abused in a physical way and they don’t want to hug.

**Shawnie Olson:** I have one woman that - I need to be very careful how I speak here – but I have one client that I saw historically who just wasn’t a physical person and said, “I just don’t like hugs,” and I said, “That’s okay, you have that right and I won’t ask again,” and at the end of the second session the client looked at me and said, “Could I have a hug?” And as that client was leaving I had tears in my eyes and I said, “I have to tell you,” I said, “That was probably the best hug I’ve had in years, because it came from you and I understand how you feel about that,” and for the length of time I saw that client, which was many, many months, I got a hug after every session and it just warmed my heart.

Like I said, I’m a very physical person; I used to hug my students; I think asking permission is important and usually after that they grab you and hug you and they don’t ask permission, which is fine. I think the morals are the same here as anywhere else. And the native population is not as emotionally effervescent, nor is sometimes the Russian population, although I’m very blessed to see some of those and, inevitably, we all end up hugging, but again, I move a little slower and a little more cautiously, and I think being culturally savvy is important to LPCs anywhere. That is certainly not specific to Alaska.
Rebecca Burke: Absolutely. You mentioned the Native groups. I wanted to ask you a while ago and I’m going to ask you now. With the Native populations, is it true that they have certain amounts of time off school to learn subsistence?

Shawnie Olson: To my knowledge, not exactly. If you were in a whaling village and the whales come through, school doesn’t exist. Everybody is in the whaling boats and they go whaling, because there are specific villages are allowed so many whales. Most of them are allowed one whale. And they bring the whale and the process is unbelievable. They bring the whale onto the beach and everybody, everybody in the village is allowed to go down and participate in the butchering of the whale and also in using every possible bit of the whale for something. When I was in Nome years ago, teaching some natural helper training, the beach had whalebone structures here and there as you walked out on the beach. It’s quite amazing, but these people use every bit of that whale that they can use, including the oil, which is used for lanterns; the hide, the skin, everything is utilized; the teeth, which is baleen, which is a very odd substance, is sold; some of it is crafted upon before it’s sold. It is amazing that there is no waste.

Rebecca Burke: And it’s just a given that the students will go and help?

Shawnie Olson: Absolutely. You are part of the whole. And in subsistence living, as you know, everybody has a responsibility, so if dad comes in with a moose, or dad comes in with an elk, or dad comes in with a bear, everybody is responsible, so a students could miss a day or two days of school, because they were home, taking care of putting up the meat. Fortunately, most of the fishing, not all of it, but most of the fishing in Alaska is during the summer and my little town is known, for example, as “The Halibut Capital of the World.”

Rebecca Burke: Lucky you.

Shawnie Olson: And we have a king salmon tournament on Saturday, so we have an inordinate amount of seafood right here in our bay and there are rivers that go all through Alaska, and, of course, then there’s the coast itself, which is extremely long, and so Alaskans are great fishermen, great fisher-people, and this takes place in the summer, so kids aren’t missing school, but they are learning the subsistence lifestyle. And the berries grow in the summer, and they can grow small gardens in the summer, so a lot of the subsistence is drying that salmon and canning that bear and putting those things up then for the winter months, so a lot of it does take place, fortunately, outside of the school year.

Rebecca Burke: And for some of them financially they need the help? Is that correct?

Shawnie Olson: That’s correct. If you want me to go off on tangent just briefly, I can. Bush Alaska is so incredibly expensive. Where I might pay 3 or 4 dollars a gallon for milk here in Homer, if I go into Bush Alaska, I can expect to probably pay triple that, I
can expect to pay $11 for a gallon of milk. A ten pound bag of potatoes, it might go on sale downtown and I might get a ten pound bag for four of five dollars. If I’m in Bush Alaska it’s going to be $15. A can of vegetables downtown for me might be a buck; in the Bush it’s going to be $3. And I’m just giving you very general ideas, but there are so many things. By the time a box of fruit makes it into Bush Alaska, it’s either too expensive to pay for, because of all the transportation it’s had to go through, or it’s spoiled and you don’t want it.

It’s not any good. So these people are deprived of a lot of things that the rest of us take for granted, and I’m included in the rest of us. Being in a town community with a road system, boats coming, planes coming and going all the time, we have access to—there are things that we can’t buy, but we have access to just about anything we want, whereas Bush Alaska does not. You can’t buy that avocado in the middle of winter. It doesn’t exist. You can’t get a head of lettuce, because by the time it gets to you, it’s going to be rotten. And that’s sad, but that’s how it is. So an LPC moving to Bush Alaska needs to be moving to a big enough community—not to throw villages under the bus—but a big enough community where they’re going to be able to make a living, because if you move to too small of a community, first of all, you’re assuming people are going to come to you.

The culture is fairly strict and they may or may not want to come to you. If they had a bad experience with, let’s say, some Caucasian person, who was doing some counseling at the high school or something, there’s no way they’re going to come to you. You almost have to set yourself up in a clinic or in a big enough consortium that you know you’re going to be able to make it, because, otherwise, you’re not going to be able to afford to live there. You’re not going to make it.

**Rebecca Burke:** That’s my next question. What do you believe LPC’s in Alaska need to know or have in place before they begin counseling?

**Shawnie Olson:** I think they need to do the research. I think they need to know as much as they possibly can about the community that is calling to them, and if they’ve been very generic about it and they aren’t sure where they want to be, they need to come here in person. They need to spend the money to take the time to come here to see what it’s all about. If you don’t do that to yourself, Rebecca, you’re setting yourself up for some culture shock. There’s a big difference between life in Anchorage and life in Homer. It’s like night and day. There’s an even bigger difference between life in Homer and life in a village or in a community like Bethel that is probably 90% native. It’s very, very different.

So in order to see if one can acclimate and fit in, one needs to come and see the process, one needs to come and have a job. I’ve had many, many former students, not many, several, former students try to open up a counseling business in Homer and not be able to make a living; not be able to support themselves. Well, it takes time to get
known, it takes time to establish yourself, and I say to all these people as they call me and they often do, I say, “Go work for the big clinic downtown. Go work for someone where you can get established and get your feet on the ground and have a steady income. Then, if you want to go into private practice, then you’re ready to go.” I guess, another thing that would come to mind, and I hope I’m not talking this question to death but-- I’m sorry? I didn’t hear you.

Rebecca Burke: I said, “No, this is an important question,” so please, go ahead.

Shawnie Olson: I think it’s really important for an LPC - not just in Alaska, but anywhere – to have a methodology. I think you need to know where you’re coming from and you need to be able to express that to your clients. A client would call me up and say, “Okay, what do you do? Are you a behaviorist? Do you practice this, or do you practice that?” And I’m a reality therapist, I like Glasser, so what I do is primarily reality therapy, and I like to be able to say that, and when people come in here I talk about Glasser’s Bloom’s [taxonomy] and I talk about what is this picture and what’s wrong with it and how can we change it, and I’m very realistically-based and I keep bringing them back to this reality focus. I think a counselor in Alaska especially needs to have that kind of focus.

I think if they don’t, people leave there wondering what they just did for the last hour or hour plus. And I like having a place to hang my hat. There are a lot of people in Alaska practicing with no license, there are people in Alaska who have let their license expire, there are people who have come here from, again, what we call “Outside” and they haven’t bothered to get an Alaskan license. Obviously, these people can’t bill insurance, which could be a blessing, because I deal with 28 insurance companies and it drives me crazy sometimes to stay current with everyone, because it’s just me. But the other side of that is: their clients pay through the nose for their services and that doesn’t seem quite fair that their clients can’t get reimbursed.

Rebecca Burke: Exactly, when you think of the single mom out there, who could afford a $10 copy to bring their child to counseling, but cannot afford $100. That person loses out if we all stop taking insurance.

Shawnie Olson: I think so. I think we have a responsibility. I also think it’s extremely important to keep our license current. ACA does an incredible job of supporting people worldwide to keep their license current, and I think if you’re going to come to Alaska, you have to recognize the isolation, and then you have to make it your business to get to an ACA conference, to get the ACA magazine, to be involved with counseling literature, to get those 20 CEU’s face to face every chance you get. We have 40 CEU’s every two years in order to renew in the state of Alaska, and the first time I saw that I thought that was an inordinate amount of time, and two or three years in I realized that that’s a minimum amount of time to stay current, to be on top of things, to understand what’s going on with counseling in the rest of the world, and especially in our country.
I think we have a responsibility to do that. We have to know the ethical standards. People that come before our board as LPC’s and they didn’t know they were doing something ethically wrong, well they get a copy of the statutes and regulations. Give them that book. If they questions, there’s a place to go to have their questions answered. I don’t think we have that ability to be naïve. I think we have to know, as a profession, what’s okay and what isn’t. And I think we’re required to do that, and I think in Alaska it’s really important, because Alaskans like to sue. You can get in trouble pretty quickly. If you’re not paying attention, you can get in trouble pretty quickly. Take the counselors, for example, not keeping notes. It’s in the rules, you have to do that. “Well, we weren’t, because we could remember.” No, you can’t remember. That’s ridiculous. What if you see someone and don’t see them for five years, you’re going to remember that happened five years ago? Of course, you’re not.

Rebecca Burke: And that’s not going to help you when you get a subpoena.

Shawnie Olson: Exactly.

Rebecca Burke: You mentioned CEU’s. What is some of the opportunities for CE’s in a state as isolated as Alaska?

Shawnie Olson: Probably as good or better than anywhere else. I think it’s one of the few things that we do incredibly well. And I don’t want to toot the horn of the Alaska School Counseling Association too much, but David Kaplan came up and presented here for us. A good friend of mine, Paul Harding was here last year to present to us. We have some of the top speakers in the country come in to this conference where people can spend as much as four days and walk away with some incredible information, as well as 20-25 CEU’s. It’s amazing.

There’s also a yearly Social Worker Conference, there’s a Native conference that I mentioned, there’s a drug and alcohol conference, there are also – believe it or not, Rebecca, because I haven’t spoken of this – there are four major colleges in the state of Alaska, and as much as we’re isolated, these have turned out to be good schools. Three of the four offer degrees in counseling, and I would go to any of those three to get a counseling degree. I feel that they have come light years in what they offer students. They’re very, very impressive. No, they do not meet CACREP standards yet, and the reason being all of their instructors do not have PhD’s in counseling. Some of them have PhD’s in psychology, some in psychiatry, some in social work; it’s a mixed bag, and that, again, is because we aren’t a well-populated state.

I don’t know if we’ll ever meet that particular requirement. Under CACREP, we do meet many, many of the others. But, that said, these colleges are always offering courses, they’re also offering workshops. We have a very active state LPC organization and they offer quarterly CEU’s. So anyone, who could get to Anchorage, and many of these are
now being telecast. You can’t come here and say, “Gee, there’s no way we can meet this requirement,” although there are so many ways, and only 20 of the 40 CEU’s required every two years must be done in person, so 20 of them can be done anyway, and people that don’t take advantage of ACA’s opportunity with the one credit to the magazine, or all the courses that you folks have available—

**Rebecca Burke:** The free CE of the month. If you’re a member, that’s 12 CE’s free every year. And then there’s the webinars and the podcasts, like people will listen to this and get a CE for them.

**Shawnie Olson:** And the other piece is: Alaskans travel more than any other population than in any other state in the nation. I know this for fact. One of the reasons is: We’ve all left family somewhere behind. Almost all of us have left family somewhere else, unless we’re homesteaders and we’ve been here since the word go. We have family somewhere else. Mine is on the East, for example. My children are in the northwest and in the west, but my immediate family from the past was back in Pennsylvania. We tend to want to see our families, so we travel to see them. We also need to get out. We need to get away from this isolation, and then we’ve gone, and then we find out we miss it, and then we come back to it. It’s bizarre, but that’s what we do.

**Rebecca Burke:** Which is wonderful. That is wonderful. Now, for the last question, this has been so fascinating listening to you, but the last question is: ACA now has over 55,000 members, most of whom are clinicians. Is there anything I’ve not asked you that you want our members to know?

**Shawnie Olson:** I think I would say that being an LPC in Alaska has been an absolutely wonderful career for me. I didn’t approach it like most people do. I was a school counselor first, and then became absolutely intrigued with running my own business and seeing adults as opposed to dealing with the teenage world every day of my life. I think Alaska affords a lot of opportunity. Alaska, like many states, is growing. Alaska is getting bigger. Alaska is getting better connected. Alaska has entered the age of technology, and I think practicing here is a marvelous opportunity. I would reiterate or underline the fact that if you’re going to come to counsel in Alaska, have a job lined up; know what you’re going to do. Don’t be afraid to do something like school counseling or counseling at a big clinic or counseling with a couple of other people that you put a small consortium together.

Don’t be afraid to do something that is going to give you a broader base and a bigger opportunity to come here and counsel. To come here and open your own private practice somewhere, that’s pretty scary, because Alaskans have to know you first, and in order to establish that knowledge base, it takes a little time to get into. Even the small communities have many of us live in. And I think that is just a word to the wise, but if I ever wanted to deter anyone, our requirements are pretty much at the top of the rung. We’re at the top of the ladder as far as requirements for an LPC license. But once you
get it, you’ve got it. You can use it forever and it’s a wonderful career, Rebecca, and it’s a wonderful thing to do and what a great way to spend your life, helping others.

**Rebecca Burke:** Absolutely. So wonderful to hear you say that, because you’ll make a lot of people happy by hearing you talk like that about our profession. I want to thank you so much Shawnie Olson for joining us today to discuss counseling in Alaska. Shawnie welcomes any questions about counseling in the Great Land. Her email address is [saje@ak.net](mailto:saje@ak.net). To view links to this program, to write to the presenter or the host, please go to [www.counseling.org](http://www.counseling.org) and click on the podcast page. This is Dr. Rebecca Daniel Burke, your host for the ACA 2015 podcast series signing off.