In the far North, Suzi Israelsson ’84 uses skills acquired at SU and beyond to make a life and career filled with adventure.

by Dawn Bennett Robson ’84

Imagine grabbing your laptop and flying off to work each morning to an exotic place. Sound glamorous? Now imagine doing it in sub-zero temperatures, on a tiny Cessna 207, to remote Eskimo villages in Alaska’s frozen tundra. Oh, and add a six-pack of iBooks, some cameras, a scanner, a projector and other equipment.

Glamorous? Hardly. But, exciting—yes! That’s how Suzi Roissier Israelsson ’84 (a.k.a. “Suzi Orange,” a.k.a. “the Judy Jetson of LKSD”) sees it, or at least she did until the birth of her first child grounded her a year ago last August. Before becoming “Mommy” to Hanna Rose and settling into her current full-time, stay-at-home job developing a student information system and distance learning programs for Alaska’s Lower Kuskokwim School District (LKSD), Israelsson traveled the vast tundra teaching Web-based technology to Yup’ik Eskimo students, teachers and their communities.

Hanna, Suzi and her husband, Tomas, live in Bethel (population 5,470). Bethel is located in the Yukon Delta in western Alaska, about 400 air miles from Anchorage. Suzi and Tomas, a carpenter as well as a dog musher, own the Run-A-Way Dog Kennel and have their own team of sled dogs.

“Bethel is a tundra, it’s a delta, it’s the Kuskokwim River’s drain off. There are not a lot of trees and mountains and all that gorgeous stuff you see on the movies or on Northern Exposure, explained Suzi. “But the people here are just wonderful. The Yup’ik people and their culture are so genuine. They always have a smile and they love to giggle. And people help each other. It’s so friendly and comfortable.”

Suzi hastens to add that the tundra does have a beauty all its own. “It changes color throughout the year and, in the wintertime, it stays covered with a blanket of snow until break-up. And our sunsets can be out of this world. Just today, we had a full moon to the north as the sun was setting to the south.” (In winter, the sun doesn’t rise until about 10:45 a.m. and sets around 5 p.m.)

A Calming Calling

As for those aliases, Suzi’s students nick-named their nomadic teacher after her bright orange snowsuit and her favored color of indoors apparel, while her co-workers dubbed her a high-tech, tundra-style Jetson last year, when she was the district’s video conferencing coordinator. At SU, we first knew her as Suzi Lyons, an enthusiastic yet, by her own admission, less-than-stellar student who took a little time finding her calling.

“My major was pretty much undeclared all along, but then I chose parks and recreation because my sister (Reene Roissier Miller ’81) took that program and really liked it,” said Israelsson. “But I found that I was working pretty much when everybody else was off, and that was a bummer. So, I asked myself what part did I like best about parks and rec. It was working with the children. That’s when I got into education.”

Israelsson soon discovered that she lacked some of the essential skills required of educators. She credits Dr. Barbara Schultz, her Children’s Literature professor, with helping her acquire those fundamentals while encouraging her to tap into her instinctive teaching talents.

“What helped me the most was that she took me under her wing,” said Israelsson. “She just had so much faith in me and she just knew that I would be a great teacher. She took me in her home on Saturdays and tutored me in the writing process and, to this day, in the classroom I’m still using the same skill-learning...
tricks when teaching my kids how to write.”

While student teaching, Israelsson received another valuable lesson. She student-taught twice, first second grade and then fourth graders. With the older kids she experienced discipline problems until her methods professor stepped in with advice. “He is comment was, ‘Suzi, I’ve never had to say this before, but you have too much energy.’ But he also said, ‘If you calm yourself down, I’m sure your kids will calm down too.’ He was right.”

Israelsson also credits another SU professor for nudging her to go “beyond the books” to learn. He encouraged her to supplement her student-teaching experiences with a summer-time stint as a children’s counselor on a cruise ship, a job she thoroughly enjoyed. On board, she had to single-handedly develop a full range of activities to occupy the children.

The Texas Years

After earning her degree in elementary education, Israelsson applied (via a job fair) to a number of school districts. When Houston sent her a contract printed in orange ink—her favorite color—she saw it as a sign. Of course, Texas’ pay also made the offer attractive.

Initially, Israelsson served as environmental science teacher for grades K-five. “That was a lot of fun, because I’m a lifelong Girl Scout,” said Israelsson. “I was able to apply my teaching skills and Girl Scout skills all in one job, which was really cool.”

In 1988, during her third year of teaching in Texas, Israelsson took a vacation to Alaska where her sister, Renee, and brother-in-law, Jamie Miller (an SU student in the early ‘80s), were then living. Suzi fell in love with the state and immediately decided to make it her home. After finishing out the school year, she packed her bags and her pet cockatiel—the school bird and her going-away gift— and headed north.

The Alaska Experience

The bird proved useful in Israelsson’s first job in Bethel, a counselor at an emergency shelter for abused or neglected children. “Usually, when the kids came, they were crying, they were dirty, maybe upset, maybe not fed ...” said Israelsson. “My little cockatiel was the bird of happiness for these kids. The bird would divert their attention from their crisis and help them relax.”

Afer a couple of years at the shelter and then a little time “working on a fishing boat and trying all kinds of other Alaskan experiences,” Israelsson was hired by the LK SD to teach second grade and, later, the sciences. Ten years later, Anchorage needed a rural community to team up with to receive a federally funded technology grant. LK SD fit the bill and Israelsson was tapped for the job.

Discovering the Tundra

Once equipped with knowledge and equipment, Israelsson was on her way. She had some territory to cover. The LK SD comprises a 44,000-square-mile area in and around Bethel, an area roughly the size of Ohio. More than 50 Yup’ik Eskimo villages surround Bethel.

Student enrollment for these villages ranges from about 20 to some 300. (Villages with less than 11 students must home-school their children.) Bethel, the transportation and services hub for the region, consists of about 65 percent Yup’ik villages, (translation: the real people) and 30-40 percent non-Eskimo, including many Europeans as well as Americans. (All are called Gussaq, or “the others,” by the natives.) The villages, however, are typically about 95 to 100 percent Yup’ik.

While Israelsson mostly flew to her destinations, sometime she went by snow machine, boat or, once the waterways were frozen solid, she sometimes loaded up her truck and “drove down the river” to the nearest villages.

During the day, Israelsson would typically work with the teachers and students at the same time, instructing them in how to use Web-based technology applications within the curriculum. At night, the learning didn’t stop.

“In the evenings, since I was camping out in the school anyway, usually sleeping on the floor, I would sometimes open the computer lab to the elders and adults in the community who normally don’t get to use computers. That was exciting because these elders would never have had that opportunity if we hadn’t provided it for them,” said Israelsson.

“At one open house, there was this one man who was crying. So, I went over to him and he cried, ‘T hat’s my church.’ He’d found a picture of his church on the Web. He didn’t even know how to turn a computer on or anything and then he discovers that there is whole new world out there. ‘That’s my church’—it just touched my heart deeply.”

Home at Last

Israelsson has found her calling. And she has found her home. Strictly on appearances, it’s a cold, wet, bleak place. Travel it’s corners and all points between, as Suzi Israelsson has, and you find plenty of warmth and beauty.

Ed. Note: Suzi has documented her visits to the Yup’ik villages with words and pictures. Visit www.lksd.org and then click on “Suzi’s Tundra Travel” page.

From the ‘It’s a Small World’ Department ...

Believe it or not. When Suzi Israelsson was flying around western Alaska, which is well over 4,000 miles from Salisbury, her supervisor was none other than a fellow Salisbury University student.

Richard Taylor was the director of technology for the Lower Kuskokwim School District when Israelsson began teaching technology to remote Yup’ik Eskimo villages.

Before Israelsson began teaching technology, she taught alongside Richard’s wife, Patty, at Bethel’s Kilbuck Elementary School for 10 years. While on sabbatical in 1984, the Taylors (both graduates of Southwest State Texas University), lived in Chincoteague, VA, while Richard took programming classes at SU and Wor-Wic Community College. That same year, Suzi was a senior at SU.

Though they did not know each other back in Salisbury, Suzi and the Taylors are now great friends.