Many people view the aging process with trepidation and dread. But Jordan Lewis has built a fledgling academic career - not to mention a personal philosophy - out of seeing things differently.

“The way I grew up and what I was taught is aging is something to look forward to, you’re respected as an elder,” noted Lewis, who grew up in the Bristol Bay village of Naknek and is now a research associate with the Center for Alaska Native Health Research at UAF. “That’s really focused my career in looking at aging as not something to fear, but to embrace.”

Lewis’ initial interest in geriatrics came from spending time as a child with his Aleut great-grandparents, whom he views as exemplars of “successful aging” because of their ability to embrace modernity while maintaining Native traditions. “My great-grandfather grew up in a sod house, and he was the first person in Naknek to have a truck,” he said. “He knew how to fix his truck, and he had a four-wheeler, but he would still go hunting and knew how to live off the land.”

Lewis studied social work as a UAF undergrad and received a Master’s in social work from Washington University in St. Louis, after which he spent four years in Washington, D.C. at a variety of public policy jobs. But Lewis found himself drawn back to a goal he had held since high school, to earn his Ph.D studying Alaska Natives. He enrolled in UAF’s Resilience and Adaptation Program, which led him to his thesis project: a groundbreaking effort to define successful aging among Native elders in the Bristol Bay area.

Lewis said he wanted to see how Alaska Native perceptions of successful aging related to the accepted Western definition, a largely biomedical model with heavy emphasis on factors like avoiding disabilities and diseases. He suspected Native Alaskans would have a more communal and less materialistic attitude.

“The hypothesis was, elders who are able to remain in their own communities and engage in subsistence activities and lifestyles would age more successfully than those who were either weren’t engaged by the community, or were forced to relocate,” he said.

Lewis interviewed 26 elders in six disparate communities about their definitions of aging well, and he said the responses coalesced around four basic elements: spirituality; optimism and emotional well-being; community engagement, and physical health.

Lewis said some of the results conformed to his expectations, but he was surprised by others, such as the importance of a positive mental attitude. The results also showed a surprising lack of emphasis placed by the elders on avoiding infirmity. “Physical health doesn’t guarantee successful aging,” he said. “Some of the healthiest people in this study who weren’t acknowledged by their community - they didn’t care. They weren’t aging successfully because they didn’t have a purpose.”

Lewis was helped toward his doctorate by Alaska EPSCoR, which awarded him both travel funding and a graduate student fellowship. He’s been showered with accolades over his academic career, including a prestigious Mellon Foundation Dissertation Fellowship and the 2009 National Rural Aging and Public Health Research Award from the American Public Health Association.

But the biggest honor for Lewis has been his appointment to the highly select Council of Public Representatives of the National Institutes of Health. Lewis is serving a 4-year-term on the 21-member board, which is tasked with providing the NIH director with input and feedback on public health issues.