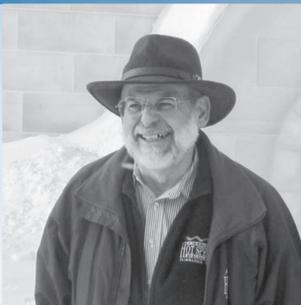


The Statewide Committee for Research honors Alaska's

# Northern Innovators



## Bernie Karl The Crusader

*Northern Innovators Hall of Fame Member*

Bernie Karl, proprietor of this sprawling yet cozy collection of cabins, warm pools and electrical outlets powered by temperature differences in local water, addresses a roomful of Alaska teachers. He does not require a microphone.

“I’ve been blessed with a lot of energy,” he says with volume that raises a few sleepy heads in a dining room at Chena Hot Springs Resort. “And I give it all away.”

Karl, 60, wears a button-up dress shirt under a Chena Hot Springs pile vest and a black fedora. The diesel-mechanic-turned-entrepreneur owns, among other ventures, hotels, a recycling facility, and this resort, where locals and tourists drive for an hour from Fairbanks to soak in soothing water, sip from martini glasses made of ice in a structure made of the same material, and eat salad greens that sprout year-round in this subarctic valley.

Karl and his wife Connie purchased Chena Hot Springs in 1998, when he drilled the first geothermal well on the property and heated buildings with hot water instead of diesel. In an unprecedented effort, he has also pulled electricity from the temperature difference between the icy water of a nearby creek and subsurface water hot as coffee. That hot water powers his resort and also helps keep his one-of-a-kind ice museum frozen on 90-degree days.

The middle-school teachers, gathered for a conference where experts are speaking on snow and ice and how to bring those elements into their classrooms, are about to taste tomato-basil soup that sprung to life in the dead of winter. Their buffet lunch, some of it from greenhouses that are another Karl dream-turned-reality, offers further proof of his oft-repeated phrase — he may be crazy, but he ain’t stupid.

In a state floating on oil, Bernie Karl is a crusader for alternative energy. His gift embodies itself when he speaks. His style: hands-waving,

anecdote-rich, confidence of a gospel evangelist. He is best portrayed in his own words. Following are excerpts from his impassioned speech to a few dozen middle-school science teachers.

“I was the sixth of 16 children (growing up on a farm in Peoria, Illinois). My wife says the reason I’m the way I am is because I was the middle child, always fighting for attention. She might be right.

“I’m this way because my dad put all of us on drugs — all 16 kids were on drugs. At two weeks old, he drug us to be baptized. And then he drug us to church on Sunday. He drug us to bail hay. He drug us to tousle corn. He drug us to the neighbors to do their work. And if he ever caught you taking money, he drug you to the woodshed.

“What’s Chena about? We’re all about sustainability. We’re about your children’s future and my grandchildren’s future. We’ve been a bunch of thieves, stealing from our kids. Stealing their future.

“I want us to get our greatness back. I want us to lead again. How do we do that? First of all we’ve got to get off the addictions. We’re addicted to oil in one arm, and we’re addicted to greed in the other. Those two addictions have us totally screwed up.

“We import 8 million barrels of oil a day from countries that hate our guts. What’s wrong with that picture? We are five percent of the world’s population, yet we consume 25 to 30 percent of all the world’s energy. When the world looks at us, they see a hog.

“We’re taking a little hug from the Earth right here. If you harness 2 percent of the Earth’s energy, that’s 1,000 times more energy than the Earth consumes . . . We’re making power off of 160-degree (Fahrenheit) water. We just drilled a new well, it’s 174 degrees.

“The truest thing our last governor said was ‘Drill Baby Drill.’ And I don’t mean for oil. I don’t care where you’re at, the gradient of the Earth is one-and-a-half degrees per 100 feet. You drill baby drill and you’re going to get a hug from the Earth and you’ll be able to make all your electricity, you’ll be able to grow all your food, you’ll be able to do everything.

“My motto is ‘bringing power to the people.’ You can do it off of solar, off of vacuum tubes, you can do it off of burning some biomass. We want to make everyone grid independent. We want to make everyone responsible for their own destiny. We don’t want you to have to buy anything from the utility unless you so desire. We want to make you the power company.

“And we won’t sell you a unit unless you have a greenhouse. Why’s that? Because we’re going to run with no smokestack. We’re going to show you how to use all the CO<sub>2</sub>. We’re going to show you how to condense out all the water and put it to the plants.

“Why are we going to all that trouble? Because we can! Because you should! There’s only so many resources.

“We’re getting really good at growing food. Why? Because we have the two ingredients it takes to be really good. It doesn’t take money. And it doesn’t take brains. Here at Chena Hot Springs, we have vision and passion. Those are the two most important ingredients to making anything work.

“We have never, ever let the lack of money slow us up. If you wait till you have the money to do something, you’ll never do anything. If you have the vision and passion and you can share that, and people believe in you, I guarantee you can get all the money you want.”