

This month, Alex corresponds with Jen Brower, a school counselor from Utqiagvik, Alaska. Located within the Arctic Circle, it is the northern-most U.S. city.

Hello Jen,

I'm Alex, an eighth grader from Colorado. I'm excited to talk with you. Since seeing the movie *Big Miracle*, I've been interested in learning about the town where you live, Utqiagvik. I would love to visit someday.

In the movie, your town was called Barrow. Why did the name change?

I imagine it gets very cold because you're in the Arctic Circle. What's the coldest temperature you've experienced? Do you ever have days without sunlight?

Sincerely,

Alex

Hi Alex,

I'm Jen Brower, I work at an alternative school as the counselor in Utqiagvik, Alaska. I have lived here for more than 20 years. It's now my permanent home.

Big Miracle was a neat movie. This community was called Barrow in the 1980s when the movie took place. In 2016, the community changed the name to its original name Utqiagvik. It was changed to bring the original

Alex enjoys a walk through the village at Winter Park.



The Brower family attends Nalukataq, a spring whaling festival where food is shared and everyone enjoys fun activities.





ancestral language of the area back, and to promote pride and identity to the indigenous Inupiaq people.

Utqiagvik is the northern-most city in the United States. It is located above the Arctic Circle, an imaginary line that marks an area where at least one day or more each year the sun doesn't set in the summer or rise above the horizon in the winter. At the end of November the sun goes down and doesn't rise until late January. So yes, I experience times without sunlight. The opposite is also true. During summer the sun will be out for 24 hours a day.

Our community doesn't have trees. Plants and vegetation grow low to the ground, so you can see for miles without anything blocking your view.

The coldest times of the year are in February and March. The average temperature is around -10 to -20 degrees Fahrenheit. Some days are much colder. The coldest I've experienced is about -45 degrees. With the wind blowing it felt like -60. The summers are warmer with temperatures in the 30s and 40s. It feels wonderful with the sun out.

Jen

Dear Jen,

Are you originally from Utqiagvik? If not, why did you move there?

What is Utqiagvik culture like? What are typical jobs?

I've read that there's a lot of scientific research done there.

With such low temperatures even during the summer months, is there a growing season? What type of food do you eat? Is it expensive to live there?

Sincerely,
Alex



Alex relaxes after school.



Dear Alex,

I grew up in San Diego and moved here when I turned 19 for a new adventure. It's a thriving community with a rich culture. I grew to love it. I eventually married Eben Brower, an Inupiaq who grew up here. We have three kids, two cats, and one dog.

The culture focuses on traditional values and indigenous ways of life. We are close-knit. Everyone knows everyone. When I came back from college, I heard, "Welcome home."

Utqiagvik is a rural community. To get here you have to take a plane. The population is predominately Alaska Native Inupiaq people. Many families participate in subsistence hunting, which includes caribou for meat, fishing with nets in summer, and whaling in spring and fall. No part of an animal is wasted. The community also celebrates spring festival, Fourth of July, and Christmas when indigenous games are played. Traditional clothing is often worn to these events.

Employment options vary but we have local government, a hospital, a vet clinic, a school system, and independent organizations similar to those across the country. We have many scientists who study whale migration, birds, local wildlife, climate, and more.

Many people have attempted different methods

for growing food in the Arctic

Circle. The growing season is very short. We have found success growing plants in ice coolers filled with dirt and a clear covering on top to create a small greenhouse. Some schools have hydroponic gardens indoors to grow fresh lettuce and herbs. Because it costs so much to transport them to Utqiagvik by plane, fruit and vegetables are expensive. This is why subsistence hunting is so important. There are specific times of year to hunt and fish to keep the wildlife population large while also ensuring people have food to eat.

Jen



Jen's daughter, Charity, helps harvest caribou meat.



Jen's husband, Eben, sorts net-caught fish.





Hi Jen,

Do people in your community need to do anything special to cope with the lack of sunlight and being forced indoors during the coldest times? What activities help keep people busy?

Sincerely,

Alex



Hi Alex,

People who move to Utqiagvik often have difficulties with the lack of sunlight during the winter. They often purchase special lamps for their homes or offices. Summers filled with sunlight were the hardest for me. Waking up at 2 a.m. when it looks like 2 p.m. was strange. I ended up at work in the middle of the night at least once.

In the winter, the community hosts many activities for everyone to stay active. We have gyms, restaurants, health and kids' fairs, Christmas activities, and churches. The winter doesn't feel long when you are participating in community activities.

I hope you and your father get to visit our lovely community someday. I would love to show you around.

Jen



Alex didn't need to visit the Arctic Circle to find a polar bear.



Wow! The Northern Lights as seen from Jen's backyard.

