

Pat Pitney

Interim President

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To the staff, students and faculty of the University of Alaska system,

Today, a verdict was issued bringing justice in the murder of 20-year-old Sophie Sergie, nearly 29 years ago in a dorm on the University of Alaska Fairbanks Troth Yeddha' campus. This afternoon a Fairbanks jury convicted Steven Downs, bringing closure to a painful chapter that has plagued our community for decades.

There is no amount of justice that will erase the collective pain and trauma caused by this tragedy, but it is my sincere hope that this verdict will finally allow Sophie's family and friends, our universities and communities to begin to heal.

Sophie's murder is a stark reminder of the prevalence of violence against women in Alaska, especially among Alaska Native women. To see justice served in Sophie's case is a small comfort.

We must ensure our universities are safe, welcoming environments and be leaders in creating a culture of respect and safety. To that end, we have increased staffing for our Title IX offices, mandated annual training for employees and students, and provided tools to assist members of our community when they become aware of difficult situations, including sexual harassment or assault, through [Title IX training](#) and online resources.

The public trial and reminder of this tragedy have been painful, not only to the families and friends that were directly or indirectly impacted by this case, but for all members of our community who are survivors of sexual assault - men, women, LGBTQ+, Native and non-Native. I want you all to know that the university cares, and that [resources](#) are available to you no matter where you are in our university system.

Students are reminded that the Student Health and Counseling Centers can provide support or counseling. Employees are eligible for free counseling through the Employee Assistance Program. Please call 1-888-993-7650, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

We must all take responsibility to prevent and promptly report instances of interpersonal violence and other misconduct. Your continued dedication to this effort is appreciated, and is critical to the campus environment we want to foster.

Sincerely,

Pat Pitney, Interim President  
University of Alaska