

Athabaskan Recovery Camp offers hope through culture and tradition

by Shelly Marshall
for the Tundra Times

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MANSFIELD — I clung to the bow of the small fishing boat, wind whipping at my hair, sunglasses protecting my eyes from the Bush bugs smashing against my face, while Raymond Titus piloted me, his family and some supplies to the original village of the Tanacross Athabascans.

Mansfield is maintained as a fish camp by the Tanacross population and recently has adapted itself to the villagers as a recovery camp. This camp was conceived by Kenny Thomas, a Native alcoholism counselor and member of *Dene*, the Athabaskan people. He's been working for 18 years to help heal his people from the most devastating disease ever to hit the Indian population — alcoholism.

The concept of an isolated "treatment center" in a traditional Indian fish camp intrigued me. Treatment centers for chemical dependency are not new to me. I have worked in the addictions field for 20 years, although never with Alaska Natives. I began a detox center for the Ute and Navajo Indians in southern Colorado.

Professionals, physicians, psychiatrists, social workers and therapists learned long ago that treatment without 12-step programs, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, doesn't succeed well with alcoholism and other addictions.

Unfortunately, we also discovered that even with AA and NA, treatment of Native Americans seldom succeeds. "I expect our people to get well here and stay well," Thomas explained to me. And by visiting the camp, I hoped to identify some of the aspects that work in their new program of recovery for Alaska Natives.

Thomas is the man responsible for formalizing Recovery Camp. I say "formalizing" because villagers have been informally using Mansfield to sober up for years.

No alcohol is allowed, and there are no stores to buy it in. Also, there are no phones, and without a boat or hiking supplies, there is no easy way out.

"Many times over the years," Thomas told me, "people coming off the booze would say, 'Take me to Mansfield,' and they stayed a week, a month or more. Sometimes I stayed with them."

"But what I noticed was, it worked. Our village is a good place, and if meditating here, surrounded by tradition, worked for one, it would work better if we did it together."

Thomas proposed a plan to the Tanana Chiefs Conference for the camp, and they agreed to fund it.

I arrived after an almost two-hour boat trip which included poling over three different mud banks in the Mansfield Creek. The remote fish camp along the creek consists of scattered log cabins, outhouses and fish drying racks surrounded by brightly decorated burial sites. The camp is located in the center of the village with

several plywood sleeping quarters and a large tent mess hall to the north.

What struck me was the orderliness of everything. Supplies neatly stacked here, tools organized there, logs for peeling in this pile and finished birch poles in that pile. Mansfield doesn't resemble any treatment facility I'm familiar with.

There are no hospital beds, no lists of rules to break, no medicine cabinets, no offices, no cashier, no receptionist and no locked doors. Recovery Camp is indeed a fish camp. So what makes this work?

Sizing me up, residents didn't offer much about the camp except small talk that first night.

"Where you from?" Phil, a 22-year

who had gathered when the elder's expressions escaped me.

I hoped the old man would speak of this village, this place where sobriety began.

"The real name of the village is 'The Sod,'" the old man said. Ah, now we get to the Recovery Camp. I hastily scribbled the name on my notepad.

"No, no," Bob, another resident, enunciated the name: *Dehtod*, which means embankment.

Each of us around the campfire listened closely. We learned that *Dehtod* is more than 1,000 years old. Claykata was a great chief here, during the gold rush the white man renamed the village Mansfield and

"We take troubled youth, and the elders teach them the old way to fish and set snares. We tell the stories of when no one had seen ham and eggs or axes or propane or cigarettes or alcohol. The kids today are too far away from our culture."

Thomas leans back and points to the space between our shoulders.

"The kids are here, halfway between us and you, the white man. They can't go all the way back to the old ways." His chuckles ripple his stomach as he confesses, "For one thing, I don't know enough about the old ways myself. But our kids don't fit into your culture either. Our ways are good, though."

As we kick more dirt he tells me that



Recovery Camp is in the center of Dehtod. Shown are several of the facilities, including the mess tent, second from left.

old good looking man asked.

"Originally California. I live in Tok now," I answered.

"Ha!" Phil thought he'd hit upon common ground. "The Grateful Dead. Do you like?"

"Na," I said. I always figured honesty was the best policy, even if I was trying to be accepted by a group.

He shook his head sadly. "Oh, you're too old for the Dead?"

I wondered if this young guy was trying to be poetic or if it just came naturally. Too old for the Dead? I wasn't sure. I moved outside by the campfire and looked into a pair of 88-year-old eyes surrounded by layers of wrinkled skin.

"Well," the elder snapped, "am I supposed to tell you stories about the old days?" I nodded yes, hoping he would tell me stories of this village so I could get a clue as to why Recovery Camp was working for the Tanacross village.

Several years ago, in a population of 75 adults, a visitor to Tanacross might find only one or two sober people on any given day. Now a visitor would find only one or two drunk people.

The elder spoke, voice crackling through missing teeth and wrinkled lips. His words painted a portrait of a childhood before he'd seen a white man, his other village 75 miles north, his wonder about a 14-hour trip to Whitehorse by car, not dog sled. I listened closely to his broken English, seeking clarification from the others

sacred ground lay to the east.

Sacred ground? I immediately fixated on that. However, the elder had tired and waved us off. Storytelling was finished for the night.

I began the next morning frustrated. Obviously, Recovery Camp was working. But why? We non-Native professionals, white-collar men and women, couldn't do in an expensive hospital setting what the Athabascans could do for a handful of supplies, a fishing boat and a storyteller. Not only as a professional, but as a fellow recovering alcoholic, I wanted... needed to know.

Thomas explained that I already had participated in part of their "program."

"We sit around the fire at night and tell stories of the old ways, sober ways and try to instill value, value now lost in the bottle."

Thomas shares how he got sober 18 years prior. Residents share and relate to one another, building an intimate understanding.

The counselors recommend staying three months, but each person is free to decide his or her own program.

"People are free up here," Thomas said. "They think about themselves. It's a place to think about yourself and why you want to change."

We rest on the wooden porch of a small village cabin, our feet kicking dirt aimlessly as we speak. I asked him about young people coming to the camp, as Phil was only 22, and I'd noticed another young man there.



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he saw the Depression, and it never affected his people.

"They just did what they always did: fished, hunted, made clothes. They didn't do without like the rest of the country."

"Now we don't want our kids to forget. It helps them stay off alcohol by giving them something to do, living in the old ways."

Thomas' eyes looked to the sky when he spoke as if he addressed important unseen visitors, not just me. Then he waved me away, not unlike the elder from the night before.

I cornered Mildred, making salmon stew in the mess tent.

"What works here, Mildred? How do these guys recover?"

She turned her caring eyes toward me, shaking the thick dark curls from her face. Mildred looked like a girl herself, yet she told me one of the young men, not alcoholic, was her son!

"The sweat baths help when they first arrive."

Yes, I thought. To detoxify the natural way. Aren't steam baths and saunas renowned the world over for cleansing the poisons from the body? It was a brilliant concept. One, it occurred to me, that should be incorporated into other treatment programs. A sweat bath to detoxify the body was medically practical for Recovery Camp; the Athabaskan sweat was as natural as breathing.

Mildred carefully picked bones from a red meaty salmon filet.

"We don't have any alcohol in the village here."

Abstinence, of course, is the basis of the road to recovery for any

alcoholic.

"But," the cook added in a disapproving tone, "we found some beer cans along the bank. Some people from town (Tok) went to the lake to fish. After they left we had to go clean the beer cans up."

"People (white people) don't respect us. We don't say anything to them about camping on our land. We don't charge them. But when you go to Fairbanks or Anchorage, they charge us to park our cars!"

She flung portions of salmon into the stew pot.

Phil meandered in to pour himself a cup of coffee from the always brewing pot on the stove.

"Hey, Phil," I said. "what's working for you here?"

Phil's cup shook slightly in his hands. He was new and still in withdrawal from cocaine.

"I've been in other treatment centers before. They didn't work for me. The feeling was bad. I got the feeling that instead of helping us get sober, they were making us get sober. So we (Indians) just leave and go drink."

"Tell me about the sacred ground the elder spoke of last night."

But Phil left, dismissing me by his sudden absence. My questions either got too nosy, too tiresome or it was just the Indian way to dismiss me after an allotted amount of time.

No one ever told me, and that is the Indian way — to let you figure out protocol on your own. I'd learned that much from the Utes and Navajos years earlier.

Irene, a volunteer with two years and eight months sobriety, answered

photos by Shelly Marshall



Marshiann Titus, 8, of Tanacross accompanies her father to bring in supplies.



Raymond Titus, camp director, peels a birch pole for the fish rack.

me.

"You must mean Medicine Hill." She pointed to the east hill of *Dehtod*, past the gravesites brightly painted red, white and blue fencing decorated with colorful flowers and purple wreaths.

The beauty of this village compelled me, nestled like this in the Interior, with Mansfield Lake to the north and the Alaska Range and Denali framing the scene from the south.

I looked up the hill she pointed at. I had been atop there yesterday playing with the children of Ray, the riverboat pilot and camp director who brought me to *Dehtod*.

"Two great medicine men are buried there. Some people hear drums and voices and other noises. It makes them afraid."

Irene peered at me, and I nodded for her to continue, hoping I wouldn't be "dismissed" yet again.

"If you go up there with a sincere heart and ask for help for you and your family you will be granted that. But if you don't do your part... a misfortune could befall you."

"So," I chanced asking her, "people from Recovery Camp go there and ask for help in staying sober?"

"They can," Irene said, hesitating.

"But," I'd almost forgotten, "they are free here and do whatever they are guided to do."

She grinned. I'd finally understood. Then Phil returned, handing Mildred a page he'd just written for us:

"Feels good to come. All my problems seem to drift away. They say my grandfather used to travel to this place by dog team. Maybe he came here because he had problems, too."

"It's amazing how just being here with the land can help you. Even the animals seem at peace. I drank a Coca-Cola today and laughed because the ones who lived here before were probably looking down and chuckling that there sat a young Indian buck, in the front yard, praying and drinking soda pop."

Reluctant to leave, I made plans with the residents for a return when the whitefish are plentiful. I asked my last question before stepping into the boat, "Ken, this is only for the Athabascans?"

Thomas shook his head. "Open to everybody. I will not say no to any

color. How could I turn someone away? What would you do?"

I would never turn anyone away, either, I thought as our boat joined the river currents back to Tanacross. A gentle misty rain cleansed our passage home.

I snuggled into my jacket, pulling the hood over my head, blocking the cold so I could think about their program. It looked surprisingly familiar, similar to the AA program. AA, like Recovery Camp, is another self-help, grassroots approach to sobriety that baffled professionals in its overwhelming success where the professional approach failed.

In AA, people with a common suffering sit around a table to share, in Recovery Camp, they sit around a bonfire. In AA, they ask a Higher Power of their own understanding for help; in Recovery Camp, they have a spiritual understanding and relationship with the earth; and they have Medicine Hill.

In AA, there are no rules, just a suggested 12-step program; in Recovery Camp, each resident is free to find his own recovery. They both aspire to abstinence.

And so, where the medical profession had to learn about addiction recovery from the alcoholic/addict's personal grassroots success, the white culture must learn about Natives' recovery from their personal grassroots success.

Do the *Dene* recover from alcoholism in a way different from the "white man"? No. Both cultures recover based on the same principles. It is the same disease of addiction and the same recovery process.

The principles of recovery are just housed in a different cultural-relevant context. I found the answer I sought: the "new way" for the Alaska Native to recover is imbedded in the "old way," both theirs and ours.

Shelly Marshall is the author of *Day by Day and Young, Sober and Free*. She has been in the field of addiction recovery for 20 years with a Bachelor of Science degree in Human Services/Drugs, Alcohol from Metropolitan State College in Denver and a degree in counseling from Burton College and Seminary in Denver. She has just finished her latest book: *Teen-age Addicts Can Recover, which is now being readied for publication.*