

Cultural conflicts leads to alcoholism in Natives

Editor's Note: The following My Turn piece was written by a brother in the Akeela House Inc., Comprehensive Drug Free Program at part of an Akeela House seminar for inpatients.

I write of my feelings about the effect that alcohol has had on a great percentage of my people. My people have survived against the odds and peculiarities of the land that is often harsh, a land now under political and governmental structures due to its resources. The imposition of these new structures has greatly affected the lifestyle, values, adaptation, status and transitions of my people. The change has been bewildering and confusing to a point that often brings stress and depression to many of us who have been regarded as isolated, primitive, unique and technically deprived. There is no way to avoid dealing with the changes. We are caught up in the confrontation.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, alcohol was introduced by Russian explorers to my people who were nomadic hunters, trappers and fishermen. Slowly, in the advancing years, as resources and land development presented an ideal economy to businessmen and the federal government, alcohol became more of a problem. The abundance of money-making opportunities brought in more people, and these people brought more changes. These changes were introduced without question.

There was no understanding of alcohol by my people, of its detrimental physical, emotional and spiritual effects. When alcohol became readily available—as towns were constructed and liquor businessmen put up stores—it became more than just a problem to many. It became a handicap.

For many thousands of years my people were able to live in harmony with themselves, with each other and with the environment. There were able to control themselves. Control meant dealing with necessities of everyday life. Stress, depression, anguish and loneliness were all accepted aspects of survival. People had to be in control, to accept that life

was hard, in order to survive. There was no choice, no way to avoid hardships. Inner strength was a quality passed on from the elders, from one generation to the next.

Now, however, I sense that this value has been diminished to some extent. I feel that the changes of the past thirty years have been a great burden for my culture. Among these burdens are the deaths associated with alcohol abuse and the problems of having to cope with alcoholic members of the family. Some statistics reveal that among the 70,000 Eskimos, Indians, and Aleuts, 43% of all suicides and 38% of all homicides are a result of alcohol misuse. To me, this shows that alcohol is a major problem, and it is sad. The suicide rate among rural Natives is 15% higher than the national average, and these kids and young adults are concentrated in the age range of 15 to 25. Drownings, exposure to cold, fire-related and accidental deaths have all stemmed from alcohol misuse.

It is very hard to deal with alcoholism in rural Alaska since there are no adequate facilities to handle problem drinkers. There are virtually no counseling resources to turn to, except a few friends and members of the communities who have little, if any, training to provide counseling.

Native alcoholics—like all who suffer from alcoholism—become self-centered, sick, self-destructive, handicapped, socially-impaired, motivationally inadequate, physically and socially neglected and psychologically impaired. They need help from Natives who understand and control the effects of alcohol. They need help in communicating and expressing their feelings of the things that they do not understand. I feel that the most important necessity for sobriety is communicating effectively and honestly.

In a newspaper quote, Robert Cole, Director of the Alaska State Office of Alcohol and Drug Abuse, says: "It is difficult to face the fact that your own lifestyle and belief systems are not going to be allowed to

function." I feel that this statement relates to the conflict between Native and modern values. This statement tells me that I have to turn half-heartedly to a lifestyle that I do not yet fully accept. It means that I have no choice. In feeling that I have no choice, I realize, I am drawing a line in between the two lifestyles. It is, at times, very hard for me to adapt to both living situations. I value my language, Native foods, hunting with my friends and relatives, participating in the feasts and gatherings, carving ivory, fishing all year round and learning animal habits. This now seems to me to be "second place" next to the obligation to learn urban skills in order to survive in the years ahead.

The line I drew between these two structured lifestyles brought me to alcoholism. I felt a lot of fear in dealing with modern society. I felt insecure, unsure of myself in succeeding. I did not know how to cope with my family, and my family in turn was aware that my desires were not centered on actually living a subsistence lifestyle. I also felt that my parents did not under-

stand me as I was, or my desires to live differently. I wanted to go on to school, but my parents held me back a lot.

So I had a communication problem with my parents. I felt that they tried to understand, but really could not. Trying to deal with that caused me to feel a lot of frustration and depression. It hurt me a lot when I wanted to leave home to pursue my educational goals but my dad became angry. He put a lot of guilt trips on me about leaving the family. Not only was a frustrated mentally and psychologically, but I was also bored and tense because of the limited recreation and places to go in the village. So to escape and recreate myself I began to rely on alcohol and other drugs. As time went on, I habitually became addicted to coping with life through my chemical dependency. I relied on alcohol more heavily and began to close myself in.

I didn't realize at that time that I was actually closed in. I felt that, as an intellectual, I lived in my own world within my mentality as a modernized and self-complexed Native. I

became self-centered and drew away from facing myself within my own world. Often I would contemplate and begin to fear life itself. I didn't know that I was okay. I didn't know what I was all about. For brief intervals I tried to reinforce myself to straighten up. But then I was faced with the reality that I didn't like or enjoy the village situation and the family pressure that I had to endure. I was unhappy with where I was at with myself. I couldn't actually formulate my desires and intentions of what I wanted to be or do. Some days when I didn't feel any self-worth, I contemplated committing suicide. Most of this was caused by my insecurities and depression, but it was also caused by my loneliness and the communication conflict which I faced because my girlfriend was in a different village. I had a hard time coping with the situation. As time passed, during my loneliness, I began to draw away from village social gatherings. Instead, I drew myself inward and began to resent myself and the village. too.

In this period of abusing alcohol
(Continued on Page Six)

Conflicts cause alcoholism

(Continued from Page Three)

hol and other drugs, I often left the house--either on one of the family boats or on my snow-machine--to go out hunting. During the summer I viciously shot birds and began to play a game wherein they became the problems which I had; I had to destroy them. During the winter I would challenge myself in seeing if I could play with my fear of dangerous slopes.

What I've said so far could re-

late to many Natives who have the same fears and insecurities of coping with modernization and competition in a complex society, who feel fear of the present and future, who do not communicate effectively and do not know how to assert themselves. I feel that this generation--my generation--will one day defeat themselves. There will be a few though whom I feel will survive and cope with the changes.

I am fearful at this time that

overwhelming and complicated changes will eventually cause more addiction to alcohol and other drugs if my race does not sort out the communication gap. I feel that there is a need for Native leaders who can effectively and honestly point out and explain the need for communication, the need for understanding and acceptance of the present and future social disturbances in cultural exchanges and settings.

In writing this, I feel fearful and emotionally hurt when I see what alcohol and change has caused. I feel for my race from deep inside. I'm angry and hurt that it has to be this way. I resent the fact that I am an alcoholic. I resent seeing my race going through this change. I'm glad, though, that I'm in touch with myself and that I'm being directed into a personal course of action in sorting myself out.

I still feel that I am emotionally weak and attentive to my alcoholism. Throughout my life I will need your support and care, as I see it now. I feel that I have the intention to help others that can see through my eyes. My eyes have endured much, but still see reality. The reality I'm seeing hurts. Spiritually, I see that God has a sense to direct me if I continue to search. Simply, I have to accept myself and where I'm at now.