

Community approach to alcohol, drugs, may be effective

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Three years ago Max Chuckalusion, Jr. was destroying his body with too much drugs and alcohol. He went home to Tyonek to recover and praises the elders for reaching out and helping him rediscover his cultural roots as part of the healing process. Today, he is a counselor in Tyonek where his knowledge of village life is invaluable for success in treating the crippling problems of drug and alcohol abuse. Chucalusion, an Athabaskan, has put renewed faith and respect in his elders as important part of treatment for Native people struggling to find identity.

"I never believed in my culture. I didn't know what it was. Now I believe. I learned mostly from my elders." He said the Drug and Alcohol treatment program in his village is designed to work according to how the village want it. He programs it to what they want and not waste his time trying programs that won't work.

"I don't take the credit. I make sure the whole people in the village will support me. I make sure the village council supports me," he said. He believes it's going to make a lot of good change in Tyonek.

"More people respond if you take over your own Drug and Alcohol program because you're one of them," he said, his voice almost too quiet to be heard. He said he doesn't open his office until late morning when he knows the town will be awake.

Chuckalusion is an example of Native people in villages assuming responsibility and turning to the elders for guidance in battling alcohol and drug abuse. From elders, young Native people are being directed back to a spiritual awareness passed down for generations but largely ignored by the advent of western ways which separated cultures.

Chuckalusion joined other counselors and administrators from around the state at the 11th Annual School on Addiction Studies Conference held at the Sheraton Hotel from May 6-10. With the theme: "Health and Healing: A Community Approach to Addictions." Around 500 people attended. Included were Native elders who for the first time in the last few years are beginning to receive young people's respect as they seek their cultural roots.

"That's the trend today," said Walter Austin, 67, a retiree from Port Alexander, a village below Sitka. "They're beginning to

listen again." He is soft-spoken, speaking deliberately and directly, unhurried in what he says to a room full of people who have come to listen to him and two other elders speak.

He believes elders should become more involved with treatment programs as part of the healing process for the Native people.

"If we fail to teach, fail to become involved in any recovery program we will become spectator. This is why we're here, so the children will not have so much problems in the future... Recovery is not just head knowledge."

Austin has been a teacher for Bob Sam, after he quit drinking five years ago, and was seeking his way back to his Tlingit culture. In an emotional statement, Sam recalled the beginning of the end. He was a small child playing amongst his elders in his village.

"The elders were crying because they knew education was more important. This was in the '50s," he said. Education, and more devastating, alcohol removed him for many years from his cultural ties.

"I'm sober now, I feel like I'm looking for something. I stuck with Walter for the last 3-4 years. I'm listening to him more and more. The same kind of feeling I had as a child I'm feeling in this room."

"I wish more young people would listen to what you people have to say because it's our spirit that is bringing us back together again."

Austin and two other elders, Titus Peter, 64, an Athabaskan from Ft. Yukon, and Art Neilson, 64, Tlingit from Sitka talked

about life in the villages when they were growing up. They shared stories, parables and metaphors taught to them when they were young. With voices quiet they spoke with story-telling eloquence, their hands doing a lot of the talking. The audience quietly absorbed the age-old stories which included Native spiritualness that today combines many of the christian teachings.

"When the churches came in, a lot of villages lost a lot of their tradition. My community lost our old medicine men," said key-note speaker Anne Frank, Athabaskan, an ordained priest from Minto. "I remember the old medicine man dancing around and chanting. With the church system we learned the new ways. When the priest came in they taught us new ways."

"The mind of our elders was very spiritual, everything was done for the good of others," Frank said. A part of spirituality she remembered is being revived through elders and is a source of inspiration for young people today.

"I feel real good about where we're going today. I feel real good. I can't do it without the direction of my elders. I know there's a sense of peace because we are going through a healing process and the elders are healing us," said Sam. "There is a coming together where our spirituality is a priority."

The merging of the generation gap has been a long time coming. The older people were firmly taught and understood where they belonged but their children and their children's children have had to find themselves, pulled between two different and conflicting worlds. Now the younger

generation is listening to what the elders have to say.

"I think the older people wanted to share but they didn't have an audience. We were too busy using alcohol and drugs. They were very patient people and waited for us to find our way back. Then they started to open up," said Sam.

"I just feel that for any new programs that are being developed we need to include our elders," he added. Sam is the new director of the alcohol program at RurAL Cap, a non-profit organization.

The word "elders" is a generic term that means different things to different people.

"When we talk about elders we are not talking about 70-80 year olds. It is you and I who have to practice it for the young people," said Anne Frank, a grandmother in her 50's.

"I don't know the difference between elders and old people," said Titus Peter, from Ft. Yukon.

The different meanings all seem to have one aspect in common - an elder is one who is esteemed and respected, a role model to look up to, to learn the old ways from, and receive guidance.

Laurie Maurum, a trainer for the Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation, spoke enthusiastically of villages taking over their treatment programs and including elders in the decision makings. She feels that is the way it should be because the village counselors have been there longer than anyone. Villages in her area are forming their own Alcohol Board where villages volunteer their time to support and provide direction (Continued on Page Seventeen)

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around alcohol prevention. She spoke of the success in Toksook Bay, population 500.

Maurum said there are twenty members on the board and about 150 people attend the Alcohol Board meetings which they call the Youth and Elders Conference.

There they share advice such as how to live in two cultures.

"There is such involvement between elders and youth. The whole training has changed. I sit in the back and orchestrate. The Alcohol Board works out the agenda. Their workshops are all in Yupik," she said.

"I think it's statewide. There's

a feeling with young people that we can't do it in the system without our elders. We need to have that spirit, that direction because without their assistance we'll fall down," said Sam.

But cities, cash economy, and other influences of the western culture are just as much a reality for the Native person in Alaska.

Young people are seen walking

around in villages wearing headsets keeping beat to such performers as Prince or Michael Jackson. There is always the tug of college, educating young minds to life and worlds way beyond the sphere of elder teaching and Native culture.

"This is a confused

world. What can you say to a

child living in two different worlds? The best I can do is teach them all I know, when he is older he will understand," said Anne Frank, mother of four and grandmother of two grandsons. "Let us get out and work and try to guide up the strength of our people again."