

Couple seeks to help alcoholics in Alaska

by Pamela Cravez

for the Tundra Times

Don and Carolyn Peter think the most important question Natives should ask themselves is: Do people they elect to boards and commissions abuse drugs or alcohol?

Don Peter, an Athabaskan raised in Fort Yukon and now president of its village corporation, heads the Alaska Native Human Resources Development Program at the University of Alaska-Anchorage.

His wife, Carolyn, works with the Alaska Council on the Prevention of Alcohol and Drug Abuse. Both are recovering alcoholics and are involved in helping others fight chemical dependency.

Alcoholism is not just a family problem, says Carolyn.

"In the villages it is a community problem," she said, adding it can't help but affect important issues such as 1991.

Leaders who use chemicals on a regular basis lack a clear, open mind for decision making, says Carolyn.

To help people learn to deal with the



Alcohol abuse is a growing problem in Alaska

Photo by Norris Klesman

pressures of decision making Don Peter and Frank Berry, former president of the Alaska Native Foundation and director of Cook Inlet Native Association, worked through the resources development program to develop the Alaska Native Leadership Program. So far, more than 80 people have graduated from the year-long intensive program, now administered

by ANF.

Participants learn how to handle stress, says Don. They learn alternatives to chemicals. Graduates also learn not to be manipulated by people who wine and dine them.

Those who have gone through the leadership program have gone back to

(Continued on Page Nine)

Couple explains need for support systems

(Continued from Page One)

their villages and become involved in village corporations, served as mayor and been appointed magistrates, and some have gone on to advanced degrees, Don Peter said.

Both Don and Carolyn are sensitive to the need for sobriety support systems in rural areas.

"Where abuse is the norm you can't tell where you stack up," says

Carolyn. "It's very lonely."

Don recalls the games he used to play when he had first sobered up. He'd tell the bartender that when he asked for a rum and coke to just bring a coke. That way his friends would think he was keeping up with them when he was only drinking coke.

"When we're using (chemicals) we don't mind making an utter fool of ourselves," says Carolyn. "But when we sober up we don't want anyone to know."

Carolyn, originally from Kingman, Kan., flew to Fort Yukon to teach in 1966. On the same plane was Don Peter, a local boy returning home from 18 months in Vietnam.

"He said I was the only one he could marry because I was the only girl he wasn't related to," she said.

Don was the mayor of Fort Yukon then and drinking quite heavily. The pressures became very great for Carolyn. She went to the clinic and they handed her Valium. Carolyn says her family's downward spiral is no better or worse than others. Today, she and Don concentrate on the elements of their recovery.

"People in Fort Yukon think I just came to Anchorage and got a shot," says Don of his 10-year recovery. "They don't realize it's a lot of work."

To get sober, he said, people must get in touch with their cultural roots. "If it's not from down in here," Don said, pressing his chest, "It's just talk."

"Native people are very spiritual," says Carolyn. "More so than others. Chemicals separate us from our creator. The effects of chemical dependency are more devastating on Natives since it is their core."

Spirit Camps, a project sponsored by the resources development pro-

gram, help people get in touch with their spiritual selves.

"There's something about being out in a camp setting closer to land, water, trees," says Don. "It helps us get in touch with ourselves and the land."

Spirit Camps have been held all over the state: Fort Yukon, Tanana, Yakutat, Haines and Fairbanks. As people get closer to their spiritual selves they realize how much alcohol takes away from their inner lives.

A teacher by trade, Carolyn is sensitive the effect that alcoholism has on children. She remembers when her son was told that alcoholism was a disease he prayed every night, "Please help my daddy get well."

To help children better understand the complications of alcoholism in their lives Carolyn developed a program that uses puppets. The puppets talk to school children about alcoholism.

This program has proven so successful that it is used throughout Alaska.

"You can have the best school program in the world, but it won't be successful until the community adopts this

(a positive attitude about sobriety)," cautions Carolyn.

She is particularly enthusiastic about a program that has been used in Canada with the Alkali Lake people. In the past 15 years the Alkali people have gone from 100 percent alcoholism to 95 percent sobriety, and from 95 percent unemployment to 85 percent employment, she says.

The Four Worlds Development Project is the community development model which helped the Alkali people. It started with the chief and his wife getting sober, says Carolyn. They were sober for a year before others in the community followed them, she said.

For the program to work it takes the leaders of the community identifying themselves as healthy role models, says Carolyn.

On Nov. 15 and 16 Indians from Canada will share their experience in the Four Worlds Development Project with Alaskans.

Sobriety has meant many changes for both Don and Carolyn Peter. Today, when Don goes into a bar, he says, "I order a coke, 7-up, whatever. I never buy anybody a drink."