

Inmates tell kids: Learn from our mistakes

By Bill Hess

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The Native students gathered together in the classroom at East High in Anchorage greet their three visitors and the guard who has brought them here from the Hiland Mountain Correctional Center with a combination of mild curiosity and indifference. They had been watching a videotape of themselves playing basketball on the television.

Some seem slightly irritated to have had the tape stopped before their victory was cinched.

Any indifference soon disappears. The students listen intently, hardly moving their eyes from the speakers. The inmates had only been scheduled to address the youth during their noon break, but instead are invited to stay over for two more hours to speak mostly to the same students again as they meet in different classes.

The prisoners are taking part in what they call a "strength of mind" program. "What we don't want to see," Harry John, Chief of the Native Cultural Council, explains why they have come, "is any of you guys caught in the same system we are. We want you to find out who you are, find out about your traditional belief system."

Alcohol, John tells the students, is what put virtually all of the Native prisoners now serving time in jail. He knows many of the young people listening to him are now facing alcohol themselves. The de-

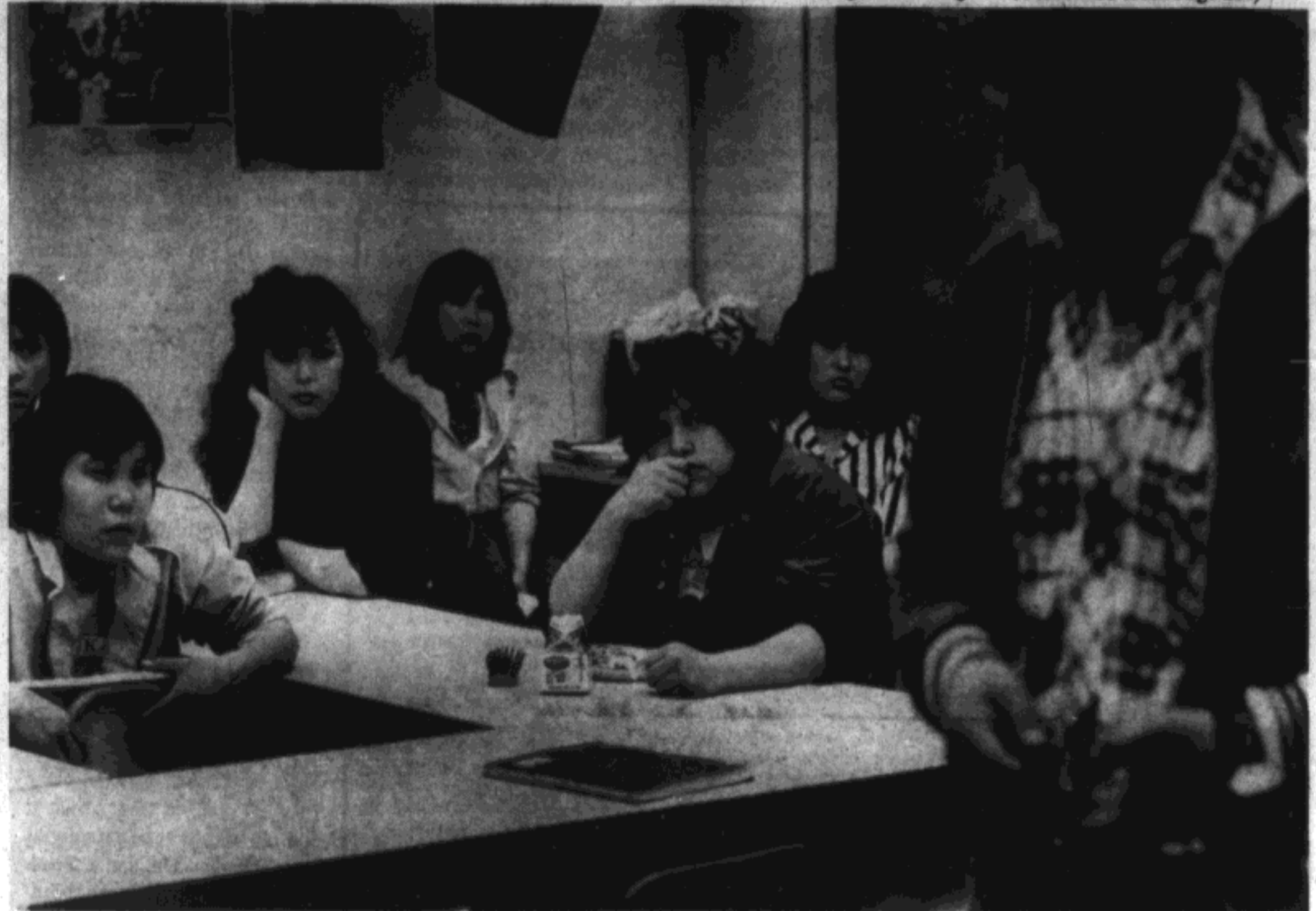
cisions they make on its use will impact them and people who care for them for decades, maybe generations.

Glenn Boyles, Tlingit, comes on hard when he addresses the students. He talks of peer

pressure, of wanting to be cool, to party, to boogey; to drink and use drugs. In language they understand, he lets them know he was very recently where they are now. He wanted to be cool. He thought drinking

and following fads made him cool.

"Is drugs a fad?" he asks. "You guys know anybody that got high today? Did you get high today? Is that another (Continued from Page Six)



Students at East High listen in somber silence as Sinka Crane tells of his experiences and counsels against the use of alcohol as part of the council's "Strength of Mind" program.

PHOTO BY BILL HESS

'Strength of mind' emphasizes positive

(Continued from Page Five)

fad?" Boyles recalls getting "bombed out" every week as a boy living in Juneau. The family moved to Anchorage, and the same thing happened.

Another "fad" which Boyles thought was cool was carrying a gun. "I held up two people," Boyles relates a drunken incident. "I held a gun in their faces and told them I'd blow

their heads off."

"I had their lives in my hands . . . I could have taken a life if I had just flinched." It was a cool act, alright. "I made the papers . . ." and wound up in jail, a place Boyles had been certain he would never go. Jail was a place for people on TV, and others he heard about. Not for him. He had only one vice; he liked to

party. Partying was fun.

Although Boyles' message is a frightening one, he emphasizes that this is no "scared straight" program. "Scared Straight" was started by prisoners in the Lower 48 to frighten young people headed toward lives of crime into straight living.

"Strength of Mind" does that, but is also intended to emphasize positive values; the

values held in the traditional culture of Alaska Native People.

In prison Boyles became involved with the Native Cultural Council and was reminded of them. Thinking of the life he had been living, of the lives he could have taken, and of the hurt alcohol was causing his family, he sought to do something about it.

Boyles replaced alcohol and drugs with running. He runs every day in prison, something he never did outside. He does not use drugs or alcohol.

There are plenty of drugs and alcohol inside the prison, Boyles stresses. He used this his first year. The peer pressure is intense. At first, a lot of the prisoners gave him a hard time when he stopped smoking pot with them. He has been "clean" for a year now, and has won the respect of many who once put him down.

"Just 'cause they use it, that don't mean you need to," he tells the students. "There are more people who like to see you sober and straight. More than you realize. When I finally realized this, I took it and ran with it . . . Learn about your people. Do some beadwork. When you learn beadwork, is that person teaching you drunk or bombed out?"

Learn who you are, where you're from, where you fit . . . I'm high on myself. I don't need to be out boogeying. There ain't nobody in here who can tell me if I don't get high, I'm not cool . . . everything doesn't happen in a parking lot."

If Boyle's story is hard, Harry John's is harder. He tells of starting life out in the village, with the old values of sharing. The ideals were somehow lost for a while after John left the village for school, the military, and Viet Nam.

"Hey, I thought to be Native is to be drunk and that's a bunch of bull. Be proud of who you are, be proud to be Native!"

Pride did not come easy to John. During military time in

Thailand he once came to his senses during a drunken siege to find himself chasing a Thai woman with a knife. Back home, his wife gave birth to a stillborn baby. During the funeral, John was off drinking, he tells the students, not even thinking that a part of him was being buried in the ground.

It got worse. "I took a case of whiskey to Bethel," John tells the students, "to bootleg it. But, hell no, I didn't have time to bootleg, I was too busy drinking it." The drinking spree that resulted led to the death of his wife and a close friend, John tells the students, and a long prison term for him.

Prison in the federal system Outside was bad. Inmates had to adopt a "tough guy" attitude to survive. Some were killed. Tough convicts who had been in prison for 10 and 20 years and longer would pick out young prisoners as they first came into the prison, and make prostitutes out of them.

Fortunately, there were culture groups of Native Americans in these institutions, and they would look out for each other. When new prisoners entered, they would pull the Native Americans aside and teach them how to avoid the pitfalls of prison life. The groups also brought in spiritual leaders to help them find traditional alternatives to the alcohol and bad times.

Still, it was hard, and is. There are times you don't believe the crime actually happened, John tells the students, you expect your wife to be waiting. And how do you tell your little girl about her mother?

John remembers reading a complaint in a newspaper about how good prisoners have it, with color television sets, pool tables, and other comforts.

"In the village we didn't have none of that stuff," he emphasizes. "We didn't even have running water. But I tell you, I'd rather be there,

(Continued on Page Seven)

Traditional values stressed by inmates

(Continued on Page Six)

without the running water, and be able to hold my little girl on my lap. I'd rather be able to hear the dogs howling, and be able to go out and cut my own wood. I don't need this color TV!"

Like Boyles, John says the traditional values emphasized in the Native cultural groups have helped him to know who he is, so he no longer feels the need for alcohol.

He strongly advises the students to make such discoveries before they have to face the hell he has been through.

"This isn't the life for you kids," he stresses. "You are our future leaders. We don't want no drunks making decisions for us. We don't want no one high on pot signing our land away!"

Sinka Crane addresses the students like he might his own grandchildren. He recalls his village of Sleetmute in the days of his youth. There was no television or much of anything from the white man's world there. Transportation was by dogsled and boat; hunting, fishing and trapping were the mainstays of life.

Fighting, murder, suicide and rape were virtually unknown, Crane told the youth. In 1955, a liquor store was opened seven miles from the village. Now there is fighting, murder, suicide and rape. Crane wound up in prison after shooting a man in the leg who he suspected of burning

his house down. Crane was drunk at the time. Four times he was paroled, and four times he wound up back in prison. "I had a bad attitude," Crane explains.

Although he drank, and that made things worse, Crane said his bad attitude was the result of the murder of two of his sons, one of whom had been a police officer, and who had left \$10,000 worth of savings to his father after he died. "I never touch that money."

Drinking or not, the pain he felt over the two deaths made him want to beat people up, Crane tells the students. He did, and broke his parole. Now, he is serving out the rest of his five-year sentence, although he does not have long to go.

A son has invited him to come and stay at his place, will help him. The son does not drink, says Crane, and

does not want him to either. "Knowing that somebody loves me, cares for me, that really helps." When Crane gets the feeling he wants to beat somebody up, he says he goes to his room and thinks about it. He is already working on building up the courage to avoid his old drinking friends when he is set free.

The inmates do not know how many of the students will heed their advice. "How many of you are going to get high tonight?" Boyles asks. "If you didn't get high today, do you really have to get high tonight?" Maybe some will. With "Strength of Mind," the inmates do not expect to reach all of the students who might be headed for troubles similar to their own.

"If we help one in 20, that would be beautiful," says Harry John.