

AFN Sobriety movement assists in prevention

by Anna M. Pickett
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Although stereotyping often diverts attention from the true causes of alcohol abuse - and tends to blame the drinker for his illness, alcoholism is certainly a grave reality among indigenous peoples the world over.

However, there are leaders who have decided to break this pattern and promote sobriety as a way of life. In 1988, the Alaska Federation of Natives, under resolution 88-05, created the Alaska Native Blue Ribbon Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse which would "monitor, evaluate and coordinate efforts to curb alcohol and drug abuse, and work with local Native organizations to develop community-based alcohol abuse prevention programs."

That Commission reported to the AFN Board of Directors that what they had started was good, and that it was wanted by the people. It was recommended in 1992 that the Alaska Federation of Natives remain involved in the "sobriety movement," and create a program to continue the work of the Blue Ribbon Commission.

The mission of the AFN Sobriety Movement deals with supporting and encouraging sobriety among Alaska Natives; working with local and statewide organizations and prevention

services; and monitoring and evaluating the actual movement across the state. The Sobriety Movement focuses and advocates sobriety as "A Positive, Healthy And Productive Way of Life, Free From The Devastating Effects of Alcohol and Drugs." This phrase can now be heard across the state in groups that have pledged themselves to the promotion of sobriety.

May 10, 1988 is the first day of Greg Nothstine's sobriety. Nothstine, an Inupiaq, is the AFN Sobriety Movement coordinator. He tells his story about having run-ins with the law in the form of *driving while intoxicated* violations, and the subsequent convictions, assault charges, and the nights he spent in jail.

"They told me at the rehab center that if I didn't lose my Native culture, I would always be drunk," said Greg Nothstine. "That really upset me. My

culture includes participating in Native games. I had to make a choice - the games or my life."

Through Nothstine's rehabilitation process, he realized that what he had

AFN-Sobriety Movement Mission

The mission of the AFN Sobriety Movement is to support and encourage the growing grassroots sobriety movement among Alaska Natives; candidly focus and advocate sobriety as "A Positive, Healthy and Productive Way of Life, Free From the Devastating Effects of Alcohol and Drugs;" collaborate with local organizations and other statewide agencies and service providers in the area of alcohol and drug abuse prevention; monitor and evaluate the sobriety movement growing in Alaska.

been told was wrong. Once he found his true Native spirituality, he found what was missing. And through this, he was able to live day-to-day, without alcohol or drugs.

"But one of the things that I found out," says Nothstine, "is that consumption is replacing ceremonies - and it's by several generations." He says that alcohol has become part of birthday parties, Christmas parties, and even Christenings. "It's a long road to change that way of life."

Without mentioning names, Nothstine says that another problem we face is our leaders.

"They go to work, and because it is the right thing to do, they promote

sobriety. But after work, they are not opposed to be going out and having a few drinks. They need to walk their profession with humility."

AFN Sobriety Movement's Chairman Wilson Justin, Athabascan, says, "when you deal with alcoholism, you really live one day at a time. The disease is so oppressive, it's a doom-laden weight."

"When I got out of it, I felt like I stopped drinking yesterday. It's been 12 years. It's never more than a day away and never more than at an arm's length," says Justin. He says that quitting drinking had been on his mind for years. "I learned early on that I couldn't handle alcohol. It was against the principles and teachings of the people I grew up with. It was very torturous for me and it stole my identity."

Justin agrees with Nothstine that sobriety is a lifestyle, a way of life. It's something that allows people to progress with life a little easier and a whole lot more productive. They have found reasons not to drink and reasons to keep on living. Both agree that they can not tell you what to do, but they can show you a better way.

They bring that philosophy with them to make the Sobriety Movement what it is today.