

Community Drug Alert, Volume 9, Issue 1

Scared Straight

Every day the papers seem to be filled with more horror stories about people who have fallen through the cracks. They die through gang violence, drug overdoses, alcoholism, suicide – and a host of other societal problems. When there are so many horror stories about lives going wrong, why is it that so many young people are still drinking and taking drugs at an early age? If they knew at 12 years old that their addiction would cause them to die in a gutter when they are 25, or spend most of their life in a penitentiary, would youths still be taking drugs?

The Scared Straight Program, presented by the Young Warriors Foundation, is working to address many of the problems faced by Native communities across Western Canada. Scared Straight consists of a five day workshop that takes an open and honest look at the cycle of alcohol and drug abuse, showing youths where they can end up if they don't make changes in their lives. The workshops are led by Lee Mason, a man who knows all too well the problems associated with drugs, alcohol and gang violence. "I want them to hear the truth from me," says Lee, "because I don't want them to have to find out for themselves."

History

Lee feels that one of the biggest problems faced by the youth is a lack of identity. "A lot of youth get their sense of identity by watching movies and listening to rap music that glorifies gang violence," says Lee. "They want to make money by running a "ho" and selling drugs. They've never learned about Native culture and Native spirituality."

It's impossible to know who you are if you don't know your own history, so Lee starts off the first day by talking about how the Native community has been treated in the last few hundred years. He tells about how colonization, western religions and residential schools have torn apart the fabric of Native life.

One of the most devastating influences in Native life has been the introduction of alcohol in the communities. Alcohol was never a part of Native culture. The first settlers and fur traders brought alcohol and essentially used it as a weapon against the Natives. They would get the Natives drunk, and then rob them blind in the fur trades. When they saw their men start drinking, Native women would bury all the weapons and run and hide in the woods with their children.

They would come back the next morning to find the men hung-over, beaten up, and, in some cases, dead.

Lee notes that “up until and as late as 1967 in some areas it was illegal for Natives to buy alcohol. They would get somebody else to buy it for them, and then drink it in the woods as fast as they could to make sure they didn’t get caught. Unfortunately, the habit of chug-a-lugging stuck. Even today, when Natives are drinking, they often drink it back as fast as they can.”

The kids he speaks to often ask Lee questions like, why do our parents drink? Why don’t our parents act like parents? “I tell them that many of their parents and grandparents were taken away when they were seven or eight years old and placed in residential schools. We all learn how to be parents from our own parents. A whole generation of Natives was taken away from their families and they never had the opportunity to learn parenting skills. Even three generations later we are still feeling the effects of this.”

Potlatches, sweat lodges, cleansing ceremonies and vision quests are some of the events that held Native culture together. But many of these ceremonies were forbidden by the Church or by the authorities. Lee has a friend whose father went to jail for holding a potlatch.

“I encourage all the kids to take part in sweat lodges, vision quests and other Native ceremonies. This provides them with a moral center and helps connect them with the spirit of their ancestors.”

Drug Use

The second day of the Scared Straight program looks at issues surrounding drug abuse. For many kids, all they know about drugs is the way these substances make them feel over the short run. They have no idea what the long-term effects and consequences to their health might be.

“I let the kids know that drugs today are not what they were twenty or thirty years ago,” says Lee. “It’s not just the drugs themselves that can kill you – it’s all the other stuff that is mixed in with them. PCP is mixed with an engine oil additive called bromobenzine, while LSD is usually laced with strychnine and amphetamines. I walk around the room with a can of rat poison and ask the kids if they want to try some. This is essentially what they are taking every time they try LSD.”

“The THC levels in marijuana are significantly higher than they ever used to be because so much of the stuff is grown in hydroponic operations. When the levels are this high, they start to cause problems with people’s memory.”

“There are a quarter of a million crack babies born in North America every year. They are so decimated by the drugs their parents used, that most of

them can't form a sentence at four years of age."

"After I go through this information, we watch a video that shows a basketball player who is addicted to heroin. The kids see the downward spiral that addictions cause – and they see how hard it is to break the habit."

"I break them up into smaller groups and get them to talk about their own experiences with drugs. They talk about all of the behaviors that people will go through in order to get drugs – how they will even steal from their own family to feed their addiction."

"And finally, we talk about how 85% of the people in jail are there because of crimes relating to drug and alcohol use."

"Scared" Straight

Day three is where the "scared" starts entering into the Scared Straight program. Lee says "in the first two days, I identify the hard-cases that seem to be headed for trouble. On day three, I welcome them to my world, welcome to Hotel Hell. I spent fifteen years of my life serving time in some of the toughest penitentiaries in North America."

Lee asks the kids in the group if any of them have ever been in prison. A handful of youths put up their hands and tell about time they spent in young offender centers or remand centers. "I tell them that they haven't been in prison – they've been in day care," says Lee.

"I look at the kids with the walkmans, the fancy Nike shoes, the sunglasses, and I say I want that – give it to me! If they don't give it to me, I walk up to them and take it, then set it all in a little pile next to me. If they start to protest, I say who are you going to tell – your mommy, your daddy, your grandma? You're in prison now – you're in my world now – there's nobody here to listen to your complaints. Nobody in prison cares if you live or die. I tell the kids that when I was in the BC penitentiary, we used to stand on the catwalk watching the new prisoners come in and we were sizing them up for what they had that we were going to take away from them."

"I turn to the hard-cases and say who's going to protect you in prison? Who are you going to turn to for help? They usually say "I'll join a gang" or "I'll make friends with some big guys."

"I tell them Alright – I'm the big guy in prison – I'll protect you. If anyone wants to hurt you, they have to come through me. If any of the guards try to intimidate you, they have to answer to me. Now go sell your ass and get me some drugs or I'll beat the shit out of you myself.

You can hear a pin drop in the room after Lee says these words. Some of

the youths have spent years victimizing and intimidating other people. They suddenly realize that when and if they go to federal prison, they are going to be victims themselves. Theft, assault and even gang-rape are just some of the things they can look forward to when they are doing hard time.

At this point, everything starts working on a personal level – on a feeling level. Lee asks everybody in the group if they've ever had anything stolen, and of course they all have. He gets them to start discussing how they felt when they were ripped off. Kids who've never thought about the consequences of their actions start to realize how their activities have hurt others.

“I tell the youths who are pimping and dealing drugs that they are responsible for the worst consequences,” says Lee. “They are no better than the soldiers who shot Native women and children. They may even be worse since they are killing their own people.”

“I ask the kids how many of them have sisters and mothers – and most of them put up their hands. Then I ask them how they would feel if their twelve-year-old sister was working as a prostitute in Vancouver to support a drug habit? How would they feel if it was their mother who died of an overdose or came down with AIDS from using an infected needle? Suddenly the lives of pimps and drug dealers don't look as glamorous as the rap songs make them out to be.”

Suicide

Native communities are plagued by some of the highest suicide rates in the country, so day four of the Scared Straight program addresses this serious issue. The group works on developing healthy communication skills and anger management skills. They learn how to respond to real-life situations, and how to deal with parents, teachers and siblings without resorting to violence. They learn how to deal with issues before they spiral out of control.

“I look at suicide as a permanent solution to a temporary problem,” says Lee. “When youths have problems in their lives, they usually turn to their friends for help. But their friends aren't professional counselors, so they don't always give the right advice. I let them know that it's alright to turn to counselors for help. There is always somebody they can turn to. I tell them to call me if they need to. Every kid that I talk with gets my cell number and my office number. I let them know that they aren't alone anymore.”

“I also let them know how important it is to get over the cycle of shame and guilt,” says Lee. “When I was first dealing with my addiction problems, I was really hung up about all the rotten things I did over the years. I had

friends who would help me put everything in perspective by telling me that I had to look at my years behind bars as a gift. The things I did in my life and the things I lived through made me the person I am today. I wouldn't be able to help others if I hadn't been through these experiences myself, youth don't want to hear somebody preaching to them out of a pamphlet, they want to hear the real facts, and I don't preach or talk down to them. I share the hard cold realities with them and they appreciate it that way, it has a real impact on them."

On day five, I let the kids know that they are the most important people on Earth," says Lee. "They are the ones who can break the cycle of violence and break away from drug and alcohol abuse."

"I let them know that they need to have healthy relationships and they need to act as positive role models. They can do this by showing respect for others, respect for themselves, and respect for all living things. They can do this by walking the path of the peaceful warrior. It is the peaceful warrior who is going to make changes in society because we can't hope to beat an army with violence, we must use our minds and our words in a good and healthy manner."

Many of the kids who attend the Scared Straight program have great leadership skills. It's always easy to know who the leaders are in these groups. They are the ones who always have four or five other kids following behind them when they come into the room. "I pick out these leaders and I ask them what kind of role models they want to be," says Lee. "If they use their leadership skills in the right way, they can get the rest of the kids to follow them in living a healthier lifestyle. There are some fine young leaders developing in some communities now."

"It's all about becoming a winner in life – doing what's best for your future and the future of your community. I tell the youth we are all in a game called life. Get a helmet on and get in the game. You'll discover it to be a wonderful adventure!"

For information, or to host a Scared Straight program for your community, call: (604) 983-9813