



The Times

Okanese First Nation Elects Young Warriors

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A program designed to bring youth together and focus on many issues facing the areas First Nations youth was implemented at the Okanese Learning Centre recently.

Okanese Chief, Mary-Anne DayWalker is concerned at the challenges facing youth and the choices they make. "In the space of about one month we had three youth suicides in our community. We need to bring our youth together - this has to stop," said Chief Daywalker.

The week-long workshop, headed by Lee Mason, an addictions recovery specialist with the Young Warriors Network based in North Vancouver covered topics related to gang violence, drugs, alcohol, violence and suicide.

"Drugs equal death and alcohol leads to further depression which can result in suicide," said Mason.

"I have known many instances of a youth taking ecstasy for the first time and dying. The drug increases the body's temperature to such a degree that the vital organs just shut down and you die. It's the same with alcohol abuse. Alcohol is not a treatment for depression, it makes it worse," he said.

Speaking from his own experiences, Mason developed an ability and opportunity to form the Young Warriors Foundation as an organization to bring youth workshops to communities throughout British Columbia. Since that time he has seen a need in many communities for workshops where he could tell of his own personal experiences in the hopes that the students could relate their issues and find answers.

"As a people we need to reclaim our strength and culture and we can do this by learning our language. Our language was taken away from us and now we have to reclaim it in order to move on and make the right choices.

All of you here today can be anything you want to be if you are prepared to make the sacrifices. I was told when I was at school that I would be a truck driver; that was all I would be good for. I know now that is not true. I

made sacrifices and went back to school. I made a choice to be something else and you can all do the same,” he said.

The final day of the workshop gave students an opportunity to appoint members from their own community to form a young warriors group.

In a wind-up to the week, elections and voting selected a core group of youth who agreed to host bi-monthly meetings in which they could address issues, share stories, organize fundraising events and become mentors to their peers.

Ron Elliott Jr. was elected chief of the group and said the workshop had been a good eye opener to what’s happening within his culture.

“I’m more aware now of the crazy things people will do just to have a feeling of belonging, like when they get involved with gangs” said Elliott.

“I have learned so much this week and it’s given me a lot to think about, it’s been a real eye opener.



Following the week long workshop, students at the Okanese Learning Centre had an opportunity to evaluate the presenter and the program. Pictured are (left) Ron Elliott Jr. and Camillia Stonechild who both said the

presentation had a very positive effect on them

An elected coordinator of the newly formed group agreed.

“I have learned a lot this week about drugs and alcohol and how it affects people, things I never knew or realized before. But at the same time it’s been fun too,” said Camillia Stonechild.

A member of the Star Blanket First Nation, Tenelle Starblanket, said that during the two days she had been at the presentation some things she had heard had changed her mind about the choices she makes.

“I have plans to finish school and hopefully graduate this year. I want to upgrade some classes and maybe go to university because I know I can. Being here has made me think differently about some things,” she said.

Chief Daywalker was pleased with the positive thoughts of the youth after hearing Lee’s presentations.

“Something has to be done and this is a good start,” she said.

The mandate of the Young Warriors Network is to provide culturally relevant workshops and training programs to assist First Nations and Metis people with factual information and skills that will prevent them from becoming further enmeshed in the destruction brought on by alcohol and drug addictions.

Mason says the Young Warriors Network tries to teach youth to walk the path of the peaceful warriors who respect all living things and look after their elders and their communities.

“When we teach them to respect all living things, they naturally start to respect themselves as well,” he said.