

Survivor shares his story with First Nation youth

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YORKTON

Youth today face many obstacles and tough decisions in their day-to-day lives. On Dec. 16 a group of more than 250 students gathered in Yorkton to listen to the words of someone who has been exactly where they are today, and knows the price to be paid when the choices made are the wrong ones.

"I lived the life I talk to the kids about," said Lee Robert Mason, who is with Youth Warrior Programs based in Vancouver. "Drugs, alcohol, crime, gangs, I did it all."

Not everyone who lives the kind of life Mason did manages to survive, but sometimes they're lucky enough to get a wake-up call before it is too late. That's what happened to Mason.

"I spent a lot of time in federal prisons for robberies that I was doing to support my addictions," he said. "Then after a near-fatal overdose I realized I needed to change my life."

He worked to turn his life around then went on to study addictions recovery and began helping others regain control of their own lives. He's since expanded his training and counselling skills to deal with suicide, grief and trauma, which allows him to better help those who have suffered through abuse and neglect.

Now, 10 years later, he has no regrets about dedicating his time to helping youth across the country.

"There are sacrifices I've had to make but it's worth it to help and to see them change," said Mason. "Especially when you hear from them years later."

While in Yorkton Mason spoke to the youth in attendance about a number of issues including addictions and gangs.

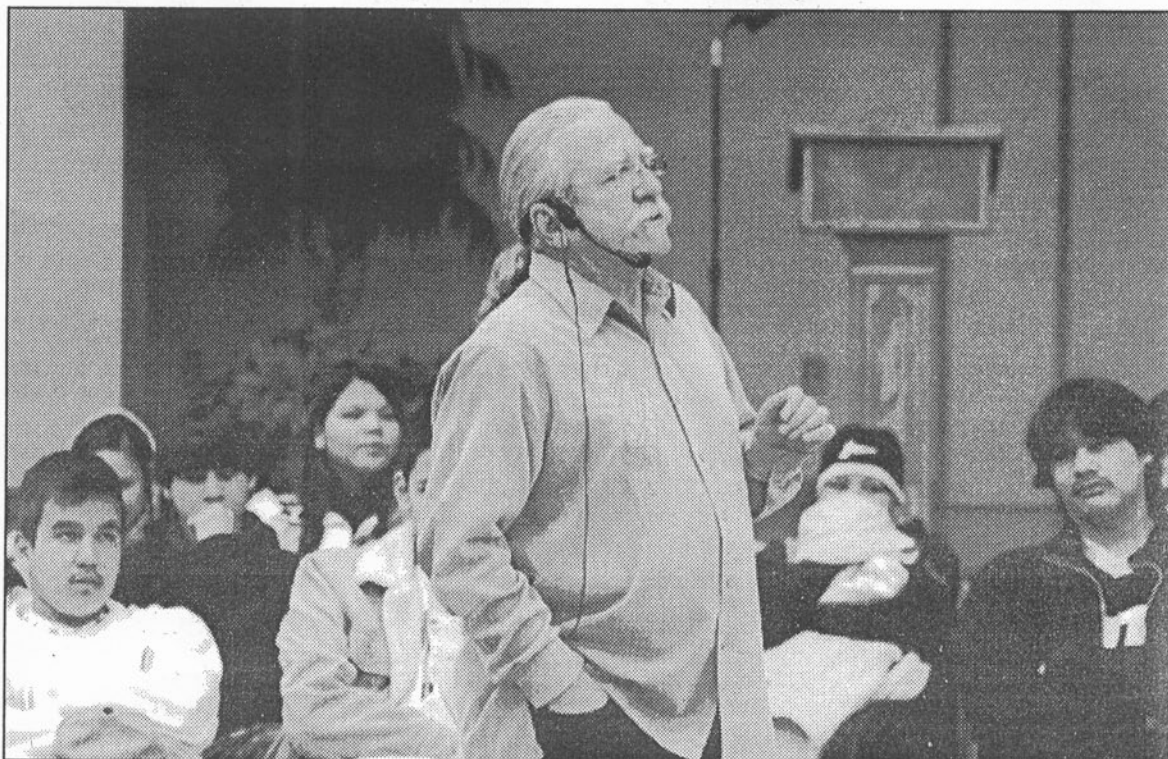
"There is a lot of anger out there, and it's not going away," he said. "It's a vicious cycle that needs to be changed. Gang life is glorified and I am here to tell them the things that no one has told them before and to try and help them see through a different set of eyes because I've been there. I'm telling them the truth."

Mason knows he won't get through to each and every youth he speaks to, but he does hope that they will at least leave the conference with a different perspective.

"For things to really change a healing process has to happen," said Mason. "Not just the youth, but the parents too. We can help the youth see things differently, but if they return to the exact same circumstances none of that matters."

Mason knows that everyone needs to feel valued and nurtured, especially children and youth, but when the parents don't know how to do that, the children don't learn either.

"You learn to be a parent from your own parents," he said. "That teaches us how to care, nurture and love. "There is so much hurt and confusion out there that the baggage of



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Robert Lee Mason, who lived a life of gangs and addictions before he turned his life around, speaks at a youth conference organized by the Yorkton Tribal Council.

both parents, combined with alcohol, drugs and abuse, does not make a healthy or nurturing situation."

Mason believes that everyone from top to bottom needs to be helped with healing before things can really change for the better.

"We all need to start getting better," Mason told the youth. "Be proud of who you are, take accountability and protect each other."

This was the first time this particular type of youth gathering was held in the city, although the Yorkton Tribal Council does focus their attention on youth quite frequently. This year's event drew Aborigi-

nal youth from Yorkton and Fort Qu'Appelle as well as from Cote, Key, Keeseekoose, Ocean Man and Kahkewistahaw First Nations.

"We do try and do something every year with the youth from the area," said Vivian Cote, director of Health and Social Development with the tribal council. She hopes the conference will become an annual event.

"It's important to hold things like this especially for the youth because they are our future," she said.

The goal of this year's conference was to send a positive message to area youth.

"We want to teach the kids about honour and how to make

healthy choices in their lives," Cote said. "To send the message we thought that by getting a facilitator who has lived the life would help them to relate better. He tells it like it is and gives the message to the kids that they need to hear."

In addition to listening to Mason speak, youth at the conference also took part in a number of sessions with the presenter, some of which excluded all adults so participants could speak openly with Mason.

The conference concluded with a concert by Edmonton-based hip-hop group REDDNATION and a youth dance.