

The deadly brew of alcohol and despair has devastated Alaska Natives. But now people are reaching out to one another in a sobriety movement that is slowly gathering strength.

## A growing revolution of hope

Almost everyone had a horrible story to tell, stories of suicides and despair and deaths that shouldn't have been. These were the kinds of things people talked about openly. More discreetly, they whispered of sexually abused children and women beaten by husbands and boyfriends in bursts of drunken rage.

People in the villages of Alaska are like a man being pulled under by the currents of a river, said Walter Charley, a 79-year-old Athabaskan from Copper Center. The people sitting around him — Indians, Aleuts and Eskimos from all over Alaska — knew exactly what he meant. Some nodded as he spoke.

"We're struggling for our lives," Walter Charley said.

Here, on a dusty baseball diamond beneath the Wangell Mountains, the roots of a revolution were quietly taking grip.

For five days last August, a couple hundred Alaska Natives gathered to discuss the problems facing people in the villages. A few were counselors, social workers or political leaders, but most were just regular people — many of them former alcoholics or drug abusers — trying to live a decent life, worried about the future and eager to visit with people from other places struggling with the same issues.

They shared their experiences and talked about solutions. They danced to traditional music, and boogied to a Native rock band. In a ceremony at the end of the retreat, they vowed to stay sober, respect the people they live around and work toward improving life back home.

The gathering was one of the most visible signs of a movement percolating in dozens of villages over the past two years. Known as the "sobriety movement," its goal is a Native world unimpaired by alcohol or drugs, one in which widespread alcoholism is no longer considered normal.

The aim of the movement goes well beyond that, though, and includes reshaping Native communities and culture all over Alaska, places where people are being destroyed by changes and forces they don't understand and haven't been able to control.

It is a long, slow, extreme uphill struggle. The movement is so new it's difficult to tell how much of an effect, if any, it is having.

The problems are so complex that there's no single, proven way to solve them.

Villages are trying dozens of approaches, from Alcoholics Anonymous to traditional Native spirituality and ritual, from legal sovereignty to est-like "personal growth" seminars.

"It's not the kind of thing you can look and see big dynamic successes," said Mary O'Conner, health educator for the North Slope Borough in Barrow. "You can't say, 'Yep, it's working. We're real successful.' You're dealing in people's lives. It's an over-time kind of thing."

What the sobriety movement has stressed above all else is a philosophy that it must be the people of the villages — not health agencies, not the government, not the regional corporations — who take responsibility for their own well-being. With that comes pride, unity with others doing the same thing, and increased control over their lives.

"You've got to start someplace," said Doug Modig, Director of the alcohol program for the Rural Alaska Community Action Program, a state- and federally-funded social service agency.

"We started with the idea that people are impaired by alcohol and that has to stop if you're going to deal with these other problems. . . . As long as people are drinking, they don't have a choice. When they stop, they do."

"We're not just talking about alcohol. It's a real broad thing. We're talking about suicides, and sexual abuse, and domestic violence. We're talking about economics and ineffective local government."

"We're talking about personal responsibility that results in self-determination. . . . It suggests a unity, that people aren't doing it alone."

Modig, a Tsimshian Indian from Ketchikan, runs the only statewide alcohol program in Alaska, and has been at the center of the sobriety movement from its beginnings. Two years ago, Rural Cap banned alcohol from its functions, a move since followed by several regional Native corporations.

Since then, Modig and his associate, Amy Lohr, have traveled to more than 20 villages, been invited to 25 others and worked with more than 90. They say they listen to what communities want, then help establish appropriate alcoholism and development programs.

"The approach from the agencies in the past has always been, 'We'll come help you.' What we're saying is, 'You got to help yourself. We can maybe help you do that, but you've got to be the one to do it,'" Modig said.

Some regional health corporations and government health agencies have begun to tailor programs to the needs and wishes of specific communities rather than use a single model for all. For example, rather than rely on a single psychologist to make infrequent visits to a village, there have been efforts

to train residents to counsel one another.

"Nobody can come in from outside and solve the problems," said Carla Bonney, director of the tribal-run health department in the village of Tanana, in the Interior. "But for so many years, people, Native people, have been told they're not capable of solving their own problems. There's been an erosion of self-esteem that goes back to the missionaries."

"It's not a big flow, something huge that's happening everywhere. It's little glimmers here and there. We'll hear that somebody somewhere else has similar ideas and it's a very positive thing."

Some people in some villages have stopped drinking. Others have voted to ban alcohol and set community wide goals for living without booze. Progress is slow, but there are small signs of it.

In Alakanuk, a Yupik village in which eight young adults killed themselves in 16 months, an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting was held for the first time last fall. With eight people attending, it was believed to be the largest AA meeting ever on the Yukon River. Regular

meetings have been held since.

On the North Slope, perhaps the most affluent local government in Alaska, young adults who have given up booze have gone on borough-owned television to talk about it.

Attendance at statewide gatherings like the one in Glennallen has increased steadily.

While some communities have tried banning booze — with varying degrees of success — there are no examples of Alaska villages that have successfully gone from rampant alcoholism to widespread sobriety. Sobriety advocates hope that, over time, some communities will emerge as examples of what is possible. That will take years, they admit.

More than anything else, Alaska's sobriety movement has been influenced by Alkali Lake, an Indian village in British Columbia that — through the will of its people — went from 100 percent alcoholism to almost complete sobriety. It took 15 years.

Alkali Lake's struggle was depicted in the film "The Honour of All," with residents of the town portraying themselves as the drunks they once

were. Cassettes of the movie have circulated extensively throughout rural Alaska for the past year, with demand increasing as more people learn what happened there.

"It's been real influential," said Modig. Dozens of villages in Alaska have problems as bad or worse than the old Alkali Lake, he said. "It's a vision of hope. People see it and say, 'If they can do it, maybe we can do it.' People look at that and they see real live Native people. It's not a Hollywood thing."

Over the past couple of years, people from Alkali Lake have made several trips to Alaska to talk about what happened there, as have people from Four Worlds Development Council, an Alberta-based Native organization that has worked extensively on Native alcoholism in Canada and the Lower 48.

"When things get really desperate, when a whole community is ready to go down, when things get really bad, it's time to do something," Lloyd Dick, a 23-year-old from Alkali Lake, told participants at Glennallen. He told of losing family members and friends, and struggling with alcohol and drugs himself.

"I used to do about five hits of acid in one night," he said. "Really get stoned. I'm really grateful for being alive. I travel maybe thousands of miles, and talk a little bit, maybe one or two, it would be really nice if you'd listen and recognize what's happening with this alcohol. . . . You can't hide a lot of stuff that happened, can't keep it inside. You stand up and share."

Later, David West, a huge man with long, dark braids who leads the Fairbanks-based Crossing Paths drummers, sat in a circle of singers around a big drum in right field. He slowly pounded a beat and, in a high, strong, ghostly wail, sang a traditional Sioux chant. Others also beat the drum and answered his chants, or danced slowly around it.

Between songs, West spoke: "We share the dream of the people of Alkali Lake, that we can kill this enemy. It's been a prayer of ours for a long time, that it would be the Native people that would show the way out from under the disease of alcoholism, for this is our country. We were put here, we're from here."

"It should be us that has the strength to show the way."



Don Burnstick "jump starts" Nellie Ewan. The tug is a psychological technique designed to help people express their emotions.

The town of Kake seems poised on the precipice. Will its many non-drinkers risk turning the tide of self-destruction, or will fear and doubt leave them silent witnesses to slow death by alcohol?

## A willingness to take risk

KAKE-Half the villagers in this Southeast fishing and logging community have licked alcoholism turned it down on their own, or with the help of Alcoholics Anonymous or their church. But Kake still acts like a drunken village, with the same sad self-destructive behavior.

Why? Because Kake's many non-drinkers haven't found a way to bring a new sober social order to their community. When public drunks stumble down the street or get sick in the post office, when a young man threatens suicide at noon and pulls the trigger two hours later, Kake looks the other way. The non-drinkers of Kake, said one local critic, practice "closet sobriety."

A handful of recovered alcoholics and non-drinkers don't think it has to be this way. They call themselves Saturday Night Live because on Saturday nights they get together to socialize and talk about how to make Kake a better place to live.

The core of Saturday Night Live is a small group of regular participants: Al Williams, a recovering alcoholic and the community's drug and alcohol counselor; Adella George, a recovering alcoholic and mother of four; Kay Larson, mother of five and a community activist; Gary Williams, who married into a Kake family and moved there a year

ago; and Gary Austin, a salesman who lost a brother to suicide last year.

To an outsider, Kake looks appealing and prosperous. It's a village of 665 on Kupreanof Island, southwest of Juneau. The sea offers up a bounty of crab, salmon, halibut and clams; hunters take deer from the surrounding forest. Just last February, all 500 shareholders received \$10,000 checks from the Kake Tribal Corp. for the sale of timber losses to an Outside company.

An early morning walk down Kake's main street adds to the feeling of comfort. Smoke curls from the chimneys of yellow and blue and purple houses. In a small bay just offshore, a lone heron greets the day. Amid this ease and beauty, it comes as a shock to learn just how deeply troubled Kake is.

### Beyond appearances

Lincoln Bean, a logger for the past 17 years, was one of the village's first volunteer emergency medical technicians. To spend a few hours with him is to look beneath the picture postcard. he begins by telling why he became an EMT.

"My brother and sister-in-law had been out partying, smoking dope. The kids were in the house, and somehow they'd got hold of a gun. My 6-year-old nephew, he shot

himself in the stomach. I ran over there. He was trying to wipe the blood away from his stomach. Everyone was standing around, screaming and crying, but there was nobody there who knew what to do.

"My nephew finally said to me, 'Uncle, I can't breathe,' so I gave him mouth to mouth, but we lost him."

"In my life it was a turning point. What a waste, and so were all the others after him."

As an EMT, Bean has responded to the suicides of 13 or 14 family members or friends, "not counting natural deaths, or (suicide) attempts." His wife's brother shot himself, his little sister drowned, another brother-in-law leaped from a third-story window. And the list goes on.

He remembers being called to a party one night. "A guy there had been telling people he was going to hang himself."

...There he was, ripping a sheet into strips, right at the party, and nobody paid any attention. Finally, he went out to this little tree outside, and hung himself.

"Another guy at the party saw it, and ran out. He held him up so he wouldn't die, and started shouting for help. But nobody came. People heard him—he could have reached out his hand and touched the wall

of the nearest house. They heard him, but nobody came.

"Finally, he had to let the guy drop to get some help. And he died. We came. It was so eerie. The guy was kneeling there, hanging from that tree. And you wanted to say, 'Why doesn't he just stand up?'"

### A head on approach

It's not that the community hasn't tried to help itself. In 1980, a volunteer health council got training for emergency medical technicians, bought an ambulance and eventually built a new health clinic. They provided a professional response to Kake's all-too-frequent scenes of human destruction, but they couldn't stop people from hurting themselves.

By all account, Brent Moody did.

Moody was hired as the police chief in 1984. A non-Native, big-city cop from Minneapolis, Moody connected with the community in a way no one else ever had. For two years after he arrived, suicide attempts dropped 75 percent and successful suicides stopped altogether.

Moody did something no one else in Kake had tried; he confronted people.

"If someone was drunk, and threatening to hurt themselves, we'd transport them to detox, actually charge them criminally for

being drunk and doing bad things," he said.

He showed no discrimination in his arrests; if the son of a city council member was drunk, he got arrested.

Moody also took suicide threats seriously. "If someone said they were going to hurt themselves, I'd take them into protective custody, and we'd transport them over to the hospital (in Sitka) for a couple of days."

"The basic reason it worked, people realized that a suicide attempt had consequences. Sometimes people would cut their wrists or take something just to get attention in the village. But then they got to realizing, 'Oh, no, this new police chief is going to send me to the hospital.'"

Ninety-nine percent of his arrests involved alcohol or drug abuse.

For a year and a half, he enjoyed strong support from Kake's city council, but eventually that eroded, and he left for a job in Juneau.

### Sober and isolated

The fact that Kake rejected Brent Moody's head-on approach to its problem may illustrate how sick the community was. Within two weeks of his departure in January 1986, the suicide attempts began again. A young man hanged himself in early

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