

Willingness to take risk--continued from page 5

1986, another shot himself in 1987, and a suicide pact among high school students surfaced last spring.

Kake slipped right back into the darkness it had only just escaped. Why? Because the drinkers kept drinking, and the non-drinkers wouldn't confront them. It was "closet sobriety" in full-blown inaction.

"(Non-drinkers) stick to themselves," said Al Williams, Kake's drug and alcohol counselor.

"There's been no kind of growth, no communication. There's a sense of isolation here."

Loren Jackson, sober for the last three of his 40 years, describes himself as "one of the baddest drinkers. They seen me for years, staggering down the road."

But his decision to sober up didn't lead him to a new community of supportive non-drinkers. Instead, it led to isolation.

"I just went into myself. After 5 p.m. at night, I was in my house. I was afraid I'd see my old drinking buddies, they might persuade me to take a drink. So I stayed away from that. The only place I went was work and to my dad's house. That's not enough. We need more places to go, more things to do. Even as a recovering alcoholic, I still get bored."

Adella George, 32, has been sober for eight months. She had a similar experience when she tried to organize some non-drinking social events. After she and her husband first moved back from Juneau with their four kids, she was determined not to slip back into the old drinking cycles. But they were her only source of social life.

"That was the only time we ever talked to anybody. I'd ask people at the party to come to my house the next day, to have some coffee and talk. They'd just look at me like I'm real strange. People don't want to change."

"We've got a real denial problem here," said Williams. "We all want to get well, but nobody wants to take that responsibility."

He offered an example. A young man of 18 or 19, involved with a girl of 16, broke up with her. He walked out onto the street and told people he was going to kill himself. Nobody did anything. He walked back out at 2 p.m. and killed himself. After the funeral, people were saying they didn't do anything because "we didn't want to upset the family." I wish it were an isolated incident, but it's true of all our suicides. There were signs. We need to learn how to confront, to find healthy ways of intervening.

Last resort, first step
But confrontation has been a last resort in Kake. It took the story of a suicide pact in the high school last spring to force one. Whether several students really agreed to kill themselves is doubted by many. Nonetheless, Marvin Kadake, a retired city councilman of 25 years, decided the community had to talk about it.

"A couple things came out at that meeting. That we have a generation gap here in Kake between parents and kids, that there's not enough communication with each other, and, that not enough love and affection are being shown to our

kids. We're too busy scolding and bawling them out to tell them, 'I love you.'

"One parent told how he was so mad when he found some drugs under his son's pillow that he beat his son up. Then he went out into the living room and cried. The kid tried to commit suicide shortly after. The father said he knew he made the wrong decision, beating up his kid. He needed a better approach, one in which they could both sit down and talk, and understand each other."

Last spring, the Saturday Night Live folks had an idea they thought would help. Four of them had attended a workshop in Juneau called New Directions, developed by a small band of Sushwap Indians at Alkali Lake in British Columbia after their community had started sobering up.

Alkali Lake learned a critical lesson: Sobriety is not nirvana. When half the community stopped drinking, it had more social problems than ever. People still harbored the same negative, self-defeating attitudes they'd had when they were drinking. In the words of Alkali Lake veterans, they were living "a dry drunk."

Then their chief, Andy Chelsea, and his wife Phyllis found a way to shed those attitudes. They went through a program in Vancouver in which they learned to express their emotions and confront rather than avoid.

Seeing the benefits of that training, Alkali Lake developed its own, called New Directions. Almost everyone on the reservation, including school children and elders, has taken it. As word of Alkali's health spread, its leaders were asked to bring New Directions to other Native communities.

Gordon Jackson was one of the Saturday Night Live members who had gone through New Directions. As president of Kake Tribal Corp. and a recovering alcoholic, he was so convinced of its value, he put up \$1,500 of his own money to help bring Alkali Lake to Kake.

"The one thing Alkali Lake offers is hope," he said. "If we can start expanding the circle of people who care, and people can begin to get well, the whole town grows."

The assumption underlying New Directions is that in any alcoholic community, at any stage of recovery, people are in tremendous emotional and psychological pain from loneliness, self-doubt, abuse. Kids, forced by neglect to become little adults at 8 or 9, grow up hating their parents for it. They have never felt loved, so they cannot love themselves.

New Directions trainers go for that pain like a surgeon to a tumor. They attack it, so healing can begin. New Directions is not a pat cure for every sick community; the trainers offer assistance, but individuals must want to change.

"Risking is what this group is all about," explained Freddie Johnson of Alkali Lake. "I never told my mom and dad I love them. I just felt guilty and ashamed. With all my drinking and violence, I carried a lot of hurt in here. I needed to let it go, but to let it go it took a lot of risk."

"It hurts to say I'm hurting. At Alkali Lake, we talk about the hurts until we feel good inside about ourselves."

New directions in Kake

Eighteen Kake residents signed up for three days of New Directions in mid-October. They were joined by 12 social service professionals from Sitka and Petersburg. Two of Saturday Night Live's members, Al Williams and Adella George, assisted the trainers from Alkali Lake.

They gathered in Kake's cavernous community hall. Quiet and shy that first morning, participants sat across from one another in the kitchen, sipping coffee, their eyes carefully averted. The air was sticky with reluctance, a mood just this side of fear.

At first it was easy. Everyone sat in folding chairs in a big circle. The trainers showed "The Honor of All," the movie of Alkali Lake's journey from drunkenness to sobriety. The trainers, Andy Chelsea, his wife Phyllis, Freddie Johnson and Louie Thadei, introduce themselves.

Each participant was assigned a buddy-someone to confide in, a friend. Then the exercises began. The first was called the Intention Walk.

A trainer arranged students along a line on the floor, and pointed to another line about 30 feet away. Walk from here to there, each in a different way, she ordered. Do it alone, while everyone watches.

The first woman swaggered across, giggling. The next skipped. Another did cartwheels, and another crab-walked. Fear of embarrassment gave way to challenge. Laughter changed from nervous to appreciative for the novel ways people found to cross the floor.

When it was over, the trainer sent them to their seats in the circle. "You were probably standing up there, with a little bundle of fear and self-doubt in the pit of your stomach, thinking, 'Oh no, I can't do this. Will I be clever enough to do it differently from everyone else?' That's called mechanics," she said. "Don't get bogged down in mechanics, at the expense of your goal or your intention." If you have an idea, do it. Don't let self-doubt paralyze you.

The point of the Red/Black game was to win, they were told. But as the game progressed, it became obvious there was no way to win.

Afterward, they went back to the circle. The trainers asked what they had learned; each player had to say something. A microphone passed around the circle made the whole process more intimidating. Palms sweated and jaws tensed as it moved closer, each person trying to think of something suitable-but not too revealing-to say.

It was Max Brown's turn to speak. A big hulking logger in his 40's, with silver hair and a shaggy mustache, Max filled his chair and the space around it. He cradled the mike in one big hand, staring down at it. He was quiet a long time. Then he looked up.

"I played that game like I live my life," he said. "Once I decided what our team should do, I didn't listen to anybody. I did what Max wanted to do. That's how I live my life."

"My wife, she can't hear so good. Instead of trying to talk to her, I just let her be. I never even ask her what does she want. I just do what I want."

"My little boy, I never tell him I love him. And my other son, the only time he ever wants to talk to me is when he's drunk. And then all he wants to do is fight with me."

Max's face crumbled, his great shoulders caved forward. He had been sober for 13 years, and was ready to get better. All around him, participants looked away, uncertainty playing across their faces.

The exercise got riskier. There was an exercise in which each person in the group walked up to every other person, looked him in the eyes and said either "I trust you," "I don't trust you," or "I'd rather not say." For a community unaccustomed to confrontation, it was scary.

In the Mother-and-Father exercise, they sat eye to eye with one another, imagining the other person as a parent and thinking what they would like to tell him or her. They didn't speak their thoughts, but several people wept openly.

Afterward, back in the circle, a young woman took the microphone.

"I've always blamed my parents for choosing the bottle over me," she began, her voice thinning to nothing. She clenched a fist on her knee, twisted in her chair, "I never understood how they could do it, why they would do it. But I forgive them," she said, tears streaming down her face. "They had a lot of kids. Maybe it's all they could do."



Jon Warren of Crossing Paths Singers and Dancers holds a mirror for a friend as they dress for a ceremonial dance and drum session near the end of the Glennallen gathering.

By the close of the second day, most had wept publicly over their hurts.

"Cry," Andy Chelsea told them. "Let that tension out. You have to get rid of all that old garbage, so you can trust and care for one another again."

On the last day, participant Beth Crane spoke, half laughing: "I never have visions, but I had a vision," she said. "And it was all of Kake, sitting here, laughing and talking and sharing together."

After the training ended on Sunday, family and friends were invited to join the participants for a supper of donated food-venison, crab, halibut and salmon, seaweed and salmon eggs, and a big bowl of berries.

Max Brown, the logger, volunteered as emcee for the evening. As families were just finishing the meal, he grabbed the mike.

"What this program did was make it so Max can love Max," he said. "When I'm walking down the street, and I see a drunk, I'm going to go up to him. I'm not going to preach, but I'm going to hold that person, even though he's lost in his own world. I'm going to tell him there's one person who loves him and his name is Max."

Max introduced the trainers: Andy, Phyllis, Freddie and Louie. Andy took the mike. "Sweat house, Saturday Night Live, AA, band meetings, whatever it is, get involved. Don't sit back, put in your disc and look for the Playboy Channel. You've gotta go out and support these guys. Because 25 years from now, your kid is going to ask, 'What were you doing when all this was going on? When the government was doing this to us?' And you're going to say, 'I'm sorry. I was sitting in a bar watching TV. I screwed up your future. I'm sorry.'"

"Get involved."

Louie Thadei, an Alaskan from Southeast who has moved to Alkali Lake and become a New Directions trainer, told a parable:

In my memory, there's an image of Mildred Monte, the public health nurse, chasing me down a trail to give me a booster shot, because I was unwilling to take responsibility for my own health.

"There have been a lot of people in the spirit of Mildred Monte who've been chasing us down the

trail to do for us the things we need to do for ourselves."

Max called up everyone who'd taken the training and had them link arms in a circle. Next, he called up members of the community who hadn't taken the training-an elder, a child, a fireman, a teen, the mayor. He put them inside the circle, and asked them to join hands. They looked awkward and uncomfortable. He asked those in the outer circle to honor those in the inner circle as representatives of all parts of Kake.

He called individuals from the dining tables around the room, one at a time, to come join the outer circle. With funny, half-embarrassed expressions on their faces, they came up. The children didn't wait to be asked. Smiling, they broke in.

Everyone stood there, holding hands. People who, three days earlier, couldn't look each other in the eye, now smiled openly. Those who hadn't taken the training could see the change in those who had.

The outer circle began to sway gently, as if to music. The moment stood suspended, a portrait of a community on the brink of getting better.

Epilogue

Within a week after New Directions, the Saturday Night Live folks had another idea: they would bring in a separate training called "Spirit of the Rainbow," for the kids. They hoped to pay for it with money dedicated to cultural programs for Native youth.

A community meeting to discuss the plan had a big turnout, including a number of ministers from local churches, who spoke against the "Spirit of the Rainbow" plan. They linked it to New Directions, which they considered a form of devil worship.

"They pointed to the fact that we all sat in a circle, and that Andy held a feather," Max Brown said. "They told us the only way to become sober was to become a Christian."

The meeting went until 1:30 in the morning; the funding committee decided not to pay for "Spirit of the Rainbow."

But the Saturday Night Live circle found other money and booked the group into the community hall. "Spirit of the Rainbow" came to Kake last December, just as planned.

The "People in Peril" series has been reprinted with permission from the Anchorage Daily News. Copies of the entire eight-part series will be available for viewing at the Museum at Warm Springs.



Untitled, 1988 by Jack Abraham, painted wood and mixed media is one of 24 pieces in exhibit.