

Tribe's treatment center teaches youths more than "just say no"

■ *Pride and hope are the main values taught at Nanitch Sahallie in Keizer.*

By Oscar Johnson
Staff Reporter

Seventeen-year-old Joey Murray was one of six youths to successfully make it through Nanitch Sahallie's chemical dependency program for Native youths.

He says he was on his second year at Chemawa Indian School in Salem when his daily Marijuana habit, bad attitude, and low self-esteem put an abrupt end to his high school daze.

"Before I just didn't care," says Joey.

But after struggling through the intensive eight-week program last month, he has gained a few weeks of sobriety, a better outlook on life and says he is ready to turn from negative peer pressure towards a future as a lawyer or maybe a comedian.

Nanitch Sahallie is nearing its tenth year of helping Native teens like Joey between the ages of 13 and 17 overcome chemical dependency.

The residential facility is one of only eight in the nation offering one-on-one counseling, peer support groups, interim school courses and what Nanitch staff calls, "culturally specific" treatment.

About 23 percent of the nation's Indian youth between ages 12 and 17 reported using illegal drugs such as marijuana, inhalants or hallucinogens within the last year.

This was the highest rate for 11 racial/ethnic groups surveyed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services from 1991 to 1993.

While there was not enough reliable data on alcohol use for this age group, 1.3 percent of the youth reportedly needed chemical dependency treatment.

But Nanitch Acting Division Manager, Candi Henry, says statistics do not tell the whole story.

"Very few people are not touched by alcoholism," she says. "And numbers can't even begin to reflect the impact of alcohol and drug abuse on Native American people."

Henry believes this is due, in part, to the historical assault against Indian culture and spirituality.

She says just as Native America is reeling from the affects of this assault seven generations later, it may take another seven generations of hard work to reverse the process.

"We try to teach kids pride in their language, culture and traditional tribal practices. And to have pride in themselves," says Henry. "With-

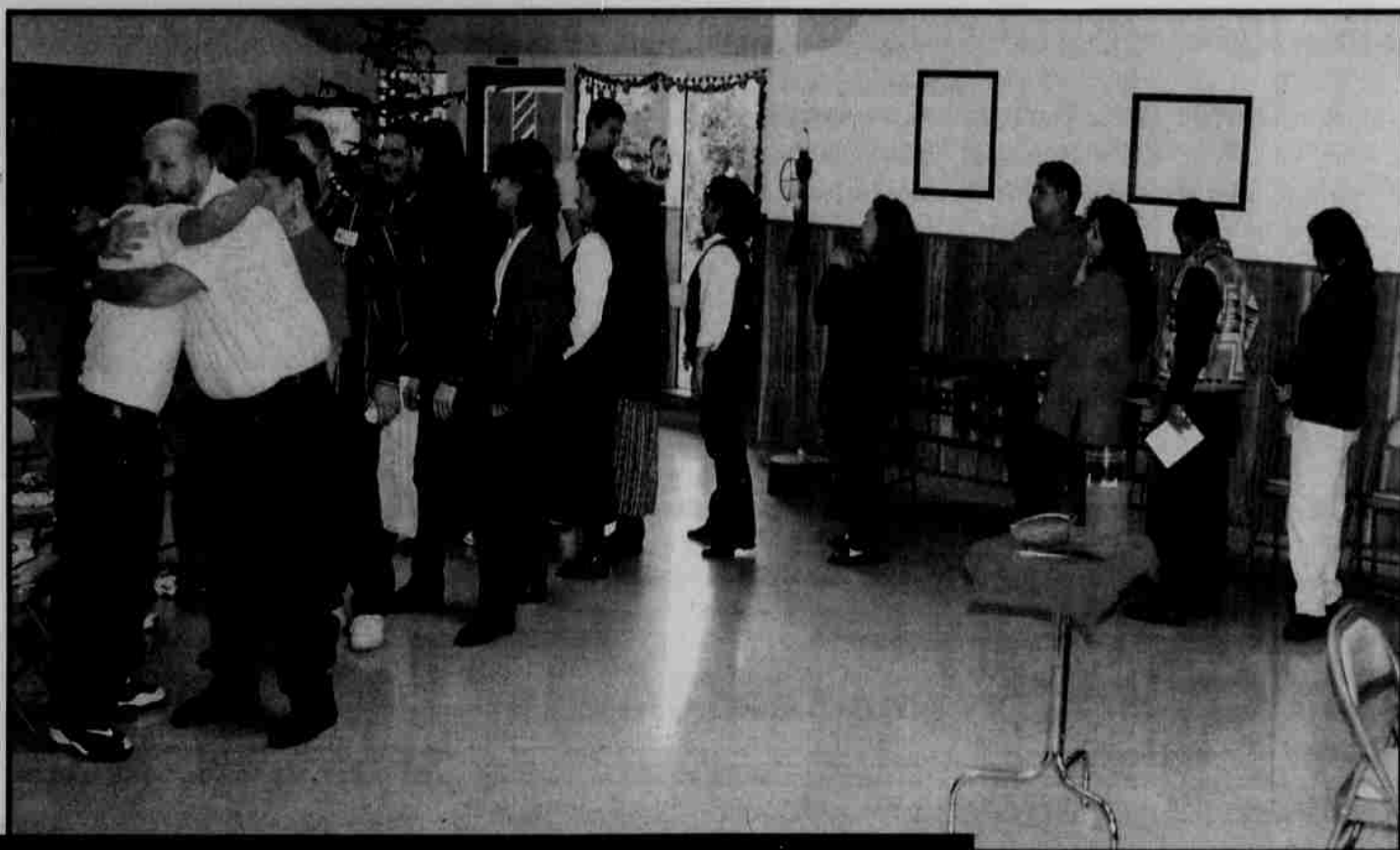


Photo by Oscar Johnson

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PROUD DAY: Family and friends stand in line to congratulate graduates of Nanitch Sahallie's eight-week recovery and treatment program. This past session was for male clients.

out it, recovery is difficult. Without pride, hope is truly far away."

Nanitch is unique because it is administered by the Grand Ronde Tribe, run by a mostly Native American staff and funded with federal and state dollars.

The program also alternates between all male and all female sessions.

Teens from 47 different tribes benefited from Nanitch's services in the last year.

The program draws Native youth from all over including Arizona, Montana, Idaho and even Canada. The state subsidy also allows for limited reserved spaces for local youth of any ethnic background.

But what makes the program truly unique is its emphasis on Native American culture.

"Whatever we do we always have culture in the back of our minds," says Nanitch Counselor, Robert Schmid.

In addition to learning about issues such as drug and alcohol dependency, anger management and how to say no to peer pressure, teens are also schooled in spiritual and cultural values, Schmid says.

He says part of a client's treatment plan might include anything from traditional crafts and nature hikes to

parental approved sweat ceremonies.

Another cultural aspects of the program is a Talking Circle which gives youths a chance to share candid thoughts and feelings with their peers.

A four-day rights of passage retreat called the "Four Directions Walk" is also central to each eight-week session.

"It's an opportunity for the girls to spend time with other women, nature, doing crafts and enjoy being sisters and daughters — being women," explains Kacey Farrenes.

Farrenes has been a Nanitch counselor for a year and helps lead the all-girl sessions on their four-day retreats. Male staff lead the all-boys sessions.

Nanitch staff say chemical abuse is not the only hurdle the youths have to clear.

"I don't think chemical addiction is always the primary problem," says Farrenes, echoing similar statements made by her colleagues.

She says often teens are using drugs or alcohol to deal with grief, depression, physical or emotional abuse, low self-esteem or abandonment.

The program also includes a family component.

During the last week of the ses-

sion youth's parents join them for a five-day residential family program.

Parents are introduced to family support groups available in their local area, taught how to recognize signs of relapse and co-dependency and also receive family counseling.

Val, who was on hand for her 14-year-old son's graduation, says since her son has been at Nanitch he has learned to take responsibility for his life and to make better choices.

But the veteran kindergarten teacher from Browning, Montana says her son is not the only one getting something out of the program.

"It's been a very good experience, not only for him, but for me," says Val. "By coming here we've learned to communicate and accept ourselves."

Val's optimism is what Henry and other Nanitch staff look for.

"I watch kids leave here with some hope," says Henry.

The kind of hope that Joey has as he gets ready to punctuate the end of his eighth week at Nanitch with a commencement ceremony.

"I can make it in the out," he says, referring to what he and his Nanitch peers call life outside the center's rigorous structure. "I don't need that (peer pressure). School is more important."

Smoke Signals received permission to use client and family names for this story.