

Speaker explains how adolescence works

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

"It's not a character flaw" when the youths in our lives suddenly stop listening, start talking back, know everything, tell us they hate us and long to engage in risky behavior.

All this, said Michael Nerney, as much raconteur as adolescent behavior specialist, is part of the normal work of the adolescent brain growing up.

Children's brains are organized differently than adult brains, said Nerney. You will not be successful asking youths to act like adults or adapting adult methods for behavior modification to children.

In fact, he said, even males and females grow at different rates, respond differently to the same situations and require different kinds of attention.

Males have 12 times more color blindness than females, he said. Females see far more shades of red. Such differences traditionally allowed males to face fewer distractions while hunting, for example, while giving females greater ability to distinguish among healthy and poisonous foods in gathering.

In adolescents, these differences show themselves one way in males, who want to act when they get emotionally stimulated. Females, he said, want to talk.

Nerney, from Long Lake in upstate New York, presented a day-long staff seminar and an evening edition for parents on Sept. 29 at the Tribal Community Center.

Tribal Elder Betty Bly was not alone in saying, "More people should come to these things."

Tribal Elder Laura Gleason was not alone in saying, "I wish I would've learned this when I was raising my kids."

And Tribal member Matt Zimbrick, Middle School lead in Tribal Youth Education, was not alone in saying, "A lot of things are starting to make sense now."

An afternoon session covered substance abuse and provided a catalogue not only of all the alcohol and drugs and combinations of the two that youths take today, but also a virtual yellow pages of where they get them.

"Most," he said, "come from the home. Prescription pills. Aerosols. Guns." And what they can't get at home, they find online. No prescription or adult supervision needed.

As mind-boggling as the list is and as intransigent as resulting behaviors can be, the sessions still focused on giving professionals, parents and adolescents the tools for making it through the toughest period of development.

For adolescents, only one of whom attended the family session, Nerney provided an understanding of the dangers of the age.

For adolescents who do engage in truly dangerous risky behavior (though not all risky behavior is dangerous), the risk lies only partly in what that behavior does to the brain and the body at the moment. Far more insidious, he said, is what adolescents don't learn about social

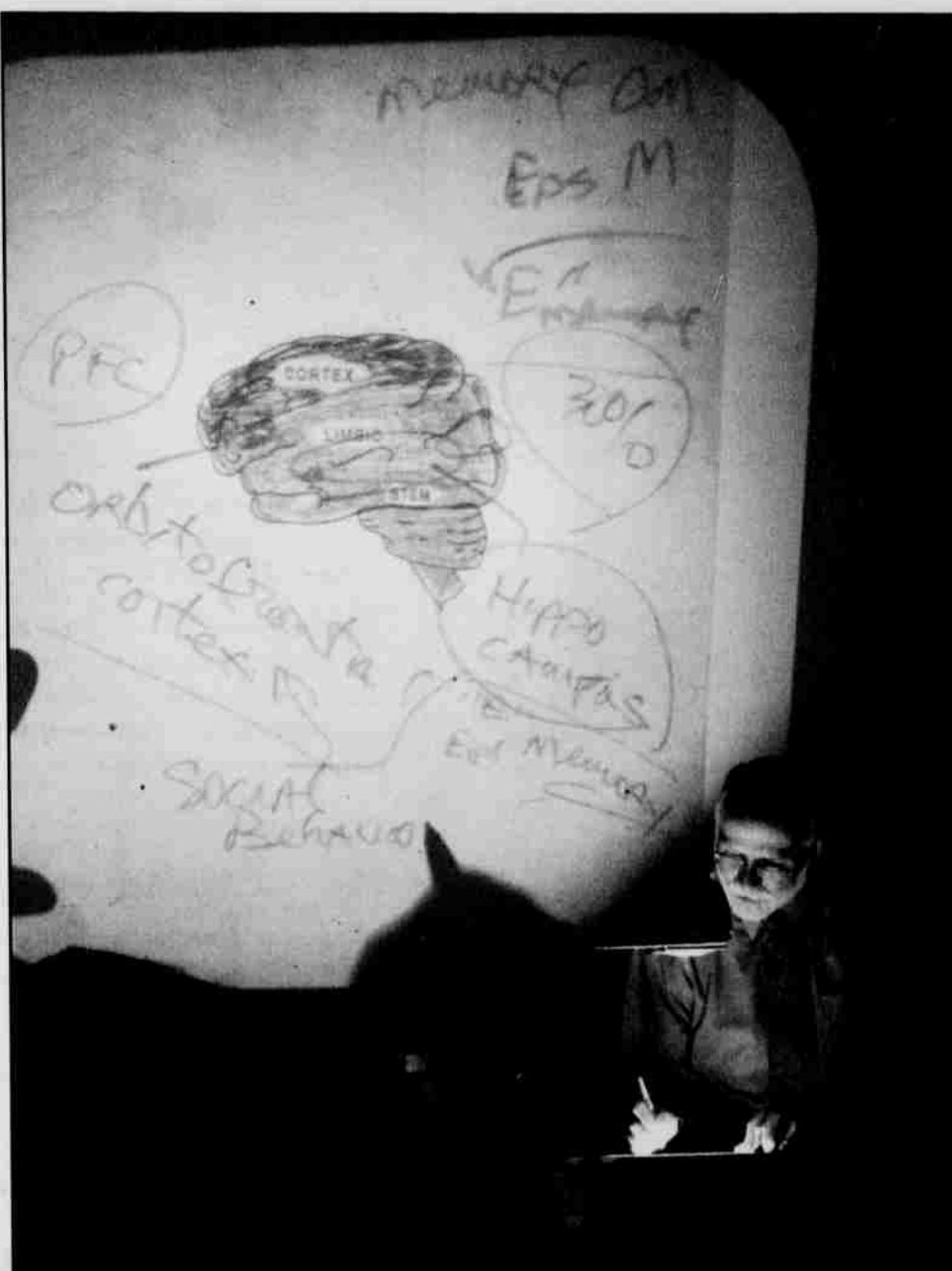


Photo by Michelle Alaimo

Michael Nerney, a consultant in substance abuse prevention and education, leads a training seminar on the adolescent brain and high-risk behaviors in the Tribal Community Center on Tuesday, Sept. 29. He presented both a daylong staff seminar and an evening edition for parents.

and emotional skills when they're busy partying, fighting, stealing and all the rest.

"The keys to human success," he said, "are social, emotional and relationship skills."

Adolescent substance abuse, for example, takes place during time that would otherwise be spent learning those skills. The result is that the foundations for learning emotional cues never get built. In some cases, the lessons aren't needed until as long as 10 years after they should have been learned. That time lapse makes it very hard to recover that lost foundation.

The skills learned instead focus on the skills needed for substance abuse, for example. Those behaviors, as useless as they may be for getting jobs, raising families, building self-esteem and self-expression, become dominant.

"When you've done the wrong thing for so long," Nerney said, "you don't do the right thing even when given the chance."

"It's not a character flaw, however, that adolescents can't give up a drug or a behavior, because drugs in particular change brain chemistry in a way that makes it hard, if not impossible without intervention, to change that behavior."

Substance abuse is only one of many risky behaviors that entice adolescents. Others involve guns and violence, cars and speed, shoplifting and tagging, and, more recently, sexting, where kids send pictures of themselves naked and beyond through e-mail.

There are ways to lead adolescents into "structured risks that aren't going to get them killed, but still allow them to experience the rewards of risk," Nerney said.

Performing in front of a large group is an example. Often, their interests — like scary movies — provide other risky, yet safe, experiences, and those should be supported.

When "safe" risks go south, he said, the resulting embarrassment is not all bad. "It helps you practice your emotional skills."

The latest science, according to Nerney, says that adolescent brains have not changed over the years, but the world around them sure has. There are plenty of "reinforcements for risky behavior" today that weren't always part of the culture.

When Bly was growing up in a very traditional Native family, her grandmother was her best friend, she said.

"I just wanted to grow up and be a grandma," Bly said. "My dad

would just look at us and we would know to be quiet. I wish so much that we could raise our kids that way today."

The best environment for learning, Nerney said, has always been one where high expectations are matched with low anxiety.

The family atmospheres with the worst results for children are those where parents are rigid and inflexible, or where the parents are completely "hands off."

The best results, Nerney said, "Come from families where the parents say, 'We love you and support you, but we have this set of rules and values. We'll try our best to be supportive. Supportive and authoritative. And because we love you, we are enforcing this set of rules and boundaries.'"

He told many stories about his own family, including one about one of his daughters. She used to storm up the stairs when she objected to a decision he had made.

"She would stop about three-quarters of the way up, when she could still get to her room and slam the door in time if I chased her," he said.

Then, she'd turn around and shout down at him that he was the dumbest, stupidest, most insensitive parent that ever walked the earth.

Although he admitted that he was never quite self-possessed enough to do it, he said that there is a good response to a child the first time he or she feels compelled to disagree out loud with a parent.

"Congratulations," a parent might say. "You've reached a big developmental landmark."

When his daughter was still a sophomore, he forbid her to go on the senior skip out. She ran up the stairs and shouted down, "Why don't you just get me a jacket that says, 'Dork!' on the back?"

"What color?" he called back up to her.

Chris Holliday, Post-Treatment Support counselor for the Tribe, said that he was glad he had Nerney's e-mail for future reference.

"There may be some things I want to pick his brain about," Holliday said.

Tribal member and Youth Prevention Specialist Lisa Leno and Tribal member and Youth Programs Assistant Shannon Simi presented Nerney, who has been a high school English teacher and wrestling coach as well as past director of the New York State-funded Training Institute of Narcotics and Drug Research.

"This was so useful in my work," said Leno. "I think we'll change lots of things, like not taking behaviors personally, like boundaries and rules and consequences, that stuff makes sense."

"And did you see how at the end of the day, he wasn't even winded? We should have him for two days next time." ■