


Keeping the Circle Strong in the North

Solvent Abuse, Alcohol, and Drug Strategies for the North

by Rosemarie Kuptana,

L'auteure, présidente des Inuit Tapirisat du Canada, discute des stratégies qu'elle tente de mettre sur pied pour la prévention de l'abus des drogues chez les jeunes autochtones du Nord. Elle

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met l'emphase sur l'importance d'une approche de travail holistique et intégrée qui prendrait racine à l'intérieur de la communauté,

Most of us here know the prominent role that drug and alcohol abuse play in our communities. Many including myself experienced first hand the darkness addiction inflicts upon our lives. We have seen our own families suffer. We have watched with horror the impact of alcohol on infants and children; we have seen many of our own leaders sink into alcohol and drug abuse; we have seen or even been a part of the vicious cycle of addiction, abuse, violence, poverty, despair, and finally suicide.

We are here to help break that cycle of despair and to help strengthen the circle of healing.

We have the opportunity to look closely at some of the achievements that have been made at the community level in combatting alcohol, drug, and substance abuse.

We can work together to create specific goals and the sense of purpose that are essential if we are to break the spell of addiction that hangs over so many northern families and communities.

In most communities in the north, we have identified and begun to face our problems. We have done our homework, in the true sense of that word, and are listening to the testimony of mothers, children, Elders, health care workers, and one another.

We are able to say, yes, alcohol, substance, and drug abuse are issues that affect us all. Alcohol and drug addiction does not discriminate. Alcoholism and other forms of substance abuse affect everyone, everywhere—housewives, teens, children, and Elders—all races, cultures, and religions. We know that in many communities, addiction and suicide levels have reached crisis propor-

tions and must be confronted with utmost urgency, or the community itself may be destroyed.

The first step is to confront directly and immediately this serious situation. We cannot approach this in a bureaucratic or political or institutional way. We must reach our hands out to those we are in danger of losing and assist them to repair their broken dreams and re-establish their hopes and the hope of their families, our families.

We must recognize that if we are to realize our large scale dreams as peoples, we must first deal with our most specific threats to self-esteem, to our fundamental identity as Inuit, First Peoples, and northerners.

We can enrich our understanding of our own problems, and derive strength and solutions to these problems from sharing the experience of others.

I want to talk a little bit about community-based action and the importance of the involvement of people in the communities in dealing with solvent abuse, fetal alcohol syndrome, and suicide.

I also want to address the problem of funding, and the strategies that we must develop to ensure that ideas do not simply become reports, recommendations, and goals that cannot be met because there is no money.

Substance abuse, fetal alcohol syndrome, family violence, sexual abuse, and suicide: these are expressions of the most fundamental grief and despair of our people. They are not secrets; they are not the problems of individuals only. We know too well that alcoholism, for example, is just one link in a chain that can first choke an individual, then a family, a community, and a people. Alcoholism is linked to unemployment, to inadequate housing, education, and health care, to poor nutrition, and to the shame and confusion that attends the loss of self-respect.

One of the things we are learning as Inuit is that we must help ourselves. We have learned that we cannot and must not rely upon the government or others to do what we must do ourselves. We can have the most modern institutions, the best programs, and adequate financial resources but if we are not ready to admit to our addictions as individuals, as families, and as a society, the cycle of abuse will continue.

Over and over again, we see proof of the fact that we must take control—of our economy, our resources, our government, our culture. Over and over again, we must break the cycle, the chain of dependency.

We can only do this ourselves.

We can draw encouragement and hope from our achievements which at first glance may seem unrelated to each other. When we recognize the connection between our struggle for self-determination and our encounter with

substance abuse then we will better appreciate and make use of our strengths as Inuit.

All the work we have undertaken in the communities, all the research, emphasizes again and again the importance of integrated approaches to solving these problems. It does not work to close our eyes to the whole picture and to only look at one small piece of the puzzle.

The histories of Aboriginal peoples reinforce the necessity of holistic approaches to life. We know, in our homes, that our survival depends on community, on sharing, and on cooperative solutions. These are the values which must motivate current strategies for breaking the cycle of substance abuse.

We talk of creating "models" for prevention and treatment. Let us not lose sight of the most appropriate shape for these models. It is the circle.

We must not create hierarchies or bureaucracies; we must work within the circle of the community. We must draw upon our traditional values, and use our reservoir of rituals, our sense of kinship, our way of grieving and healing. We must create our solutions on our terms, and in our own terms.

Every strategy that we propose should be measured against the circle model. Otherwise, we may not be



Ulayu Pingwartok, "Children at Play", Lithograph, 1976.
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coming around again and again to those in need. If we do not listen to the voices of those both with the greatest need and the greatest experience, we will not be able to break the cycle.

Vigilance is required by all of us; we must seek to balance vigilance and compassion. It will take vigilance and compassion on each of our parts as people in families and communities to address these issues and to help and support one another.

It will take vigilance and determination on the part of our political leaders, our youth, and our Elders to address the problem of funding for research, the training of our own health care personnel, the setting up of adequate community hospitals or nursing stations. We must integrate medical experts and techniques with our traditional ways of working together and helping one another.

It will take vigilance and determination to make sure that we control those resources, that it is our own people who look after our own people.

We must forge the circle together. Let's get started.

A version of this speech was presented in Yellowknife, N.W.T. on November 22, 1993.

Rosemarie Kuptana has been President of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada for three years. She was recently re-elected for another three-year term.

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