

# GESGAPEGIAG COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER



Volume 3, issue 2

May 2004

---

## A Simple Observation On An Intolerable Problem

July 2002

For the past few years, I have had the misfortune of witnessing many tragic events that have taken place in our community. Needless to say, there have been no positive lessons learned from these events, as the trend continues to traumatize our community. The continued one month (or less) mourning period is still observed, but life generally goes on. Meanwhile, the after effect from each event magnifies itself, and seems to be more tragic than the previous.

Please take note that this is simply an observation and is not directed towards politicians, law enforcement, or any other entity. As a community member, I am affected and somehow feel responsible for these tragic events. I guess we all feel the same, since we demonstrate our feeling, by expressing sympathy to the family involved. Somehow we all manage to go on. Quite frankly, that is what life is all about, moving on. But as we continue to move on, we notice that the number of people moving on with us has decreased, for a number of reasons. In our case, as a community, the phenomenon of having a natural death is fast becoming a thing of the past. For the past ten years, there have been more deaths contributed to, or directly related to the abuse of alcohol, drugs, prescribed drugs and solvents, than any other disease. I hope that it is not an accepted fad for the coming generations, because there will be a lot of tragedy to deal with and a lot of consoling to do.

Far be it for me to say that I am an expert in finding a solution, but as a community member attempting to deal and cope with these problems, reality dictates that we have to work on our pressing problems collectively. We can always continue to use the excuse that the mortality rate under these circumstances in other communities is much greater than in Gesgapegiag. To an extent, I agree, but I do not live in the other communities nor do I have to feel the sorrow or their pain. I have however read their statistics. In the case of Gesgapegiag, the loss of one human life by a tragic event, that otherwise could have been prevented, is far too expensive.

Many of the problems that we are facing could have been prevented, had we taken the time to see the reality that exists. One of the contributing factors for taking refuge with alternative solutions (alcohol and drugs) is to escape reality, the main reason being that reality

---

P.O. Box 1280, Gesgapegiag, Qc., G0C 1Y0  
Telephone: 418-759-3441

Fax: 418-759-5856

# GESGAPEGIAG COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER



Volume 3, issue 2

May 2004

can be cruel. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples identified the three dimensions of community health that required change, so that the well being of Aboriginal people could be improved. These changes included poverty and social assistance, shelter, water and sanitation facilities, (both individual and community infrastructure), environmental conditions, including pollution and habitat degeneration. The Royal Commission went through the whole nine yards in explaining how we as native people came to live such miserable lives. It is unfortunate to acknowledge that not many people read the Report. The statistics are quite revealing and equally shocking. But to focus on the situation at hand, only the statistics that are applicable to our situation were used.

The theory of the non-native people sitting on the Royal Commission is best described as: aboriginal people have an inherent genetic and biological basis for alcohol addiction, or that the use of alcohol is a cultural-based attempt to seek "visions" in altering states of consciousness. How much of this jargon would you agree with?

The Royal Commission goes on to say that these observations and the contemporary history of socio-economic conditions among aboriginal people suggests that substance abuse is a coping strategy for poverty, unemployment, poor health and the list goes on.

The positive side is that it also states that these solutions lie in the collective actions of the community, because the health and well being of an individual flows, in large part from the health and social make-up of the community. The Royal Commission had set some particular goals. A ten-year timetable was established to meet the primary aims of the Canada-wide campaign to prevent aboriginal suicide and self-injury. It also went as far as stating, "**that by 1997, every aboriginal community must have a resource person trained in suicide prevention, intervention and grief support techniques. By 1998, each community must have a resource person trained in community development planning and methods.**" A National Forum on the Prevention of Suicide among aboriginal people is to be held in the first year and every three years thereafter until the tenth year of the campaign. I have yet to find the results of these recommendations. I do know that Native organizations in Alberta have developed many programs that deal in prevention and also provide training for suicide prevention workers to be certified.

On September 21, 2001, Minister Alan Rock and National Chief Matthew Coon Come agreed to convene an advisory group to review previous studies and any recommendations that have

---

P.O. Box 1280, Gesgapegiag, Qc., G0C 1Y0  
Telephone: 418-759-3441

Fax: 418-759-5856

# GESGAPEGIAG COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER



Volume 3, issue 2

May 2004

been made on First Nations youth suicide, and suggested short- long-term strategies. The advisory group members were to be chosen jointly by Health Canada and the AFN. Minister Rock at the time had this to say: " The high rate of suicide among First Nations youth commands urgent attention, and we need the advisory group to develop practical and workable strategies to address this challenge". National Chief Coon Come added that the issue of suicide is a daily matter of tragedy in native communities. The advisory group was to present concrete, practical and achievable recommendations to the Minister and the National Chief in the fall of 2001.

Coming back to our problem the last two events that took place in our community have been very dramatic in nature however, results from studies in other native communities suggest that it should be of no surprise. One other alarming result brought out in the Royal Commission, is that the rate of suicide is six times higher than the Canadian average, and comparably the rate of homicides are equally as high. Statistics show 60% of all natives who commit suicide are acutely intoxicated at the time, this being comparable to 24% for non-native suicides. In our case, the same applies, even though two or three have may been classified as accidental, we have to live with the result that most have been deliberate or calculated. Others are attributed to people who could not come to grips with the consequences of their actions. The final result: the death rate of native people from injury and violence is five times higher than the Canadian average.

The Assembly of First Nations on September 28, 2000 issued a backgrounder stating that it had no recent information on suicide in First Nations people other than the published data for the 1979 - 1993 period. It showed that the rate of suicide among First Nation men was 2.6 times higher than most Canadian men and among First Nation women the rate is 4 times higher. In 1993, the suicide rate for First Nation men was 53 per 100,000, and for women it was 21 per 100,000, translating to about 160 suicides per year. The trend and regional variation did not indicate a clear sign that suicide rates changed over the 1979- 1993 period, either upward or downward.

Although the suicide rate may be stable for the First Nations population as a whole, specific communities and areas experienced "clusters" of suicides in a given year or over a period of several years, while other areas have few or no suicides. The method of suicide for both sexes is, however, non-discriminatory almost half of both sexes chose hanging, firearms were used in

---

P.O. Box 1280, Gesgapegiag, Qc., G0C 1Y0  
Telephone: 418-759-3441

Fax: 418-759-5856

# GESGAPEGIAG COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER



Volume 3, issue 2

May 2004

1/3 of all male suicides, while women chose drug overdose as a method.

However, depending on the current status of events, we are probably looking at more suicides, other attempted suicides, (which are in reality a loud call for help), due to lack of an ability of an individual to deal with existing problems. Notwithstanding is the issue of incarceration, which is mostly related to young people who commit offences with complete disregard towards the population and community property, let alone the human factor that is involved or the consequences. Failure to recognize the impact of one's actions while intoxicated will lead to other consequences. As an example, of not being able to cope with life in a Federal or Provincial Institution has resulted in untimely deaths.

The British Columbia Institute on Family Violence conducted a survey on native communities and made a number of recommendations to alleviate self-destructive behavior among their fellow First Nations people. They recommended that natives must first regain a positive self-image, particularly among the youth and recognize that alcohol and substance abuse are major social problems that lead to dysfunctional life styles and unhealthy situations. First Nation communities are urged to develop prevention programs and crisis management teams: promote individual and community well-ness, improve parenting skills and train native caregivers. Cooperation is needed among all levels of resources to improve economic conditions on their reserves.

Our community demands action that is beyond what the report of the Royal Commission has recommended. Unfortunately, our reality is the loss of human life is far too high and has created an unacceptable burden that could have a heavy price tag at some point in time, probably sooner than later. Out of respect for the families who have suffered these losses, no names are mentioned. We all live in the same community, we know the events and circumstances of each tragic event.

It is safe to say that we have the available resources to start a development phase, which can be modified into a concrete awareness and prevention program. Without prejudice to the police department, we have too much enforcement, not enough intervention and no prevention. A prevention program would create a balance or a buffer zone between the system (police) and the young people as well as the whole community. We take it for granted that our children, will eventually out-grow the experimental stage, and turn over a new leaf and become contributing community members. However, in most cases the lack of respect for authority and authority

---

P.O. Box 1280, Gesgapegiag, Qc., G0C 1Y0

Telephone: 418-759-3441

Fax: 418-759-5856

# GESGAPEGIAG COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER



Volume 3, issue 2

May 2004

---

figures becomes more evident with the concept of total enforcement. The lack of respect moves in both directions, young people don't respect authority, and vice versa. In many cases the reference made is " Well it's only him/her or what did you expect "? "His parents are drunks and he's a pothead. " It is extremely hard to command respect with an attitude like that.

The situation regarding our young people is particularly frightening; according to statistics 38 percent of all registered Indians in Canada are under the age of fifteen, which means that over the next fifteen years this age group will be passing through the years of high risk for suicide. Suicide, regardless of whom it affects, is a tragic and puzzling event. It is said that suicide "is a permanent solution to a temporary problem." It also states that each person who eventually completes the act of suicide dies once, while the surviving family and community members die a thousand times in trying to assess or understand what triggered the final event.

Having stated the above we have seen the positives and negatives for ourselves. Fortunately, reality tells us that there will be exceptions. These exceptions have to be our targets and our starting point in beginning a process of communication. There is also, the ever-popular point of view, "down playing the situation," minimizing the problem as much as possible to avoid dealing with the situation. It creates a very risky situation, and pardon the expression "one never knows when someone will blow a fuse." There are different terminologies that could be applied but the result will always be the same.

It leads to the use of the coping strategy of: cultural loss, defiance, boredom and the self-fulfilling prophecy that "drinking is Indian." Peer pressure is also an indicator of all types of abuse. The end result; a high rate of death from injury, traffic accidents, including successful and attempted suicides, and incarceration. The question: How much of this is "REALITY" in Gesgapegiag?

For the past fifteen few years, there has been a serious absence of meaningful prevention programs, caused by voluntarily dispositions or funding problems. We have turned to programs that target young people without objectives, or have hired people who lack the knowledge of setting objectives to operate these programs. There are no set objectives or selected target groups other than providing employment. The programs certainly provide much-needed employment but is it possible to determine a positive or a negative outcome if the program is not evaluated? And what would the evaluation be based upon?

---

P.O. Box 1280, Gesgapegiag, Qc., G0C 1Y0  
Telephone: 418-759-3441

Fax: 418-759-5856

# GESGAPEGIAG COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER



Volume 3, issue 2

May 2004

It is also understood that the social and economic conditions in most reserves are difficult and Gesgapegiag is no exception. Statistics reveal that 45% of all status Indians living on reserve are illiterate, contributing to the difficulty of competing on the job market, damaging self worth and the sense of security. We would have to look at the education factor of individuals versus the job market and place some type of priority on the value of education. These problems create unhealthy situations that prevent people from advancing and instead leave them reluctant to attend meetings or events because they feel insecure. It brings us to a meeting that was initiated this past year for a very unfortunate event that had taken place. Although the results of the meeting have not been released to the community, I am confident that they created an impact on someone, somewhere, or at the very least, added to our list of statistics. It is my understanding that recommendations were in fact made but not followed through because of missing players. It could be that the meeting and the event were too close and many people were still in a state of disbelief.

From the outset, I utilized the "we" factor, simply to describe the problem as a Gesgapegiag problem. It would not be a fair or a just observation, to imply that we can all absorb the pain without shouldering some type of blame as community members. We have to keep in mind that we all have a stake in our community especially towards the young people, whom we always refer to as "Our Future Leaders." It is not possible for our community to go to another stage if we do not develop what they will need as tools or resources for the future. Considering the age factor mentioned previously, the time to act would be now.

Not to take away the spirit of the previous meetings that have been held, I for one cannot understand why we have to get people from outside the community to try and resolve what is already described as a community problem. Consultants or experts cannot and will not resolve our problems nor fulfill our needs. The solutions to our problem have to start from within and, as community members and leaders we have to get our act together. As mentioned, we have the required resources, it is just a matter of refining skills and, getting ourselves ready to work as community members, not as politicians, law enforcement, or directors. We need the human element to be involved. It is the human element that suffers, when tragic events take place.

Our resources are not limited, and if they are, it is because we have placed limits on ourselves. Our inability to talk about the reality that exists in the community as we see it, is based on fear of reprisal, or the fact that we may be ridiculed, and finally we are afraid to

---

P.O. Box 1280, Gesgapegiag, Qc., G0C 1Y0

Telephone: 418-759-3441

Fax: 418-759-5856

# GESGAPEGIAG COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER



Volume 3, issue 2

May 2004

admit that we give a damn about our community, its population and the coming generations.

A complete assessment would be required to establish a community-based plan, but in the meantime, a three stage developmental phase could be initiated.

Short-term goals could be established, to be followed by mid-range goals to eventually create a comprehensive community plan.

The points that I have made reference to may be considered negative or offensive to some people. However, if the reader uses an open mind and takes the time to look at what is taking place with the young people, I am sure you will see that there is a need for a serious approach and that the situation should be explored on a different level with open minds.

As I read the message from the Chief in the community newsletter, I have to strongly agree on the issue of lost opportunities. We have for the most part created our misfortunes and simply tried to blame the system that is yet to be defined. Taking things for granted is dangerous thinking that leads to other problems. To re-instill pride in the community will take a community effort, and people will probably have to learn hard lessons to come back on track. However, lack of pride always has an origin and we have not taken the time to understand this aspect enough to be able to correct it. The article written by the Director of the Walgwan Center, certainly expresses the need for people working together in creating an awareness that not all things are bad in our community. For what needs working on, these initiatives have to be put to the test. We need people in the field who believe in the community and its people, especially the youth. We can no longer just sit around and pass the buck from one organization to another. It is simply not acceptable and should not be tolerated by the leadership or by community members.

The issue of domestic violence in First Nation communities is one that demands urgent study and action. For example, studies indicate that among native people there is a very high rate of mortality either by accident or family violence related to alcohol and drug abuse. The goal is not to comment on family violence generally, but to try to focus on family violence as it affects native women, teenagers and children. You may recall a recent study that was mentioned on TV, about problems in the care taking of children in our country, the plight of aboriginal children is not mentioned in particular, but in most cases it is especially alarming.

While domestic violence clearly affects all family members, the most obvious victims are women and children. The Ontario Women's Association reported that 8 out of 10 native women were

---

P.O. Box 1280, Gesgapegiag, Qc., G0C 1Y0

Telephone: 418-759-3441

Fax: 418-759-5856

# GESGAPEGIAG COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER



Volume 3, issue 2

May 2004

---

abused. And there is growing documentation that aboriginal female adults, adolescents and children are experiencing abuse to a staggering degree. As more victims are beginning to report abuse, battering, sexual abuse there is every indication that it will be very problematic. There was a request by the Royal Commission to address the following: the women's perspectives on factors that generate and perpetuate domestic violence; and strategies proposed to reduce and eliminate violence. Barriers to implement the strategies will also be mentioned.

The Royal Commission wants policy recommendations more than an extensive analysis of violence. However, it would be profitable to the reader to take some time to think about the possible reasons for violence against women. Not only would an analysis be a good working tool towards a solution, but also an educational process that we all need in order to address the issue with comprehension and compassion.

In a local setting one has to wonder, what everybody is waiting for? Why hasn't there been more effort to provide recreation facilities for the youth in our communities? There is so much untapped potential for excellence in our young people. Is it not time to move in that direction?

All Aboriginal youth should have access to counseling services. They also may be in need of psychological or psychiatric needs; these too must be made accessible. Our young people have dreams and hopes for their future and their well-being. Every effort must be made by all parties concerned to protect these young people and to facilitate their aspirations. Native communities should organize conferences that could address their needs as well as present role models.

If our young people enjoy their daily existence, and if they can have dreams that can be attainable, their daily activities would change substantially. They would respond to a creative environment and move away from destructive influences and destructive behaviors. If we wish to eliminate violence, we have to substitute negative attitudes by creative and meaningful alternatives to it. Our children deserve nothing less.

Finally, studies show that rural native people move to urban centers to escape family or community problems. Most communities are small, making the situation that much more difficult for victims. The lack of concern and leadership, or family support, effectively sometimes chases people from their own community. This should not happen. No one should ever have to leave home in order to feel safe. The Aboriginal leadership at the federal, provincial and regional

---

P.O. Box 1280, Gesgapegiag, Qc., G0C 1Y0

Telephone: 418-759-3441

Fax: 418-759-5856



# GESGAPEGIAG COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER



Volume 3, issue 2

May 2004

level must take strong stands against violence. The message and modeling must be clear and firm so that violence against women and children is inexcusable, intolerable and unacceptable.

The leadership with its community resources must take the initiative in raising the consciousness about violence. Violence must be raised as the social problem it is: A problem requiring urgent attention. Forums for discussion, education and information must be set up to facilitate awareness and social concern. Every effort must be made to prevent violence and to help those who have been victimized.

All native resources involved with family problems should be required to attend workshops or conferences geared to addressing the issue of domestic violence. Community resources must be free to address issues such as violence, equality and political leadership. They must receive support to create forums through which they can gather to discuss issues of mutual concern. Raising the consciousness of Aboriginal grassroots is one of the important tasks in moving toward wholeness and can be seen as "service" to victims of violence. Community members need to believe that they can act to make change and that by acting on issues they are empowering themselves. It may take years to understand and resolve the violence; meanwhile we must deal with the everyday realities of it. Even if we agree about what causes violence, we could not end it immediately, if ever.

There are no easy answers, nor is it suggested to look for simplistic solutions. But in most cases the system has so over-complicated issues surrounding violence that the laws and the exercising of these laws have become absurd. This results in the devaluation of human dignity in the whole system. Property and alcohol and drug offences mean more to the system than the violation of one's person.

No one has the final answers, simply suggestions for plans. The subject of violence is extremely difficult, and made more so, because it goes to the heart of personal, family and social politics. While it is evident that there is more emerging information and a better understanding of the causes and effects of violence, there is room for continued research at all levels.

A caution of the loose terms of and notions of "healing", "counseling" and "family violence." The effect of using such terms gives the impression that violence cause no great harm and that it is easy to fix. Just go for counseling and the pain will go away. Healing is used so often that it risks promoting the idea that victims of violence can be easily healed. There is every indication

---

P.O. Box 1280, Gesgapegiag, Qc., G0C 1Y0  
Telephone: 418-759-3441

Fax: 418-759-5856

# GESGAPEGIAG COMMUNITY NEWSLETTER



Volume 3, issue 2

May 2004

that violence is extremely traumatic and destructive and that these effects are long-term. We run the risk of trivializing violence by using descriptions and terms that cushion and soften the impact.

Violence has long been rampant in many Aboriginal communities. We know, too, that we have shied away from dealing with the issue partly because we have had to fend off racism and stereotyping. But given the seriousness of the situation we must confront the problem. If we do not, there will be self-government without selves to govern, for people are leaving their communities at times to escape violence. It is possible to deal with these issues intelligently, without having to resort to racist stereotypes?

In many cases, we are aware of the system's lack of respect towards Native people. Many of us grew up watching the police abuse our parents. Police roughed up and picked up our parents for no reason at all, and sometimes on the word of our Dominion Police (the First Reserve Cops), under the Indian Act. This generation could not defend itself in the courts because of language differences, discrimination, poverty and the liberal use of certain sections of the Indian Act. But we also saw or heard of police and courts neglecting Aboriginal victims of Aboriginal violence. This is the ultimate form of racism.

In our community, we were all victims of colonization but we did not all turn to violence. As a final observation, why should as victims of violence bear the ultimate burden of colonization, racism and negligence of the criminal justice system? It is time for us to take a stand against violence in our community.

My hope is that our community will be renewed, and people will find support for restoration.

Douglas Martin.

---

P.O. Box 1280, Gesgapegiag, Qc., G0C 1Y0  
Telephone: 418-759-3441

Fax: 418-759-5856