

**Project Case Study
Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan**

1. Introduction

This case study of the Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company is one of a series of case studies of projects funded at least in part through the federal government's National Homelessness Initiative (NHI). The case study first describes the project including: conditions prior to implementation, what the project involves and its objectives. It then describes project implementation to date. Finally, it notes outcomes to date, including comments from clients where available.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) is producing these case studies in order to contribute to the government's understanding of how NHI is working in individual communities at the project level, to gauge the extent to which the objectives are being achieved at this mid-way stage of the three-year Initiative, and to determine what can be learned from the experiences of particular projects that may be applicable to others participating in the Initiative.

The case study is based on a review of the initial proposal for the project and other available documents describing the project and its objectives and how it fits into the community's plans to address homelessness, and on a series of interviews with people representing the following groups:

- managers and staff of the project
- participants of the project
- community organizations working in areas related to this project that might share clientele with the project or whose service to people who are homeless might be influenced by this project

2. Description of the Project

Conditions prior to project implementation

The Saskatchewan Native Theatre Company (SNTC) runs a 28-week program called the Circle of Voices, which started in 1999. The program supports at-risk youth and has four components: career development, cultural development, performing plays and developing life skills. The primary focus is on the participants and their personal development in

building self-esteem and having hope for the future. The program's foundation is based on sharing the wisdom and teachings of Native Elders with the participants and through the performances.

Applicants have to be of Aboriginal ancestry, between 16 to 30 years of age, affected in some way by homelessness (either their own or that of someone close to them) and willing to commit to a drug and alcohol-free life-style for the duration of the program.

Every program has the four components noted above and a general theme. The themes chosen for the first Circle of Voices in 1999 were based on discussions with youth, Elders, Aboriginal performing artists, founding board members, educators and core funders about issues that affect Aboriginal youth in the world today. SNTC also did a youth survey that provided suggestions as to what types of stories and themes should be staged for presentations. The first project lasted 10 weeks and produced the play, "Truth Hurts," which examines the historical cycle of the intergenerational effects of residential schools and the after effects of this experience on Aboriginal youth.

The second Circle of Voices expanded to 12 weeks and the play produced, "Love Songs From a War Drum," focussed on love, family, identity and gangs. The play dealt with the struggles youth go through and the pressures and expectations in maintaining and perpetuating family feuds from earlier generations. For both the first and the second programs, participants worked from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. but were not paid.

What the project involves

This project is the third Circle of Voices program. The project involves bringing the power of culture and theatre to youth and the community, starting with securing and coordinating funding from the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, Assembly of First Nations, Metis National Council, HRDC Youth Employment Strategy, Canadian Heritage, National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, Saskatoon Arts Board, Sask Culture, National Aboriginal Healing Foundation, Saskatchewan Lotteries, Saskatchewan Indian Gaming Authority, Dark Horse Studio, Missinipi Broadcasting Corporation, Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations and Eagle Feather News.

The HRDC funding allocation allows 20 participants to receive allowances for their work in the program, and also contributes to the purchase of a computer for the theatre company, and some other operating expenses. The project coordinators interview candidates (with an HRDC representative present to inquire about any participation in previous HRDC programs) and hire suitable youths. The next step is coordinating the participation of Elders, mentors and professionals who are involved in the theatre community to run workshops on acting, writing, dance, makeup, set design and carpentry. Participants then apply their newly acquired skills to writing, developing and performing a play. During the program, cultural activities are facilitated and youth are supported to develop in their chosen careers.

Objectives of the project

The project has the following five objectives :

- to work towards ensuring that young urban Aboriginal individuals are not involuntarily on the street, by providing programming for homeless and at-risk youth;
- to reduce the number of individuals “couch surfing” by providing preventive programming;
- to help, urban, at-risk youth move towards self-sufficiency by providing esteem-building activities and life and employment skills;
- to help communities strengthen their capacity to address the needs of homeless people through increased awareness of homelessness issues;
- to improve the social, health and economic well being of homeless and at-risk, urban, Aboriginal youth by providing a forum for them to explore their cultural heritage, to present their views on homelessness and to develop employment skills.

3. Implementation to Date

Seventy youths were interviewed as potential participants and 20 were accepted. Five youth were hired as project staff in addition to the 20 participants. The interviewees heard about the program from a variety of sources such as youth service agencies, community newsletters, posters and word of mouth. HRDC participated in the interview process and handled questions about the interviewees’ current income and other HRDC projects they may have participated in, which affected their eligibility.

The 20 participants chosen included nine young women and eleven men. Approximately 90 percent of them were on social assistance. The majority had finished high school, with the lowest level of education obtained being Grade 8.

HRDC funding allowed the program to run full-time from Monday to Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and to pay the youths \$634 every two weeks for 60 hours of work. Initially, HRDC requested that the youths work only 30 hours a week, which caused some difficulties. In the theatre, people are paid bi-weekly and are expected to be there until the job is done, thus it requires a more flexible work schedule with longer hours. The participants wanted to be paid over-time for the extra hours required at various times. A compromise was reached as to when over-time could be banked and taken. The project staff hours were increased from 30 to 37.5 hours per week, requiring an amendment. The participant hours remained at 30 hours per week.

The play “The Alley” was written by Maria Campbell in collaboration with the participants. The script was developed through story-weaving. Information came from the participants in a variety of ways such as through Talking and Sharing Circles and from

those participants who felt comfortable sharing their reflective journals with the play writer. Circle of Voices members participated in all the theatre training workshops such as lighting, sound, set design, makeup, costume design and acting. When fine-tuning the play, each person was asked to sign up for the production area where they would like to use the skills they had learned in the workshops. Those wanting to act had to audition.

The play has been performed a total of 73 times with audiences numbering 40 to 400 per show, within the Saskatoon area as well as in major cities such as Regina, Winnipeg, Calgary, Toronto and Ottawa. Ten of the participants of the Circle of Voices, two technicians and two Youth Ensemble Team members toured with the play.

Throughout the 28-week program, participants also learn about Aboriginal culture from Elders and other respected mentors within the community. Participants are given a forum to explore Aboriginal culture and learn the significance of traditional teachings and stories. They personally experience the strength of honouring the traditions. For example, the participants “smudge” prior to each performance to cleanse themselves, free their mind, body and spirit of negative thoughts and feelings and focus on the task at hand. In Native theatre, the stage is a sacred place and the Circle of Voices participants learn to hold that space in very high regard

Developing positive life skills is another component of the Circle of Voices project, including helping participants to develop self-confidence and to recognize the importance of eating healthy, nutritious food. Volunteers prepare healthy lunches and snacks for the participants.

Abstaining from drugs and alcohol is one of the most difficult issues that participants deal with on a regular basis. The general manager and the director offer counselling and are available 24 hours a day for those who express a need for support. As well, “sweats” and other culturally appropriate ways of dealing with stressful situations have been introduced and are offered on a regular basis. The Youth Ensemble Team are past participants of the Circle of Voices and they are also there to offer support when requested. One participant was in a difficult position with a family member who was encouraging him to drink alcohol. Staff members of SNCT asked the participant and the family member to come together and discuss why it was important to abstain from alcohol, particularly while in the Circle of Voices program. This helped to relieve some of the pressure on the participant although the issue has not gone away.

Career development is an on-going part of the program. A SNTC staff member said, “Most participants have Grade 12 but do not know what to do with it. They have no career goals, do not know what their interests are nor how to follow through with their interests.” The program helps youth to explore their career potential and set realistic short and long-term goals. Practical skills like résumé development and writing cover letters are taught. Some participants want to pursue a career in the performing arts and have received support to develop their own Web site.

Of the initial 20 participants, seven women and eight men completed the program. Of those who left; one person secured employment in her own community, one single mother regained custody of her children and needed to focus her attention on them, two participants acknowledged they were not ready to be in the program and left of their own accord, and one person was asked to leave because of behaviour demonstrating an inability to commit to the program. The five people left well into the process, so they were not replaced. All but one of those who left continue to maintain some contact with the SNTC through the career development component.

Not only does the SNTC reach out to communities through the performances but also through the Northern Lights School Division. Through the Division, the Drama Links Theatre program links with nine high schools in the area. The theatre groups in each school were asked to write and perform plays related to homelessness. The SNTC visited each of the Drama Links theatre programs. In the afternoons, the Drama Links Theatre group performed their play, a meal was then shared and in the evening the Circle of Voices performed. Through the Northern Lights School Division the theatre links to the high schools was strengthened, while the community issues of homelessness were explored by youth.

The third Circle of Voices program ended August 30, 2002. Participants are welcome to come back to the SNTC anytime and participate in cultural activities and continue working on their career development.

4. Outcomes to Date

Preliminary observations

While it is premature to make any assessment of the impacts of the Circle of Voices on the lives of its many clients in the longer term, it is possible to make the following preliminary observations:

- The high number of people who apply and continue to call from across Canada to enquire about getting into the program is an indication that the Circle of Voices is valued within the youth-at-risk community.
- Five youths chose to work off their court-imposed fines at the SNTC, and continued to do volunteer work at the SNTC after their fines were paid.
- Through the Circle of Voices program, SNTC staff said, “Youth gain an understanding of how they got to be where they are. They need to know this in order to break away and understand social assistance is not a career.”
- There has not been a formal follow up on past participants; however, SNTC does keep in touch through the “moccasin telegraph.” It is estimated 10 percent of the past participants have gone back to youth-at-risk status.

- With the inclusion of participant allowances, SNTC has observed that for a few participants, there is less of a commitment to the true intent and spirit of the project. It is felt these participants attend to receive the money and this is portrayed by the lack of commitment, responsibility and reliability they demonstrate to the group. This behaviour is in contrast to that of other participants who attend because they want to get the most out of the short duration of the Circle of Voices program.
- SNTC staff mentioned they felt HRDC could be more flexible in how money is spent. For example, one participant while on tour had to be flown home due to a death in the family. It was not known if HRDC would cover this cost. In the past if SNTC wanted to alter the HRDC funding to cover particular costs, a lot of time and effort was required to make amendments and there was a long waiting time for approval.

Client comments

In order to get a sense of the project's impact on the participants, the researcher spent several hours at the performance site in Ottawa having informal group and individual conversations with 10 participants. The researcher asked participants what changes, if any, they have experienced as a result of the inception of the project or of additional services made possible by NHI funding. The responses are, by their nature, the subjective comments of those individuals willing to respond.

- When asked where they would be if not with the SNTC, the majority of the participants said "at a dead-end Joe job or hanging around on the street." One participant said, "I'd probably be in Regina, hanging around and earning a living off the street."
- One respondent said that the project "helped to push ourselves more than ever before. We have learned to adapt to surprises, for example by being an understudy." One woman had half an hour to learn her lines and said, "I did it! That's an example of pushing myself like never before." One man mentioned, "I learned to put the past behind me, accept what and why I did things; things I can now leave behind and move on."
- Everyone spoken with said that the project is hard work and requires a lot of dedication. The following two quotes reflect the general feeling of the group, "We eat and breathe theatre, there is always something to do and that's what has kept me out of trouble. It is a feeling of being exhausted yet feeling good at the same time."

- One participant said, “At first I wouldn’t even take my jacket off, I was a young single mum with two kids, worried what others would think of me. Now, I have grown so much, I know what I want for myself and my kids, I’m much stronger.”
- One participant said, “HRDC funding has helped to change a lot of young lives for the better.”

Summer 2002