

Reclaiming Hope

Suicide Prevention Forum

Introduction

The Reclaiming Hope Suicide Prevention Forum occurred at the Sapoyi School in Stand Off, May 29th and 30th, 2008. Youth, adult and elder representatives of the four Kainai communities were present, with more than 140 youth attending sessions throughout the two days and nearly 60 adults and elders participating and supporting the Forum. Just over half of the youth attending were female, while the majority of adults and elders were male. 11 of the youth participating were from a treatment centre in a neighbouring community, where many of them were court ordered to deal with substance abuse issues and anger and violence issues. Members of the Siksika (a neighbouring reserve) youth Band Council were also in attendance with several of their adult supports.

The goals of this Forum were realistic, and the planners involved were candid with their expectations. *“I know we can’t just hold this Forum and this will fix everything, because we know it won’t, we know it can’t. When our community leaders, when our community elders tell us that we’re in a state of emergency, that our youth are in crisis, it’s not going to take two days of talking about suicide and what’s not working and talking about hope to fix it. We’re dying, our children are dying. My brothers and sisters are dying. I just want us to start talking about it. Start talking about suicide because it’s been a word for so long that we just pretend, we just pretend it doesn’t exist. But it does.”*
(Community Worker- Lavern)

The Forum was an opportunity to do three things with and for the community. The first was to bring youth, adults and elders together for the first time in recent memory to discuss the issues surrounding suicide in an open, honest way. The second was to gather information about current youth opinion on suicide, and the realities of living on the Blood Reserve. The third, and final reason for bringing youth together was to provide hands-on training and leadership experience for members of the Kainai Youth Council. Youth Council members and the four community youth workers were involved in all aspects of the event including planning the agenda, organizing the logistics, supporting speakers, elders and youth to participate in the event, and facilitation small

group discussions throughout the two days of the Forum. Youth Council members were also involved in evaluating the Forum at its close, and deconstructing what we learned from participants. What is distilled here in this report, has come as a result of these conversations.

Preparation

Staff from The Students Commission of Canada attended the Blood Reserve on two separate occasions to help prepare for this event. During the initial community visit in the late winter of 2008, staff met with Youth Council members and adult supports from the four Blood Reserve communities in the nearby city of Lethbridge. During this visit, these Youth Council members and their adult support discussed some of the most pressing issues and concerns facing not only the children and youth of the community, but adults and elders as well. Out of these discussion grew the major focus for the Forum, that is, that there needed to be a space for youth to share their concerns with members of the community, and discuss ways in which action could be taken. There was much discussion at this first community meeting about the power of positive role modeling, and how the perception of youth held by those on reserve and off needed to shift drastically for youth to really succeed. It was decided at this initial meeting that one of the goals of both the Reclaiming Hope Forum, and the Reclaiming Hope project in general would be to shift public perception of the youth on the reserve by showcasing youth doing positive things and standing up to ideas and actions that they believe need to change. *“We’re not a bunch a creeps, runnin’ around and doing stupid stuff and being all bad. We don’t all drink, we’re not all in jail, some of us are doing really great things with our lives, and I want to show people that, get people to support the good things that can happen.”* (Youth Council Member- Moses Lake)

The second visit to the community by Students Commission staff in the early spring was spent focused on finalizing the program of the Forum, developing the format of the discussions (including the discussion questions) and training youth for their roles as program supports and facilitators. Adult supports, elders and the four community workers were trained in facilitation as well, however the major focus with this group was

on how to support the youth facilitators during the discussions, and how to engage with other elders and adults to participate in discussion as well.

In the days leading up to the Forum, staff from the Students Commission reviewed the roles of the facilitators and supports with those involved, and worked closely with the Youth Council to ensure they were prepared for the event. Particular attention was paid to making sure that adequate emotional support was provided for these facilitators, as the community had suffered the loss of two youth, ages 12 and 17, to suicide in the weeks before the Forum.

Discussion Themes

“This place has only ten thousand people living on the land, and we’re all connected. We’re all related because we share our culture. But we are a divided people. We fight, we have histories of families that fight, we rarely have the opportunity like this, to reach out to each other, no matter where we are...no matter who we are...and talk. Just talk. We need to think and talk out our ideas because that is what shapes the future.” (Blood Tribe Elder)

This Forum provided youth, adults and community elders with the opportunity to speak candidly about the many, intersecting issues young people on the Blood Reserve face daily, and challenged both youth and adults alike to provide concrete solutions for positive change in the community.

Modeled on a number of Students Commission’s conference programming tools, the discussions were broken into four themes: *Spirit, Head, Heart* and *Feet*. The discussions on *Spirit* asked Forum participants to explore how they felt about themselves, their own stories of suicide and the story of the elder who relied on her culture to cope with the aftermath of finding her child after he had committed suicide. The idea of these discussions was to focus on how participants create something positive out of a negative situation, focusing on the coping skills and resilience of

individuals and the community, and exploring how our personal understanding of culture, spirituality and the individual sense of spirit translate into a person's daily life.

The theme of Head focused on the concept of "strong communities, healthy communities." The objective of this session was to focus on community strength and resiliency by exploring the positive things that exist on the Blood Reserve. This was an opportunity to showcase the positive aspects of the community, in spite of the negative things that daily present themselves. Heart was a discussion that was designed to move participants from the larger picture of community strength to the reality of themselves as active participants within that community, and champions of hope. Throughout the Heart discussions, there was a focus on stories of survival and strength, and a look at the coping skills that have helped participants themselves overcome barriers to positive living in their own lives. Building on the assets of both individuals and community discussed in the first three sessions, Feet focused on creating positive action for change.

Discussion Outcomes

Though these discussions were led with strength and asset based questions, for many of the groups, particularly the group of adults and elders, it was very difficult to move participants to this approach. When asked why it was so hard to respond to the strengths of the community, one participant responded *"because we've never thought of it this way before. We're always thinking about what's not right, we're always talking about what's wrong with this place, and why we want to leave it, we always see what's bad, so it's hard to talk about what's good. No one has ever asked us what's good before."* (Youth Council member, Stand Off)

Spirit

"Spirit is about...it's about hope, it's about making choices based on what's right for you, it's about hope for the future. You can't just label it something like, a belief in God or the Creator, or something that like, because it's so personal to each of us." (Youth Council member, Old Agency) Generally, people responded

positively to this particular theme of questioning, and spoke about both personal and community morals and values. It was of interest to note the divergence between these two categories however, with individuals holding themselves to a higher moral standard than they did the community. One youth participant (a recent graduate from a nearby treatment centre) said *“It’s like... I knew what I was doing was wrong, but nobody reached out and stopped me. Not my parents, not the teachers at school, not any of the elders. It’s like, until I messed up in Cardston and the RCs [RCMP] got involved, nobody cared. It’s like they just expected me to be like how I was, all drunk and crazy and stuff, and nobody told me it was wrong, nobody showed me nothing better or different. When I tried to quit, they [the community] still thought I was always gonna be like I used to be, and when my brother died, I wanted to change so I did, but they still think of me like I’m the same.”* Another youth (a current resident of the same treatment centre) said *“It’s hard for me to like....not drink, because those same people who are telling me to grow up are just as hard as I am. This one time, the bootlegger that lives near where I used to stay told me I shouldn’t drink...I think I bought something from him the next weekend.”*

What was also interesting was that all discussion groups reported that they believed a stronger community focus on connecting the spirit (in large part through the reinforcement of culture through traditional cultural activities and events) to the daily lives of people would contribute to stronger, healthier communities. One group suggested that an emotional connection to life was missing for so many members of the community, young and old, and that restoring this balance through the exploration of the spirit with the support of the community, would work to resolve some of the issues of identity and belonging that often factor into suicide and unhealthy decision making. *“We’re caught. Some of us, many of us don’t really know our traditions and our culture, and others, they don’t know anything but...what they learned in the residential schools and from the missionaries. You see...because they sometimes battle, we battle ourselves, and our spirits...We’re caught in the middle of this war for*

our hearts and minds and souls, and our children, they end up losing out of it all...our children they don't know where they belong." (Kainai Children's Services Youth Support Worker)

Making the connection between doing positive things as a result of a tragic event was difficult for most Forum participants to articulate, however many of their responses would indicate this is exactly what happened. For many of those in attendance, there was a critical moment in their lives when a tragedy occurred in their lives that led to healthy, or healthier decision being made in theirs. For some, the death of their peers as a result of drinking and driving encouraged them to find sober drivers, for others, the suicides of friends and loved ones made them distinctly more determined to live their lives successfully and honor the memory of those who had successfully taken their lives. This was not the case for all though, and many spoke of the paralyzing despair they felt when the community was dealt yet another loss. *"I don't know why we do it, but sometimes we don't do anything but grieve for someone even if you've never met them in your life. It's like....the community can't be happy for too long before we need to cry again. I think sometimes we get stuck because pain and grief and....and sorrow can be shared with everyone...happiness can't."* (Kainai Youth Council Mentor)

Much of the discussion around coping skills also focused on the polarity between the self and the community. Many of the youth were able to speak to countless positive ways in which they cope with stress, anger and sadness, however they were unable to provide such concrete, positive methods of coping found at the community level. The group of adults and elders spoke to the lack of coping skills at this level, saying that *"We as a community, all of us here today too, we have so much anger for old hurts that need to be healed. Our hope is with our children, we have none left for us."* (Blood Tribe elder)

Head and Heart

These discussions became closely linked as the groups worked through the guiding questions, and many of the stories that were shared looped through both the Head and Heart themes. Throughout these discussions, though it was still easier for participants to focus on what was *wrong* with the reserve, when they were asked the question “*Why do people stay?*” there was a clear allegiance to the family, community and cultural ties they saw happening around them. Playing on these strengths, participants expressed their desires to have more, and stronger ties fostered at the community level. They saw these ties as being excellent opportunities to create positive spaces for youth to develop, giving them the chance to make healthy decisions, develop their coping skills and find alternatives to suicide. Participants envisioned their communities providing more spaces for adults to build and sustain their own support systems with each other, creating more opportunities for families in need to receive counseling or other social service programming as required, and offering a greater number of cultural events and activities for youth to participate alone and with the adults on the reserve. What is of particular interest is that the younger participants focused their discussions on the development of cultural activities and the creation of family support programs, while the group of adults and elders focused more heavily on the creation of a greater number of positive spaces and activities on reserve for youth to engage in.

Many participants also called for elders and youth to work together more closely, suggesting that the Band look at implementing programs designed to support positive role modeling and mentorship of youth by elders in the community. This was met with some resistance by some of the youth participants though, with one youth saying “*They tell us that we’re drinking ourselves to death, and that we’re not going to have good lives, but it’s not us kids who bootleg. It’s them that do. The adults.*” (Youth participant, Stand Off) While another said “*It’s like they [adults and elders] think that they can fix us and that solves everything that’s wrong with native people. Where do you think we learn it from? Where do they think that we learn this from? I had more uncles killing themselves when I was*

growing up than friends [who killed themselves]. Who am I supposed to look up to if the people that are telling me that there is something wrong with us kids are the ones that are doing the same things they don't want us to do?" (Youth Council member, Moses Lake) One group felt that role modeling and mentorship should not be limited from elder to youth, instead they felt that programs encouraging inter-generational sharing and learning should be most beneficial to *"the entire community, to all of us, because we're all in the together, we're all hurting, we all need to support each other."* (Youth participant, Siksika)

Feet

"Today we face a state of emergency. Yesterday we faced a state of emergency. Our children are dying. This is not our culture, this is a disease that is eating us from the inside. How many more children have to die before we learn that things need to change? Are we really going to have to face another state of emergency tomorrow?"(Blood Tribe elder)

Contrary to what Forum organizers thought would be the case, discussions about action were the most difficult to facilitate. In some groups, for every concrete example of positive action that was put forth, there was an equally strong reason as to why such an idea would fail. However, the strength of the youth facilitators is to be commended as all of the groups ended with a number of positive opportunities for action and change within the community. Building on the ideas of developing more opportunities within the community groups discussed earlier, participants spoke at length about the role these positive activities could have in the lives of children and youth living on the reserve. They also felt that the school played a major role in helping to develop positive identities as well as educating children and youth. They felt that the school was a place where youth should be able to learn about their culture, and pushed to have greater emphasis on being Blackfoot in school. All participants felt that the Kainai Youth Council was a place for positive youth development, and that the youth leaders being trained in each of the four community youth clubs were strong candidates for

peer mentorship, but felt that more sustained programs for mentorship and peer-to-peer leadership should be implemented in each of community. Members of the youth clubs agreed that the clubs' existence was important, but felt that *"they could be so much more if they had a program, or a plan...[club members] hang out, and we're safe and doing good things because we're not doing bad things like drugs and stuff, but it can get boring sometimes when we just do nothing but hang out, that's when we get restless."* (Youth Council member, Stand Off)

Many participants felt that members of the Kainai Youth Council should be more involved in community decision-making within each of the communities, but also at the Band Council level. *"If we see young people making decisions that effect what we do on the reserve, we'll start thinking that we are valued as part of this community, and want to make a contribution too."* (Youth Council member, Lavern) Though this idea did not hold for many of the adults and elders.

Job creation for youth was an oft-repeated step for positive action, however according to many of the youth participants, a major barrier to getting and keeping a job, particularly during the summer months was a lack of reliable transportation. As one of the largest geographical reserves in Canada with only a modest 10,000 residents, Kainai faces the challenge of many rural communities. For many youth, a lack of affordable, reliable transportation is a major barrier to getting a job, or getting involved in many of the activities that are currently offered for youth, and it is particularly difficult for those youth who reside in outlying regions away from the four townsites.

Challenges and Plans for the Future

"Suicide is an option for our children because it's out there. They see it happening to their peers, to their friends, and all of a sudden, it's a choice they can make. If they don't know what it is, they don't think about it. If they don't see it everywhere, they won't think about it. Everyone here, all of us have been wounded because we've lost someone." (Kainai Children's Services Youth Worker)

The challenge for the future is to remove suicide as an option for youth and adults of the Blood Reserve alike. Kainai Children's Services and the Kainai Youth Council have committed to continue to review the outcomes of this Forum and any resulting discussions, and will work to reinforce their programming for the youth of the community based on what has been called for. Currently, there are plans for Kainai Youth Council members to develop a curriculum for youth that would address issues of culture, identity, and self esteem which is slated for completion and pilot-testing in the fall of 2008. With the continued support of The Students Commission of Canada, the Kainai Youth Council will continue to build the Reclaiming Hope project, using it as an avenue to engage youth in the development and delivery of its events and outcomes, ultimately providing positive opportunities for youth to get and stay involved. The Kainai Youth Council will also continue to act as a liaison between Kainai Children's Services and the children and youth of the Blood Reserve, advocating with and for all youth on issues that are important to them and their future.

"Hope is....it's about something special, it comes from within, and is reinforced by the people we are surrounded by...Reclaiming Hope is...it's about standing up and telling the world that you can't take hope from us, though people have tried, and every time another one of us dies, and every time there is another tragedy, they try...they try and take it from us, but they can't. It's ours, and it's time to reclaim it." (Kainai Children's Services Youth Placement Staff)