

In Search of Your Warrior Program

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The “In Search of Your Warrior” program is a healing program for Aboriginal men caught in the cycle of violence. It was conceived, developed and implemented through a participatory process at Native Counselling Services of Alberta (NCSA) over a five-year period.

Program assumptions

The program is based upon the following guiding assumptions:

- Human beings are part of a number of systems such as the family, community and society at large - we affect these systems and in turn, they affect us.
- No matter how tortured an individual’s history of violence may be, he is respected as a human being - one who has made “mistakes” from which he can and must learn.²
- Traditional Aboriginal teachings and culture will guide individuals back to a non-violent way of life.
- All human beings are inherently good, and their behaviour is shaped by their life experiences.
- Personal change takes time and requires readiness, commitment, desire and patience.
- In order for healing to occur, the spiritual, emotional, physical and psychological parts of the self must be engaged in the healing process.

Program development

Ten years ago, the Solicitor General of Canada’s Aboriginal Corrections Policy Unit partnered with NCSA to produce a video looking at violence from the perspective of men in prison. The result was an in-depth, four-part series on the chronological manifestation of violence entitled “RAGE”. In this series, seven men, who were residents of the Stan Daniels Community Correctional Centre (now Stan Daniels Healing Centre - SDHC) discuss their childhood experiences including: how violence, abandonment and neglect shaped their paradigm as children; how they turned from victims to perpetrators; and the escalation of violence in their lives through adulthood and into prison. The videos were directed, written and shot by these residents, and include dramatizations of their experiences with violence.

The RAGE videos surpassed the original objective, in that they provide “a convincing commentary on

the possibility of basic healing, and a graphic illustration of the conditions required for its maintenance”.³ Indeed, the final product is a powerful educational tool that walks the viewer through the evolution of violence and demonstrates the manner in which violence is passed inter-generationally, helping the individual to better understand their own experiences with violence.

Upon completion of the RAGE video series, it became apparent that a debriefing session needed to be devised to accompany the videos, as they elicited a very strong response from the audience. In addition, staff and residents of the SDHC were aware that the videos could be used in a broader context with men in (and out) of prison, to help them move away from their patterns of violent behaviour. It was with this intention that a researcher was brought into the process to find material that would form the sessions to be used with the RAGE videos. Elders, staff of the SDHC, residents and “experts” in the field were all consulted and included in the program development.

The *In Search of Your Warrior Program* includes information, therapeutic sessions and suggested resources for facilitators to use over a 6 to 13 week period that deals specifically with helping individuals break their cycle of violence. The foundation for this program is the culture, teachings and ceremonies of Aboriginal people. With the assistance of an Aboriginal Elder, the appropriate ceremonies and teachings for each particular group of participants are weaved into the delivery of the program and form the basis for the therapeutic interventions that take place.

The warrior metaphor

The concept of “warrior” has been powerful throughout history in Aboriginal cultures. For this program it provides participants an ideal way of being that they can strive to adopt for themselves. The concept of warrior is applicable for both males and females and includes “the development of such qualities as self-possession, spiritual and psychic awareness/alertness/attentiveness, goodness and caring, endurance, patience, resilience, the capacity to fight for what must be defended and preserved in order to assure a Way of Life”.⁴

Research and program evaluation

Once piloted at the SDHC, NCSA recognized that participant evaluation was needed in order to report what types of changes individuals realized as a result of participating in the In Search of Your Warrior Program. In partnership with the Correctional Service of Canada, a pre- and post-test for program participants was developed as a means of measuring the success of the individual, in a way that was culturally appropriate and specific to this unique program. Special care was taken to include the feedback from Elders who were involved with the program participants, as well as a tool that measured any change in specific areas that an individual sustained. The results of this research are now being analyzed and will be reported at a later date.

In addition, the program curriculum was reviewed and critiqued from an Aboriginal psychological perspective by Dr. Joe Couture. Through this process of evaluation, changes to the program were made.

Implementation in different environments

NCSA realized that the setting of the program could have a great effect on the amount of change the participants of the program realized. In 1999, the staff and facilitators of In Search of Your

Warrior moved the program to a bush camp for the summer and fall months, with great success. Facilitators have reported that the natural environment and decrease of formal structure has lead to an increase in the amount and depth of personal development made by the participants.

Currently, the *In Search of Your Warrior Program* is being delivered by trained facilitators inside of federal institutions. The manual has been translated into French, making the program available for Aboriginal inmates in Quebec. In addition, community people throughout the Prairie provinces have been trained to deliver the program, developing skills to address issues of violence in their community. Most recently, the NCSA adapted the program for Aboriginal women who are caught in the cycle of violence; a program that is named "Spirit of a Warrior", which has been delivered successfully at Saskatchewan Penitentiary. ■

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² Couture, J. (1999), *Psychological Evaluation / Critique of the In Search Of Your Warrior Program Curriculum*. Native Counselling Services of Alberta Unpublished Document.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

Coming up in *FORUM on Corrections Research*

The January 2003 issue of Forum will focus on Community Corrections