

# Traditions bring peace to natives

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STONY MOUNTAIN, Man. — After years in the volatile world of federal prisons, Julian Bighetty says he has finally found a way to escape the violence.

"It's like there's always somebody behind you, just pushing you to get into trouble," he says of the world of high walls and steel bars that has been his home for the past 11 years.

Once he was a willing participant, now he reaches into a pocket of his prison garb, pulls out a tight braid of Prairie grass, and finds his peace of mind.

"You don't turn around. You don't blow up on a person.

"You burn your sweetgrass and you pray."

Bighetty is among the growing number of federal prison inmates discovering traditional native spirituality.

With the blessing of prison authorities and the help of Indian elders, they burn sacred plants such as the sweetgrass and conduct sweat lodge ceremonies.

Native leaders say it has meant an escape for some from the circle of alcohol abuse and crime that has trapped many of their people. Prison officials say it has already proven to be a calming influence on some inmates.

In this prison north of Winnipeg, where natives make up almost 45 per cent of the inmate population, a grassy courtyard has taken on the appearance of a sacred Indian prayer site.

The frame of a large tepee stands in the last patches of snow and bent willow branches form the

frame for what will become an igloo-shaped, canvas-covered sweat lodge.

Bighetty will be here for the monthly sweat lodge ceremony, praying with others in the darkened, low-rise structure, while steam comes off red hot rocks doused with water.

He says the sweat lodge and other traditional native ceremonies have relieved him of the intense headaches that he says led to violent behavior.

"It releases that thing inside me that's bothering me," says Bighetty, convicted of manslaughter in 1978.

Elder John Stonechild, who is hired on contract by the correctional service to work in Stony Mountain, says the sweat lodge is a purification ceremony, one of the most important rituals to the traditional native culture.

"When you're in here (as an inmate) a lot of negative feelings develop within you, and consequently you become a walking time bomb," says Stonechild.

"The sweat lodge releases it all. Your anxieties are left in there."

Corrections Canada now recognizes native spirituality as having the same status as other religions.

## 'Formed circle'

It pays for people such as Stonechild to go into the prisons to help with ceremonies, to collect the sacred plants for the inmates, and to provide counselling.

Corrections officials don't have statistics to show a lessening in violent behavior by native participants but say there is some evidence.

A spokesman says that during a major disturbance at the Drumheller, Alta. prison, "natives didn't participate.

"They formed a prayer circle," says Millard Beane.

Stonechild says the prison here accommodates native spirituality and says officials don't even look into the sacred bundles he brings into the jail.

Guards have been taught to identify by smell and sight the sacred plants. Some have even participated in sweat lodges and other ceremonies so they can better understand native culture.

Harvey Chartrand is another native inmate here who has careered through a life of alcohol abuse and crime.

He says that in previous prison stays, he took the Bible that was offered him and went to church.

"But I can't read or write," says the northern Manitoba native who is serving three years for breaking and entering.

"So in church I don't know what to do, I don't know what to say.

"But at the sweat lodge, you can just listen."

He says that in the close quarters of a prison, inmate "are used to picking on each other," but tensions are reduced among sweat lodge participants, who include some non-natives.

Bighetty says: "Before, I was really violent. I never cared about the other person.

"Now, I just laugh at the next person who's trying to raise hell."