

Jailed natives return to

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Indians turn to culture, spiritualism for help

GUELPH, Ont. (CP) — Half-naked and shivering in the winter air, 15 men walk barefoot over the snow, then kneel and kiss the earth next to a small tent.

Crawling inside, they huddle in a circle, watching silently as rocks glowing with heat are reverently passed into a small pit in the frozen ground.

In the blackness, someone pours a gourdful of water on stones that hiss and radiate a wave of heat and steam.

The smell of incense hangs in the air, a voice prays to a Grandfather — the Creator — for forgiveness and the men slap sweating chests and arms to welcome the enveloping warmth.

The Indian sweat lodge ceremony — ancient, intimate and mysterious — has begun.

But what makes this ceremony unusual is the surrounding high chain-link and barbed-wire fence at the Guelph Correctional Centre.

Unusual

Ten of the sweating men are prisoners doing time for assault, armed robbery, drug offences and other crimes.

They have failed in a white system, which they say has failed them, and are searching for guidance in the Native Sons program.

They are returning to the old ways, for the pride, strength and wisdom to keep them on a straight path.

They find those ways in the sweat lodge — praying, singing, smoking sacred pipes.

The elder, a volunteer, tells them the lodge is a sacred place like their mother's womb — dark, warm and safe.

"This can make me look at something else other than shoving needles in my arm," said Aaron George, a prisoner from Parry Sound, Ont., serving time for assault and a drug offence.

Indians constitute less than two per cent of Canada's population but 11 per cent of inmates in federal prisons are natives, Statistics Canada says.

A recent study, which listed numerous recommendations for improving treatment of native offenders and re-integrating them into society, stressed the value of spiritual and cultural programs in stopping repeat offences.

Tona Mason started the Native Sons program at the Guelph Correctional Centre, one of few institutions to accommodate the sweat lodge ceremony, while serving an 18-month sentence for theft 12 years ago.

"I was trying to be a white Indian," Mason says.

"I got into drugs and alcohol and petty crime to maintain my habit.

"But I had to learn my own culture to put me on the straight path in life. It reinforced my need to stay sober.

Special room

Inmates in the program have a special room in the prison where they can visit three times a week, make cards, burn sweetgrass and sage tobacco or merely talk to their brothers.

Jail workers have had to adjust to the changes.

For a time, some guards mistook the aroma of burning sweetgrass for marijuana.

No one is expecting a 100-per-cent success rate for the program, but jail authorities say traditional Indian values and spirituality are making a difference.

Wilson Plain, a native counsellor at the prison, says he tries to teach those values to the jail's 35 native inmates in the same subtle way that his father taught them to him.

"My father never said, 'Today we're having a medicine wheel lesson'," Plain says

Plain also works at reviving native values on the Sarnia Chippewa reserve.

In October, he and his friends started the Medicine Wheel Project, a program that allows first-time offenders do community work rather than jail time.



CP Photo

Inmates Wilson Plain (left), Joe Schneepinskum and Gary Kwandibens cook hamburgers outside the Guelph Correntional Centre. Native Indians at the centre are turning to ancient rituals to help them achieve serenity and come to terms with their problems.