

Traditional spirituality helps heal wounds from Oka crisis

By HARVEY SHEPHERD
SOUTHAM NEWSPAPERS
Montreal

A program known as Breaking All Barriers is using traditional spirituality of Mohawk and other First Nations to help heal the emotional wounds and social divisions left by the Oka Crisis of almost a decade ago.

Mohawks place a high value "on peace-makers and in using a good mind in all you do," explains Wanda Gabriel, program director of Breaking All Barriers at Kanesatake just east of Montreal.

"We draw upon the elders, whether of our own communities or others. We share their teachings and wisdom."

Kanesatake's emotional wounds stem not only from the trauma of the 78-day Oka standoff — which pitted militant Mohawks against Quebec police and Canadian soldiers — but also result from other conflicts and oppression, Gabriel says.

Those conflicts include the devastation caused by residential schools and intergenerational sexual abuse. Trauma also comes from abusing drugs and alcohol, says Gabriel, but she sees their use as a symptom of deeper problems.

At Breaking All Barriers, "we don't deal with the symptom, we deal with the problem," she says. And that means going beyond conventional methods to promote health in the individual, family and the community.

The program provides one-on-one counselling sessions as well as group work, including a traditional Mohawk healing circle, in which participants share their concerns and learn about Mohawk and Kanesatake history and traditional North American native lore.

Lower-key social events like pot-luck suppers, block parties and recreational activities create "venues for people to come together," notes Jimmy Nicholas, a youth and community worker with the agency.

"Oppression has created such mistrust in our community," Gabriel adds. "We are concentrating on re-establishing trust and safety among individuals and families."

Disruption of native societies has meant the loss of many traditions, and as indigenous peoples return to their roots, they borrow from other First Nations, she says.

For instance, the sweat lodge — a sort of sauna believed to bring spiritual benefit — originated in the West, but has been adapted by eastern First Nations, including Kanesatake.

The medicine wheel — a conceptual framework, not a physical object — also plays an important role in healing. It emphasizes balance, says Gabriel, and "is an ancient symbol used by almost all the Native people of North and



Mona Staats, 71, a Mohawk living on the Six Nations Reserve is doing her part for International Year of Older Persons by teaching the lore of her ancestors to others, especially to groups of children and seniors. One of the highlights of the tour of her property is a walk in the woods to examine herbs and roots which contain medicinal properties used by natives long ago.

CP Photo

South America."

"There are many different ways that this basic concept is expressed: the four grandfathers, the four winds, the four cardinal directions and many other relationships that can be expressed in sets of four," she says.

"Just like a mirror can be used to see things not normally visible (behind us or around a corner), the medicine wheel can be used to help us see or understand things we can't quite see or understand because they are ideas and not physical objects." Gabriel, whose grandmother was removed from her

home at age five and placed in a Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., residential school, says teaching about injustices the community has suffered is also a major step in the process, as are stories passed down by the elderly.

"History is among our tools for healing."

For Gabriel, traditional spirituality has assisted her own healing journey.

"It has restored my faith in a higher power and helped me to understand there is a spiritual basis for existence. It has allowed me to go farther."