Justice as Healing
A Newsletter on Aboriginal Concepts of Justice

Power in the Spirit: Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge

Jason Warick. The following article appeared in The [Saskatoon] Star Phoenix (29 November 1997) C1. It is reprinted with permission from The Star Phoenix and the author.

Nestled in the rolling landscape of the Cypress Hills, the healing lodge is the only North American correctional facility designed specifically to rehabilitate aboriginal women.

The lodge stands in the middle of the sacred Thunder Hills (Okimaw Ohci in Cree) of the Nekaneet First Nation, one of the few groups of Plains Indians that refused to be uprooted to reserves in central and northern Saskatchewan.

Here at the lodge, conventional programs such as anger management, addiction and abuse counselling are complemented by daily sweetgrass ceremonies and other Native customs and traditions.

The women live in small dormitory-style residences, not cells. Earth-tone walls stand in place of metal doors; dreamcatchers and motivational sayings replace bars. More than a dozen names are on the sign-up board for an upcoming drummaking class.

There was a Halloween party, and residents of Maple Creek and Nekaneet attend regular ceremonial feasts and sweat lodges with the women.

The most innovative and unique experiment at the lodge is its mother-child program. Three toddlers have been living full-time with their mothers at the lodge since August, the first program of its kind in North America. The goal of all programs is to achieve “total healing” for the aboriginal women, who constitute a shockingly disproportionate number of federal inmates.

About 17 per cent of the federal female prison population is aboriginal, even though only three per cent of all Canadian women are Native.

Brenda Morrison knows what life in prison can do to a person. Every day she felt herself get a little harder, a little colder. Morrison said she had nearly lost hope and may not be alive today if officials at Okimaw Ohci hadn’t taken her under their wing.

“In a normal prison, all there is is yelling and screaming and swearing. You lose your will because you are frustrated, hostile and angry. It doesn’t matter which prison. You can’t show your emotion or you’re weak,” Morrison said of her previous experience in the Kingston Prison for Women.

“Here (at Okimaw Ohci) there’s a lot of respect. That comes from trust. I believe (the staff) are working here to give us a chance. I believe the cultural teachings are making a difference.”

A 34 year-old Saulteaux from the Sakimay reserve 100 kilometres east of Regina, Morrison speaks politely and confidently with her hands folded. She is engaging and funny, and focuses intently on the listener.

Time will reveal whether Okimaw Ohci can rehabilitate someone like Morrison, once considered one of Canada’s most dangerous inmates. Staff who have worked closely with her for the past two years believe she has dealt with her weaknesses and the problems that landed her in prison.

“She’s really changed. We’ve never had problems with her,” said Veronica Favel, who oversees security and operations at the lodge.

Morrison, like an alarming number of young aboriginal women, became entangled at an early age in a web of abuse, addiction, prostitution and violence. Her mother and grandmother were both alcoholics, and she was frequently beaten before running away at age ten to live on the streets of Regina.

[Sample Article]
Allegedly high and drunk during most of her crimes, Morrison was given a four year manslaughter sentence in 1987 for shooting and killing her boyfriend. In June 1993, Morrison and another woman robbed a 53 year-old man, beat him with a baseball bat, and cut up his penis before stuffing him in a car trunk and abandoning the vehicle outside Regina. The man managed to free himself after a couple of hours.

Morrison, an experienced kickboxer, was sent to Kingston where she helped orchestrate a four day riot which ended with an intrusive strip search and assault on the women by an all-male riot team. She stabbed a guard with a syringe during the uprising.

Although many felt Morrison was beyond redemption, officials at Okimaw Ohci saw potential in her and brought her to the lodge.

Since arriving, Morrison has been a model “resident.” She has participated enthusiastically in all programs and has complied with various interview and speech requests, including a talk about her life at a United Church children’s camp this fall.

Morrison said if she would have served the rest of her time in Kingston, she would have eventually fallen back into the drug and crime scene. She and the other residents are at the lodge because they want to learn to cope with their problems, she said.

“If I’m so dangerous why hadn’t I escaped? There are no walls There must be something working here,” Morrison said as she looked out the window at the women playing fetch with the lodge dog, a golden lab named Oldie. Five cats also wander the grounds, and there are plans to bring in a couple of horses.

Warden Norma Green, called Kikawinaw (Cree for Our Mother), said if people looked at the histories of abuse, violence, addiction, and racism affecting Morrison and the other residents, they would see the crimes in a different light.

Nine out of ten aboriginal women inmates have been physically or sexually abused, and 87 per cent are alcoholics or drug addicts, according to CSC [Correctional Services of Canada] statistics.

“Society is generally discriminatory. I would say that aboriginal women are doubly disadvantaged because of their color and their gender,” Green said.

“We want to give the women the tools to heal, to help them find their identity as aboriginal women. When they leave here, we hope they can cope better and won’t come into conflict with the law. Then they won’t be a burden to society.

“I think most of them will make it.”

Aside from daily meetings with Cree, Sioux, and other elders, psychologist Val Howard works with the women three days a week. She said most of them want to talk to her about how they were abused. But she also discusses the women’s crimes with them and encourages them to take responsibility for their actions.

“The sadness and guilt is horrendous. Let’s face it - they’re in here for a reason. I see a humanness, a softness. I see such a difference during their time (at the lodge),” Howard said.

Judith Heminger, executive director of the Elizabeth Fry Society of Saskatchewan said many Native women who are repeatedly incarcerated lose hope. At that point, the prospect of going to prison is no longer a deterrent.

“The programs at the healing lodge instill hope in them. They start to feel proud of their culture and it gives them their self-esteem back,” Heminger said. “They begin to see themselves as people who have a future.”

Heminger estimated at least 85 per cent of the women inmates in Saskatchewan prisons are of aboriginal ancestry. “It only stands to reason that we need to deal with their specific issues,” she said.

Darren Winegarden, director of justice for the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, said aboriginal women feel alienated by the justice system and need a facility like Okimaw Ohci to address their needs. “When
the system introduces our values back to Indians as part of the healing, that’s where the success rate comes in,” Winegarden said.

The lodge residents are showing the people of Nekaneet how it is possible even for hardened criminals to kick an addiction to drugs and alcohol, said Chief Larry Oakes.

Oakes and all Nekaneet band employees have sworn off alcohol to be a better example to the community’s youth. Nekaneet officials eventually want to take over cultural programming at the lodge, and hope to some day assume control of the entire facility. “We want to run the healing lodge but we have to improve ourselves and be clean first,” Oakes said.

The Okimaw Ohci experiment has been more expensive than most other forms of incarceration. It costs about $120,000 per woman annually to operate the healing lodge, while the average per-person cost for all maximum security institutions is $68,000. The Kingston Prison for Women has an annual cost of $74,000 per person, while the Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatoon is the most expensive institution on the prairies, at $125,000 per person per year.

CSC officials say the healing lodge money is well spent. Taxpayers will save far more in the long run if Okimaw Ohci can rehabilitate the women, keeping them off the streets, off the welfare rolls, and out of the courts and prisons. Okimaw Ohci is also a relatively new facility, and the costs should go down after a few more years, they say.

The $9.2 million healing lodge is one of five institutions built for federally sentenced women following a 1990 task force [Creating Choices - The Report of the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women]. Some, like Okimaw Ohci, were well planned and seem to be resoundingly successful. The facility in Metro, Nova Scotia, has followed the lead of Okimaw Ohci’s mother-child program and is allowing two toddlers to live with their mothers inside the prison walls. But at least one other facility has been a complete disaster.

The $5 million Edmonton Prison for Women has recently reopened after a catastrophic first year which included several escape attempts, an attack on a nurse, a murder, and multiple suicide attempts. Over $440,000 in security improvements were made to the prison, but were ineffective. Many of the women were shipped to the Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatoon or the Saskatchewan Penitentiary in Prince Albert. Each Saskatchewan facility had to make more than $200,000 in renovations to accommodate the women.

Vanduremalen admitted many of the maximum-security inmates were not ready for the relative freedom the Edmonton prison allowed them, and said the women should have been screened better.

The intensive screening process at Okimaw Ohci is part of the reason it has not run into similar problems, Green noted. Candidates must fill in a detailed questionnaire and pass an extensive interview by healing lodge staff. Green said about eight women are being considered for the one upcoming vacancy; only those who are committed to self-improvement will be considered.

CSC officials are ecstatic with the healing lodge experiment, Vandor-emalen said. “All of the correctional service institutions in Canada were built and designed and programmed to meet the needs of white male offenders,” he said. “(The healing lodge) is the first one to accommodate aboriginal women.”

Okimaw Ohci served as a model for a similar facility for minimum security aboriginal male inmates which opened in August on the Hobbema reserve in Alberta.

Although her offences may not be as shocking as Morrison’s, Janice Nepoose is another one of the women many people had given up on. Nepoose said Okimaw Ohci has been a miracle for her and other residents.

Nepoose was repeatedly abused as a child – sexually, physically, and emotionally. “The only way I knew how to deal with it was with the drugs and alcohol. I was doing acid trips, hash, dope and booze as often as I could get it. I’d hang out with my older sister to get my alcohol and drugs,” Nepoose said. “I had to escape from the reality I was living in.”

[Sample Article]
Nepoose, who was born and raised in Hobbema, soon amassed a long record of drunk driving and assault convictions. She found herself at Okimaw Ohci following a manslaughter conviction. “It only takes a split-second for your life to be taken away from you,” Nepoose said.

“I look at myself today and I wouldn’t want to go back to that. I didn’t like myself with all the drugs and alcohol. It really destroyed my life out there.”

Nepoose’s three year-old son, Kyle, and 20 month-old Ayla moved into the lodge with their mom on August 29 as part of the mother-child program. She’s hopeful the programming and spiritual grounding at the lodge will help her and her children escape the traps of abuse, addiction, and violence.

“Now I can say ‘Janice, look at your life and the way it’s gone. It’s time to correct it because there’s something better out there for you and your children.’

As for Brenda Morrison, she has begun a series of three-day unescorted absences from the lodge and is due to be released Jan. 16, 1998.

Morrison said she has arranged to finish her high school courses, and wants to become a drug and alcohol addictions counsellor. Her greatest wish is to be a real mother for her teenage daughter, Natasha. “I thought, ‘Do I want to waste my life or take advantage of my time?’ I’m feeling pretty confident now. A person can change if they want to change.”

Editor’s note: The four-day riot at the Prison for Women in Kingston (P4W) referred to in the above article led to the establishment of a commission of inquiry by the Governor General in Council. The Honourable Louise Arbour was appointed commissioner on April 10, 1995 to make independent findings of fact regarding the incidents that occurred at the P4W beginning on April 22, 1994 and to recommend improvements to the policies and practices of the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC).

The final report, entitled Commission of Inquiry into Certain Events at the Prison for Women in Kingston, revealed significant discrepancies between CSC’s operational policy, its written policy, and the law. “…[I]t is evident that some very important, yet essentially simple, legal principles which govern crucial aspects of the operation of the [CSC] have become lost …” (p. 4) The Inquiry found that “…when the departures from legal requirements in this case became known through the inquiry’s process, their importance was downplayed and the overriding public security concern was always relied upon … This was true to the higher ranks of the Correctional Service management …” (p. 57) These findings led Commissioner Arbour, “…to believe that the lack of observance of individual rights is not an isolated factor applicable only to the [P4W], but is probably very much part of CSC’s corporate culture.” (p. 57) Commissioner Arbour found that the response of CSC to the incidents which took place at P4W to be “difficult to reconcile with the spirit of Creating Choices which was concurrently animating its entire strategy for dealing with women offenders Nearly every step that was taken in response to this incident was at odds with the intent of the new initiatives.” (p. 24)

A summary of the recommendations of the Commission of Inquiry was reprinted in the Summer 1996 edition of Justice as Healing (vol. I, no. 2).