

Young people 'let go of their burdens'

Suicide prevention camp uses peer-based curriculum to reach vulnerable teens

By the CUJ

WESTMINSTER CAMP - Amber Riddle was in and out of foster care, in a rehab center for meth, and locked up for fighting.

Depressed and alone, she took five Percoset pills, a handful of Ecstasy and Vicodin, then slit her wrists.

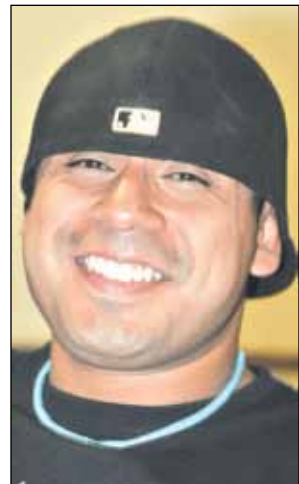
The young girl - now 15 - wanted all the hurting to be over.

"Nobody wanted me," she said.

Her stomach was pumped and the cuts stitched up. When she awoke, members of a new family were at her bedside. That was a turning point in her life.

Amber wasn't the only young person who "stepped outside their comfort zones" and shared agonizing stories about abandonment, parents in and out of jail, drug abuse in the house, sexual abuse, domestic violence and other "monsters."

About 30 youth from four Oregon tribes gathered in the Blue Mountains for the "Life Takes Courage" camp. Using a peer-based curriculum called Native Hope - Helping Our People Endure, the teen-agers - age 13-18 - spent two and half days "letting go of their burdens" through a series of activities, ranging from skits to sweats.



Counselor David Rodriguez from Warm Springs.

Creating a safe environment where youth feel comfortable and protected leads to "kids getting things off their chests," said David Rodriguez, an adolescent alcohol-and-drug counselor from Warm Springs Community Counseling.

"The message for kids is that if they tell their problems they will not be alone in their struggles," said Rodriguez.

Young people often avoid talking about their feelings.

"They expect to hear ridicule from adults; they're scared of being judged," Rodriguez said.

Instead, the Native Hope counsels kids to talk with each other.

"It's about youth helping youth," said Clayton Small, a Northern Cheyenne Indian from Albuquerque that developed the Native Hope curriculum.

"That's important because who has the most influence over youth today? Other youth."

Even with encouragement in a safe, protective environment, teens aren't keen on talking with each other.

"There is a code of silence," said Small. "There's an unwritten rule among teens. When they see a friend in trouble, depressed or suicidal, they won't do anything about it. They don't think their friend is serious, that he's just high or drunk. They think they might betray a friendship, they don't trust adults, or they're afraid they don't know what to do."

"Life Takes Courage" camp is designed to give youngsters a "sense of belonging" so they face their fears, and provide an atmosphere in they can release anger and pain and depression that leads to suicide attempts or successes.

"We're asking these kids to take a healthy risk and make positive changes," said Shane Lopez-Johnston, who works for the NARA managing a Garrett Lee Smith suicide prevention grant, a Methamphetamine and



Amber Riddle tried to commit suicide after being tossed around in the foster care system. She shared her story at the 2011 Nine Oregon Tribes Suicide Prevention Camp at Westminster Wood Campground near Meacham Aug. 8-12.

Suicide Prevention Initiative grant, and NARA's Youth Program.

"We see an amazing transformation in two and a half days. It's suicide prevention that is important, but young people carry a lot of other problems. It's our job to get them to open up," Lopez-Johnston said.

After gathering a rock that represented their journey in life, each youth sat around a campfire on the first night to talk about their journey and what it might take to heal from a variety of shared problems - death, divorce, abuse. Then they tossed away the rock - and the problems it represented.

It was later that the young people became confident enough to express their individual feelings in words.

"I actually had two or three kids who came up to me to talk about suicide attempts, cutting, abuse in the family," Rodriguez said. "We create a safe environment to talk rather than feel alienated."

Young people are dealing with a viscous cycle of harmful issues handed down in families for decades.



Clayton Small stands next to a big drum during a pow-wow for young teen-agers participating in the "Life Takes Courage" suicide prevention camp in August. Small, a Northern Cheyenne Indian from Albuquerque, developed the peer-based "Native Hope" curriculum.

"We tell them it's up to you to break the cycle. We ask them if they are ready to break the cycle?" Small said. "There is a stigma about suicide. Natives say don't talk about it because it will bring on evil spirits. I say bull---. Native Americans have the highest rate of suicides among all races, almost triple (the national average.) We need to talk about it and we need to intervene."

Beyond talking about the issue, communities must "take action."

Plans and studies are useful but they don't address the underlying problems, Small said.

"We help the kids go through the process of healing and leadership. We address suicide but we also talk about risk factors - drugs and alcohol, violence and bullying, stress of family situations and depression. You can't address suicide without addressing these other issues."

Across Indian Country, Small contends, there are "too many chicken littles saying 'the sky is falling.' There is too much cynicism, fighting, back stabbing and gossip."

Further, Small added, about one in three Native American adult males end up in prison.

Instead of perpetuating the weaknesses in Indian Country, Native young people can take on family dysfunction by embracing their strengths, chief among them being spirituality.

"Spirituality could be ceremonial, church, a walk in the forest, writing in a journal, the essence of being humble and healthy enough to ask for help. Nobody can do it alone; it's okay to ask for help," Small said.

Continuing, Small said, "Spirituality and culture are the anchors. Two boys for the first time went to a sweat and it probably changed their lives forever."

Attending the camp from the Klamath Tribe, Amber Riddle was abandoned by her parents and placed in a non-Indian foster home. She went to school and was sent to a juvenile detention facility after being charged with a number of assault-related crimes, including strangulation. After serving her three months in detention she was released only to learn that the family she was staying with no longer wanted to deal with her volatile behavior.

"I had no place to go."

She went into rehab for meth, got in another fight, and was sent back to juvie. She served her time and came out unsure of what was going to happen next. The state and the Tribes were hassling over who was going to help her.

To Amber is seemed like "nobody wanted to take me."

When a native foster home became available it couldn't meet the state's muster.

"They wanted to save me, but they couldn't."

Then, two weeks before her 15th birthday, the state certified the family and Amber found a new home.

It was too late. All the fighting and fussing and turmoil had taken their toll. She was so depressed that she swallowed the pills and cut herself.

At the hospital, she told doctors she didn't want to recover. She wanted to die.

Fortunately, hers will be recorded as a suicide attempt. Instead of dying alone, she woke in bed surrounded by people who cared about her.

Amber was a natural to attend the camp.

Caroline Knolle, Prevention Coordinator for the Klamath Tribe, had been to the camp, which rotates between the nine Oregon tribes,

"I knew I had to bring her," Knoll said.

Amber said the camp provided education in a setting comfortable enough that she was able to share her story.

"I let go of things that were hurting me a lot, that were a burden to me and my family."

Things are so much better now.

If all goes according to plan, Amber and her sister, split up four years ago, will be

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united and possibly adopted by the new foster family.

Finally, said Amber, "I feel wanted."

The adult chaperones and counselors are fully aware that teen-agers won't always accept or comprehend the message. As expected, there were a couple of disruptive kids that Small referred to as "recovering knuckleheads," but most of the teen-agers wanted to be there.

Said Lopez-Johnston, "We can't reach every kid, but if you save one life isn't

that worth the effort that you put in?"

Sarah Frank, Substance Abuse Prevention Coordinator at Yellowhawk Tribal Health Center, organized the camp and said she was impressed with the way the young people were able to open up and share.

"The kids, the chaperones, even the adults who helped were able to share their pain for the first time," she said. "I believe the ones that were here were meant to be here."