

Healing a life of hate and violence



SHERRIL ZICKEFOOSE

At 27, Tiffany has known a lifetime of violence from growing up on the gang-riddled reserves of the Samson Cree Nation.

But she was part of the problem. A metal plate and seven screws are holding her ankle together — the physical wreckage caused by kicking down doors. As a former enforcer for one of Hobbema's deadly drug-fuelled gangs, Tiffany became a fearsome warrior just trying to survive.

She spent years shaking down residents for money and beating rivals. She took the rap for crimes, sparing higher ranking male gangsters jail time.

Even after her own brother was shot in the neck during feuding over the lucrative drug trade on Hobbema's reserves, Tiffany continued on a path of violence.

It wasn't until her young daughter was taken away by the province that Tiffany says she began to question her life of crime.

"Karma hits you. All the bad I did, the drugs are killing off my community. And the money doesn't last," she said. "That's what I don't want for my daughter."

Motivated to regain custody of her child, Tiffany left the reserve and ended up at Calgary's Awo Taan Healing Lodge.

The agency is guided by native cultural values and traditional teachings. Since August, Tiffany has been taking part in Awo Taan's weekly healing circle and parenting program.

Exposing struggling parents to spiritual ceremonies and support circles with elders help them reconnect with their culture.

Awo Taan's Parent Link Centre provides high-quality, comprehensive, accessible, community-based programs that comply with province-wide standards. What makes it special is how it responds to the needs of families and parents like Tiffany.

"We offer a sense of commu-



Photos: Leah Hennel/Calgary Herald

Clients take part in a smudge ceremony at Awo Taan Healing Lodge.

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nity. A cookie-cutter parenting program is not going to work," said Samantha Green, the healing lodge and parent centre program co-ordinator.

Awo Taan's Parent Link strives to help families develop healthy lifestyles. They focus on nurturing physical, mental, emotional and spiritual growth. And according to Tiffany, it's working.

"Coming here makes me stronger. I feel motivated and confident. I can change," she said.

It hasn't been easy.

"There's a lot of hate on me for leaving (my reserve). I was one of the first in my community to go up against a gang. It scared me at first," she said.

In her quest to regain custody of her three-year-old daughter, Tiffany abstains from drinking and drugs, and is learning new skills to be a better parent.

"The workers make me feel comfortable, this is a safe place,"

she said.

For now, Tiffany is aiming to finish school. She dropped out in Grade 9. She sees herself training to become a hairdresser. She wants to be a good example for others back home. She wants her daughter back.

"I want to get my story out there. I want to make my community more aware. They see that I've changed. That was the old me."

It's not just parents who benefit from Awo Taan. Children are a big part of the programming.

"There's always something here for your children. We're comfortable here," said Roanna, a 46-year-old mother of two who fled to Awo Taan from an abusive home on a nearby reserve.

Their dilapidated home was no place for children. The vandalized windows were broken, there was no heat.

"It wasn't livable. I had to leave," she said. "Everything was broken. I just gave up on everything."

Roanna lost custody of her children for six months as she battled alcoholism. Now sober, she says Awo Taan has made a difference for her daughters.

"Before, my kids didn't get to do anything. Now, they're more outgoing, they are treated right. They really like it here and it keeps my kids in a cultural place."

Her daughters, ages eight and nine, were overjoyed to fly to Disneyland for a day recently as part of Dreams Take Flight. The

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Tiffany, 27 is a client at the Awo Taan Parent Link Centre. "... I feel motivated and confident. I can change," she said.

national non-profit organization takes disadvantaged children on a trip-of-a-lifetime.

"I wouldn't have been able to afford it because I'm a single mother."

As Roanna makes connections with elders and support workers, she says their friendship has been invaluable.

"There are people who have been through what I've been through. They don't judge me because I've had a hard life."

For all the good Awo Taan has done over the past 20 years, it is now experiencing growing pains. A new facility with modern space for programming would help it keep pace. But money is tight.

"We are stretched to our capacity. We have full family loads for each worker," said Green.

To call Awo Taan a no-frills

operations is an understatement. With a budget of \$345,000 a year, its true costs run closer to \$500,000. The charity is grateful for donations of food, cultural enrichment programs, Tiny Tots, and cost-sharing of programs.

Ideas to expand programming include focusing on children's healing circles, naming ceremonies, and one-on-one sessions.

The dreams are worth pursuing, staff say. "We offer a sense of family here," said Green. "It's non-judgmental. We rarely use the word clients. These are mothers. Staff can act in a grandmother role if people are missing that. It's really about a sense of belonging."

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