

LEWIS FRANK

KAKAWIS

"The elders taught us that we must do, rather than speak about what we should or must do."

There are 14 bands on the west side of Vancouver Island, British Columbia, totaling about 3500 people. The Ahusit band has about 600 people on reserve and 600 off. Responding to the problems and sorrow caused by alcohol the elders of the community said, "We have to do something. We must do something." In 22 months in this small part of the island there were 17 alcohol related deaths. They had to do something. So many were dying that they couldn't keep up with burying the dead. The community joined together with other bands, although not all bands were interested. It seems to be human nature to say "I (we) don't have that problem." However 5 of the 14 attended. The two denominations on the west coast also said they wanted to help. After many meetings they were able to secure the use of the vacant Christi-Indian Residential School with the help of the clergy. They weren't as successful in getting the cooperation of the government because they were unable to produce black and white balanced figures on the project. In the past those in the community with alcohol problems were separated from their families and sent 300 miles to Vancouver. Usually the whole family had an alcohol problem, not just the single member. So staying sober upon the members' return was difficult to impossible. The elders suggested a program that would treat the whole family. That way a father with an alcohol problem would have the support of his family during the program and they would go back to their village as a unit of strength. Even though they had no government backing, they went ahead in implementing the elders' plan with the support of the Catholic Church. They were fortunate in having a doctor trained in counseling and the Sisters of St. Anne to staff the facility. One family that was not even from the reserve volunteered to work from day one. The community worked together to renovate the old school buildings into 2-3 bedroom apartments, never keeping track of the time they put in or how much an hour was owed to them. The elders said, "Do something!" and they responded. The first came to the facility at their own expense because there were no funds with which to support them. They just all leaned on each other, on the church, the families in the community, and the families that wanted to be helped. After 4-5 years of treating 4 or 5 families the government finally granted the project not quite \$9,000 for 6 months operation, with the program underway the key to it all were the elders. "Go in as an equal," they said,

"No matter how down trodden that person is. Not on a doctor/patient relationship, not on a teacher/student relationship, but as an equal because that man is creation of the Creator, same as you are. Dont put yourself above them for their courage to seek help. Mr. Frank said that for him that was a real lesson. He said that maybe in his mind he thought that because he was a little more educated or never had a drink of alcohol that he was a notch above that poor guy with a drinking problem. His elders, his grandfather told him, you're no better. Hes equal to you, dont knock him down, hes go enough problems already.

In a nutshell thye were saying, dont set up an institution, set up a place of love, respect, and equality. The government and their own Native Organization were the hardest to convince that what the elders wanted did'nt have to meet what they wanted, even though they had good intentions. The elders said, "No, it must be a place of love," and at the same time they said dont push away the expertise, invite them to be a part of Kakawis. We can use them, learn from them. Never think you have it all there's always someone you can learn from.

After a while people who had been through the program came back to be part of the operation and worked side by side with experts like the doctor and psychiatrist. There seemed to be a better relationship between them and new people coming in because they understood more the hurt they went through. There was constant communication between the elders and the board to maintain the standard of love and equality. That is the foundation of Kakawis. New staff coming in dont have to be told this but sense it from those already there. We tell them this is what our hopes are, do you want to be a part of it?

For so long in the past the wisdom of the elders was pushed aside because we had a little bit of education. The church and school system did not want to give their input. Mr. Frank compared the elders wisdom to a bible. You open it to get directions from its passages. The elders are a living, walking, breathing bible that was pushed aside by modern society. We failed to recognize and utilize this. The fact is, the values so dear to the elders are the same as those in the bible; Respect your fellowman, Do unto othersd as you have them do unto you. We have an exciting responsibility t pass those valuse on and teach the following generations that these values are universal through time. They are the same that are the basis of the constitution.

For each session at Kakawis we now review applications and try to accept seven from the same reserve. Then they'll return to the reserve as a unit of strength. The hope is that they will have a representative to sit on the Kakawis board to steer it in the direction it will be going. At one point the program came to a stand still because of the tendency to deny the problem, to say "I dont have to go there. I dont have that problem. Just that poor so and so

down the road. "He should go." Finally the most influential people in the community took the step. The head chief, his father, and his uncle and their families led the way. Once that happened others in the community wanted to be part of it. Now they have dinners for the elders or to enjoy each others company as a off shoot of Kakawis.

In the beginning the odds were against Kakawis, besides the difficulty of finding support, the building burned down. They were able to rebuild with funds provided by the order that first allowed them to use the school. Later they bought a logging camp and moved the buildings over with volunteer help. The facility has a certified teacher to work with elementary children while high school aged kids did correspondance study for the period of their stay at Kakawis. They strove to develop a self sustaining home away from home.

As for the success rate - who can really define success? One may not utilize what they learned at Kakawis until a few years down the road. However, a pretty high number remained sober