

## The Pressure is Killing Our Youth

April 2002

By Beverley O'Neil

I was speaking recently with an Aboriginal teenager who was telling me how upset he was that in his community he is subjected to name calling from his friends, his siblings, and his relatives. "You're a nerd. What a loser. You're boring. Chicken. What, too afraid to try drugs? Whimp." But, this teenager isn't afraid to try drugs. He understands their effects. He can see it. He knows that he doesn't want to do them. Fear has nothing to do with it. And, I know he won't yield to the pressure, he won't become a user. And, I'd say that strength, self-confidence, respect and wisdom are the qualities he possesses and the reasons he doesn't and won't.

As he was telling me this, I was reminded of a similar conversation I had with my friends almost twenty years ago. "You're boring when you're straight", she said. And I replied, "Yeah well, you're stupid when you're stoned." And that was that.

That was the peer pressure I encountered when I was a teenager. But I didn't yield to it. It was easy to see the effects of drugs on my friends. How they got the 'munchies' after and consumed everything in sight gaining weight and then having to deal with a weight problem. I also saw how they stared aimlessly into a fire saying "Oooooohh, cooooooIIlllll. Wowwwww!" after the use of acid. And I saw high school peers who were bright, social, well-rounded people become 'burn-outs' and 'waste-oids', 'go-no-where people' and corpses. And, I just knew then that drugs was something I never wanted to subject myself to, and that I never wanted to suffer the effects of any addiction.

You know I probably even hoped that kids today wouldn't have to see the things that I did or face these same types of pressures from their peers. I had hoped that with all the education, literature, advertisements, campaigns, presentations and discussions on the effects of drugs that kids today would understand and not try them and not pressure others to do so. That kids would learn from the experiences of their parents and others, and be braver and smarter. But kids are trying drugs. They're choosing to use drugs. They're still pressuring others into the use. They're falling victim to the continued pressure of their peers. They're becoming addicted and they're becoming another statistic.

The Medical Services Branch of Canada reported that the death rate of Aboriginal people attributed to the use of illicit drugs was estimated to be over twice as great as the general population - 7.0 deaths per 100,000 versus 2.6 in the general population. Furthermore, the use of drugs by Aboriginals was over three times higher than non-Aboriginals. In a different survey, Correctional Services of Canada realized of Aboriginal offenders at intake that over half of this group (53 percent) had evidenced a drug problem. While yet in another study by National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program, community leadership, health and social services and NNADAP workers all reported they believed that illegal drugs was a constant to frequent problem in a combined 77 percent of the time. Many Aboriginal children in Canada have grown up without their parents, placed into foster homes while their parent's were trying to 'get their act together', or parentless because their mother died of an overdose.

With these alarming statistics and such realization, you wonder why drug use is so high, why it still continues.

Last summer an ambulance was in the back alley of my neighbourhood in Vancouver's Gastown. The paramedics were putting into the ambulance the latest casualty of drug addiction, a corpse. He died overnight from a drug overdose. Every vein in his body, arm, ankle, thigh, stomach and neck, were once subjected to a needle. His body had given in. He probably didn't even know.

My favorite restaurant is one server less... another victim of drug overdose.

When I drive along the streets of Gastown, it is common to see the effects of drug addiction. Men and women of all ethnic origins including Aboriginal, barely skin and bones, wobbling and staggering along the streets, women prostituting themselves at 7 o'clock in the morning for a few bucks for a quick fix. And these skinny men up against a cop car, an assortment of somebody else's personal belongings on the ground next to them, while the cops charge them with theft, break and entry.

Why do people continue to fall victim to drugs? Have the campaigns over the past decades not helped change this course?

I recall two very poignant advertisements publicizing the effects of drugs. The first, an image of an egg with the caption "This is your brain", and then the egg being cracked into a hot frying pan followed by sounds of crackling and spitting and the caption, "Now, this is your brain on drugs." The second commercial... "Ever wonder what a bag of crack looks like?" Then you see a couple of paramedics pushing a gurney that carries a full body bag.

One might expect this pressured teenager to be bitter for being dubbed an outcast in a small community where there is little to do and few kids his age, but instead he is quite the opposite. He expresses concern. "How can I help them? What can I do to get them to stop?" He's looking for solutions.

For many of the kids who fall victim to drugs, the pressure that possessed them to try drugs came from their friends, adults around them, and sometimes from their very own home. Drug use is promoted in the behaviour of their parents who themselves are the users, abusers and dealers.

Sometimes people try to justify drug use by saying, "It's only marijuana. Everybody does it." Well, the fact is that not everybody does do it, and it's not 'just' marijuana. Marijuana might just be the beginning that leads to the introduction, sale and use of other drugs - rave, date rape pill, LSD, acid and cocaine. Drugs are not confined to the annals of the city, they are in every community, rural and remote, in British Columbia and Canada and every First Nation. Someone is bringing it in. Someone knows who it is. Someone is watching it happen. Someone is letting it happen.

It takes a whole community to raise a child. We all share the responsibility. When a child's parents are not doing it, that's when community involvement is required even more. The people in the community have to take charge, be responsible, and ensure the youth are guided to healthier, positive paths in life, that these youth are given the guidance, support and opportunity to realize their true potential. The cycle has to stop.

In times like these, in our first Nation communities, these solutions have to come from the community collectively. They have to come from the leaders, elected and natural, old and young. Yet, in some of these communities the leaders and people who are best equipped to

make a difference, are the relatives of the drug users and dealers themselves, or they are the drug users and dealers. They're afraid to make the change, because they are themselves affected. But, the change is not going to take place without people taking action.

We have to stop people from trying drugs in the first place. For those who have, we have to get them to stop. We have to stop allowing peer pressure to exist. And we have to start praising and holding in high esteem those people who never tried drugs in the first place, not just recognizing those who became reformed. We hear too many speeches begin "My name is ... I'm a reformed drug user." The good thing is these people are showing that one can make a change, and turn their life around. However, we never hear people begin a speech with "My name is ... I've never used drugs."

I'm very proud of this youth for speaking up. He took the first step towards making a change, towards doing something about it. Now if only the adults and leaders in more communities would do the same, perhaps then there will be fewer of our people in the alleys of Gastown, on the corners of the prostitute neighbourhoods, in the jails of Canada, in the body bags of the morgue, or hanging from the end of a rope in their home.

*Beverley O'Neil is a citizen of the Ktunaxa Nation, President of O'Neil Marketing & Consulting and Numa Communications Ltd., as well as a freelance writer. Tel. 604-913-1905  
[www.designingnations.com](http://www.designingnations.com)*