

## Change Can Happen At Any Age

I have been a part-time Men's Counsellor at Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Services (GFASS) for about three and a half years. I have worked in the Human Services field for over twenty years and the last ten in the Domestic Violence area.

When I came to GFASS I worked closely with another Men's Counsellor to develop a group program called Oha<sup>7</sup>hi:yo: (Cayuga word meaning a good road). The Oha<sup>7</sup>hi:yo: program is for adults who have used and/or experienced violence in an intimate partner relationship and would benefit from learning healthy relationship behaviors. In a safe environment, participants gain an understanding of the dynamics that have led them to experience power, control and/or violence within their relationships as well as the impact this has had on self and others.

Participants are reminded of Haudenosaunee (People of the Longhouse) cultural teachings through interactive, educational experiences that focus on relationships with self and others. Participants also explore the impact of generational legacies such as residential school, alcoholism, domestic violence and how all this is still impacting families today.

This is a story of an elderly gentleman, who came to GFASS as mandated through the court system. Thomas, not his real name, was pretty set in his old school ways. Thomas appeared to enjoy his alcohol and when he drank his relationships suffered. Thomas was a quiet man who shared very little about himself during the intake. During Thomas's intake for Oha<sup>7</sup>hi:yo: he stated he would do what he had to do, but that "you can't teach an old dog new tricks".

In the beginning of the group, Thomas quietly participated in each exercise. Very early on it was obvious there was more to Thomas than he let on. Thomas began to show his commitment to the group process through his homework exercises. Each week Thomas would arrive at group early, with his homework completed. Thomas's homework was always very well thought out and insightful. During the grounding exercises, he offered occasional insight into how he felt doing the exercises and

always with a little grin! Through weekly check-ins, Thomas slowly began to find his voice in the group. As the group explored the dynamics of domestic violence, Thomas began to divulge tidbits from his own life where he had experienced and used violence.

As Thomas's confidence grew, so did his voice. Interestingly the group, which was comprised of participants of different ages, began to see Thomas in a different light. When Thomas expressed his thoughts with the group, all of the participants listened intently to this innocent wisdom. Thomas's grin soon turned to gentle humour which he used to lift and encourage participants as the group began to explore generational traumas. These included domestic violence, residential school, and drug and alcohol use.

While doing an exercise focusing on accountability and responsibility, a participant revealed that he felt alienated from the group as he was not from the community. With his little grin, Thomas suggested in a very welcoming voice, that everyone is here for a different reason and it doesn't matter where you are from. We are all equals and sharing this experience together.

During a particular exercise focusing on generational trauma, a narrative was used to explore how contact, colonization and subsequent traumas have impacted the community and First Nations people. All of the participants gathered in a circle within a large body band, holding sacred objects while drumming played softly in the background. The narrative began and the group was taken back to a time of our ancestors, a time before contact and colonization. As the group progressed through the narrative, members were taken away from the circle that represented the community and isolated from each other throughout the room. The narrator slowly described the traumas removing a participant with each description. Loss of culture, language, identity; sexual, physical abuse; mind changers; residential school; and family violence were all mentioned, until one group member was left standing in the middle of the room. The music ended; the narrator stops and there is a moment of silence.

As we began to process this exercise, Thomas was on the other side of the room, with his head down and slowly nodding. Thomas was asked what was happening for him and he slowly and thoughtfully shared his story with the group. Thomas talked about finally feeling able to speak his truth, and how he felt that he trusts the members of the group. Thomas shared his experiences in the “Mush Hole”, the Mohawk Residential School where he was placed as a child. Thomas explained that he had never thought of how he lost so much of whom he was; how he had lost his language and what that had meant to him. Thomas paused and then began to tell for the very first time his story of sexual abuse when he was in the “Mush Hole”. Thomas said that he had never spoke about this abuse before and how much it had impacted him as a man.

An interesting dynamic occurred as Thomas finished his story. The younger participants began to provide support and encouraging words to him, just like he had offered throughout the group. One particular participant stood up and told everyone that he was honoured to have heard Thomas’s story and that Thomas trusted them enough to share his story with the group. Once the group debriefed, each participant was encouraged to rejoin the circle, pick up a sacred object and once again become a part of the community. As participants came back to the circle with the song “One Love” playing in the background, the narrative began, encouraging them to feel the love and support within the room.

Thomas’s insight continued after this session. He took his homework that evening and with his regular, “see you next week”, he left. Thomas came to group the following week and during homework review he shared his feelings of sadness and loss, but also of hope. Thomas then said that this exercise had helped him with being able to feel the loss of his wife, suggesting that he had suppressed his feelings about her death and began to drink more often. Thomas indicated that he now knew why he used alcohol. It was to help him cope with the many losses in his life. Thomas implied it felt like a weight was lifted off his shoulders.

In the final session, Thomas expressed that he was thankful for the experience of being in the group and honoured to have been a part of everyone's experience. Thomas announced that he will live a life of sobriety, explaining, "the old dog has some new tricks"!

Boyd Leeson  
Ganohkwasra-Men's Counsellor

