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The StarPhoenix: Recovering addicts tell stories in song

By Jeanette Stewart, The StarPhoenix

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Researcher Colleen Dell facilitated a process for aboriginal women to share their stories of addiction



Researcher Colleen Dell facilitated a process for aboriginal women to share their stories of addiction
 Photograph by: Greg Pender, The StarPhoenix

Just singing a song may not change the world, but it could help the lives of one group of aboriginal women in treatment for drug and alcohol abuse across Canada.

A University of Saskatchewan researcher has envisioned a unique way to tell a story of addiction and recovery through songwriting -- taking women "from stilettos to moccasins" as they re-claim their aboriginal identity.

"This is a means and a mechanism for their voices to be heard," said Colleen Dell, an associate professor and research chair in substance abuse at the U of S.

Her four-year project focused on collecting stories of more than 100 women in treatment for drug and alcohol abuse across Canada in a partnership between three agencies -- the University of Saskatchewan, Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse and the National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation (NNAPF).

At a workshop at Blackstrap Lake last month, Dell gathered 30 research participants, addictions researchers and treatment workers to collaborate with Prince Albert-based singer-songwriter Violet Naytowhow, a Woodland Cree artist from the Sturgeon Lake First Nation.

Naytowhow will compose and produce a song to accompany the stories.

"Unless people feel, sometimes they don't get it," Dell said. "Song would be one way to get it."

The study is designed to fill a gap in addictions treatment and research. Across Canada there are few treatment centres and little research dedicated solely to addictions in aboriginal women.

"We need to have something more specific," said Sharon Clarke, executive director of the NNAPF.

"The women spoke highly, and with a lot of reciprocity, of wanting to share their stories and what they've learned, so they didn't go through all they went through to just heal for themselves," Dell said.

She says some of the women in the treatment centres were learning for the first time about their aboriginal culture and dealing with the racism, bullying and discrimination that had followed them throughout their lives. Prevalent in the stories was the role of trauma, abuse and discrimination. One woman, who inspired the title of the song, said she was hanging up her stilettos for her culture, in reference to giving up a life of prostitution.

"When we gave some of the information to Violet to look at, she said, 'You don't have a song here, you have an

album. You have a couple albums,' " Dell said.

Naytowhow, a Canadian Aboriginal Music Award-nominated singer and a recovered addict herself, plans to produce a single based on the lyrics penned at the workshop.

She said the story the women put together acknowledges both how they went through their healing and their value in society -- sometimes for the first time.

Naytowhow equates anticipation for the song's release to that of having a baby. "It's like the birth of a new child," she said.

Primary findings from the project include a fact sheet for care providers specific to aboriginal women's healing. A DVD of the Blackstrap Lake workshop is almost finished, and the researchers are working on pamphlets and guide books to get their findings out to the general public. When the entire project is complete, they will use tools such as social networking sites to make the song and video accessible to the public.

The group effort and the variety of delivery methods for the project results is an attempt to ensure the findings won't just sit on the shelf. The partnership with the two centres and other experts will ensure the research can make its way to meetings and policy discussions.

"It's so important to have the decision-makers . . . they're the people who sit at those tables and help influence those decisions," Dell said.

The tools created through the research will be used within national Native alcohol and drug abuse treatment centres to provide programming specific to women.

jstewart@sp.canwest.com
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