



Tsi Tionkwatention A'non:wara Rason:ne

“My Home on Turtle Island”

Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Youth Lodge



The Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Youth Lodge is a co-ed residential group home for First Nations youth located in the heart of Ohsweken on the Six Nations Reserve. The Lodge services clients twelve to eighteen years of age and prides itself on providing therapeutic supports and services that integrate wholistic healing practices in a culturally sensitive manner. And in acknowledging that crisis among youth is very rarely predictable, the Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Youth Lodge has committed itself to staying open and accessible twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week.

Teen crisis, agree the experienced staff at the Lodge, stem from a widespread variety of issues in today's society. Alarmingly prevalent however, is the increase in prescription drug abuse and mental health issues. Both of these are very common threads in the dissolution of home life. Prescription drug abuse, for example, affects not only youth but their parents and caregivers as well. The widespread availability of prescription medication has often led to the extremes of 1) stigmatism if medication is prescribed to address a condition such as mental illness or 2) over-medication whereby pharmaceuticals end up abused due to improper dos-

ages. In addition, many individuals aware of First Nations culture have expressed concern regarding the misdiagnosis of a child or youth with traditional gifts as needing to be “fixed.”

Just as attitudes need to change regarding the use of pharmaceuticals, the area of mental health requires attention as well. It is an often studied fact that rates of depression, suicide and other mental illnesses are occurring at a higher rate in Aboriginal communities when compared to the mainstream population. Some factors contributing to this are increased levels of stress for parents as a result of increased work days (keeping numerous jobs); financial struggles; addictions; past and/or present trauma; large families that often include extended family; etc. For youth, all of the above in addition to school pressures; parental issues; bullying; and other adolescent stress can precipitate an unhealthy mental state.

The Lodge recognizes the unique situations that each youth is coming from and addresses the individual needs of each resident through a specifically-tailored program that accommodates their identified needs. The intake process involves a series of procedures that include referrals; pre-assessment screening (to determine if the youth lodge will be suitable for the

individual and their needs); completion of an intake package; and a supervisor interview/screening (for youth ages twelve to sixteen, the parent or guardian is required to attend the intake interview). If the youth is accepted into the program, an initial plan of care will be drafted and signed between the youth, parent/guardian, the Lodge staff and the referring agency.

During the plan of care process each individual is assigned a primary worker to provide support and guidance throughout their stay at the Lodge. It is incredibly important that many support systems be available to create a “stabilized environment” that enables youth to grow and develop skills of self-reliance. Youth often enter the Lodge without a permanent home and lack of personal identification or basic necessities such as food. The Lodge ensures that all of these needs are met and staff are aware that negative behaviours from youth entering the Lodge can be attributed to the instability many residents have been living with for so long.

Learned behaviours of youth such as manipulation and distrust affect their relationships with other residents at the Lodge and the goal of the program is to improve interactions among the youth while creating boundaries for self and for others.

Staff emphasize “teachable moments” for this development of boundaries (the safe touch agreement is part of each plan of care) and every youth is expected to contribute to the upkeep of the Lodge through life skills training that includes laundry, cooking, cleaning and self-care. Residents are encouraged to start self-evaluating and taking responsibility for their actions in all areas of life, whether it be interactions with others or choosing foods that are more nutritional. Rules and structure at the Lodge are transparent and the benefits of organized living are demonstrated.

During programming sessions, the Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Youth Lodge philosophy utilizes the “Reality or Choice Theory” developed by Dr. William Glasser. As explained by the Lodge: “To attempt to change behaviours through the use of external controls such as reward and punishment (or consequences) is futile. In fact, behaviours are usually the symptom of real problems which need to be addressed.” Their approach therefore focuses on the youth to self-identify their behaviours. To support this, individual and group counselling sessions start with education awareness around family violence, cycles and effect of abuse and the “bill of body rights.” Soon after, “core work” is introduced and includes any of the following according to the individual: Art or play therapy; relationship building; physical recreation; therapeutic games/movies/activities; and recrea-

tional outings (individual or group). While completing this work residents are taught to recognize behaviour that “disconnects” them from the current situation and replace it with behaviour that “connects.”

Each aspect of the Lodge attempts to employ a wholistic approach that balances the spiritual, physical, emotional and mental. Cultural teachings are provided by Elders and by case workers, many of whom have



Lodge Staff (left to right): Veronica Kinden, Brody Thomas, Leah Sault and Jami-Lee VanEvery.

various gifts and traditional knowledge to share. Examples of teachings include roles and responsibilities of women and men; full moon ceremonies; sweat lodges; traditional foods; drumming; traditional crafts (ribbon shirts, drums, moccasins, and dream catchers); clan teachings; moon time teachings for women; smudging; and spirit painting (art therapy). Staff are a mixture of male and female to provide cohesiveness and gender specific knowledge or experience to the Lodge. While many of the programs and activities at the Lodge support First Nations traditionalism, staff acknowledge that each resident may have diverse

beliefs and to this effect, staff offer support for the continuation of each resident’s spiritual journey. In doing so, the Lodge is able to assist youth in strengthening their own self-identity; a core aspect that will assist youth in their transition to adulthood.

During each resident’s stay at the Lodge, parents and/or guardians are encouraged to participate throughout the entire process. Family participation is widely regarded as an essential element to the plan of care and ensures that the whole family gains an understanding of how relationship-building and healthy living improves family life. Involving members of the family also ensures that a support system is in place for youth who complete their programming. Once released, youth who successfully complete their plan of care continue to receive after-care support from the Lodge or other transitional services affiliated with the Ganohkwasra Family Assault Support Youth Lodge.

Ultimately, each individual youth that enters the Lodge is being prepared to leave with a foundation of skills to build on. It is the goal for each resident to leave with a positive support system in place, armed with the tools of knowledge and awareness concerning family violence. As the youth continue on their life journey, it is the hope of the Lodge that they retain their perspective as to future goals and priorities while acknowledging and handling the realities of their rights and responsibilities. ~