

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

ABORIGINAL YOUTH SPEAK OUT

On

Issues That Concern Them

A REPORT

For

**SAYT K'ÜÜLM GOOT REVISITED – (OF ONE HEART)
BRINGING OUR YOUTH TOGETHER**

**Compiled by
Kimberly Godfrey**



For

**The Child and Youth Officer for British Columbia,
The First Nations Summit**

And

The Forum's Community Planning Group

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Thank you so much

Introduction

My name is Kimberley Godfrey. I am 18 years old and a member of the Tahltan First Nation. I was hired by members of the community-planning group for the Sayt K'üülm Goot Revisited –(Of One Heart) forum, a forum that will gather Aboriginal youth from the, Tsimshian, Haida, Nisga'a, and Métis First Nations to continue to address Aboriginal youth suicide and introduce HIV/AIDS prevention.

The community planning group wanted to be sure that it understood what is important to Aboriginal youth. I was to gather that information and bring the youths' concerns, interests and issues back to the planning group so that the forum could address what really matters to young people in the communities.

Hearing the Voices of Youth

I spent three months visiting youth in seven communities in the Northwest and asking them what they wanted the conference to address. Focus groups of youth were organized in Prince Rupert, Kitsumkalum, Lax Kw'alaams, Metlakatla, Kitkatla, Hartley Bay, and Haida Gwaii by participating members of the planning group, and I met with the young people.

The focus groups had a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. The questions were open-ended and were a starting point for discussion. There were breaks with snacks, and time to talk informally.

Each session started with a description of last year's forum (Sayt K'üülm Goot --Of One Heart) I talked about why I was there, gave an outline of guidelines for the meeting, and mentioned the goal of the session. The youth agreed that respect would be the over-riding value for each meeting. The youth then introduced themselves, their clan and crest and described what super-power they would have if they could. This gave the youth a sense of themselves, their history, and a sense of their power to bring change in their communities. It added some fun, to what could be pretty heavy conversations.

Why hearing youth is important

Hearing the voices of youth is important to help them and their communities reach solutions and meet challenges that confront young people. By engaging in this process, the youth learned that they have strength to impact change. While we gathered information for planning the forum, the young people were able to look at positive paths to begin to form meaningful solutions. They are able to move to active engagement in meaningful change.

The communities where the youth were

In the three-month period, I visited seven communities, traveling by seaplane, ferry and bus. It takes both time and money to reach the geographically isolated communities, bringing to light the difficulties of isolation and resource issues.

What We Asked Young People and What They Said:

"If you were able to choose one super power what would it be, and what is one thing that you would improve in your community if you had this super power?"

This question, designed as an icebreaker, really made the youth think about what they would want to see changed. The responses were similar in every community:

Here are some of the "super powers" that the youth would have, and how they would improve their communities:

- A lot of the youth said that they would want to fly so that they could fly far from their communities at any time that they wanted, being able to escape and have the option to return. They could also fly people from the community into Prince Rupert or to any other place and they wouldn't have to worry about taking a plane or a ferry. This would save money that could be spent on more important things. It would just be so cool to actually be able to fly;
- Some youth wanted the power of persuasion or being able to change peoples' minds. This power would give them the ability to help others in their communities make healthy decisions and right choices. They would persuade others not to do drugs and not to turn to alcohol, by showing them what life is really about and how they can live happy lives without alcohol and drugs. They would also turn people towards counselors and people that they can talk to, helping them to reach out for help. They

believe that this power would be a great asset. They said that there are a lot of ways that this can happen without a power, such as support, understanding, love and having positive and respected leaders and role models to help the community members make healthy decisions and choices;

- Another power that the youth said they would want to have is X-Ray vision so they could see when people are drinking or doing drugs. Then they could know who needs help in the communities;
- Others said that they would want the power of time travel to go back in time and fix situations before they escalated into serious situations. By going back in time they could stop people from ever having their first drinks and before they ever tried taking drugs. They could make people more aware about sexually transmitted diseases, safe sex and that it's ok to reach out for help and support;
- Some youth wanted "Spidey Powers" which is every power that you could ever think of to change or make any situation better or prevent them from ever happening;
- Others wanted "invisibility" to spy on people doing bad things and then "scare them from doing it" Invisibility would also give escape from everyone they didn't want to see or talk to. They could also hide from all of the bad influences and peer pressure;
- The power of laughter and happiness. This would benefit everyone because if you were ever upset, down, depressed, or just having a bad day then the one who has this power could cheer them up automatically, it would be their own personal comedian, someone to tell them jokes and act like a goof and make them forget about everything that's bothering them and make sense of it through comedy. Everyone would be HIL (High on Life) instead of relying on drugs and alcohol;
- "Green Thumb" (Marijuana power) the youth that came up with this power felt that by having it would benefit the community a lot. They could just snap their fingers and poof everyone would be happy and no one would be miserable.

What challenges do the youth in your community currently face that may lead to at risk behavior?

The youth said that knowing and understanding the challenges that they face that sometimes lead to suicidal thoughts and feelings is crucial to understanding and being able to help. The youth had this to say about some of the challenges:

- Drugs and alcohol abuse in every community where youth were interviewed: The youth believe that drugs and alcohol are the leading factors in suicide and thinking about suicide. The youth also believe that many things lead them in the direction of drugs and alcohol. Drugs and alcohol are a form of escape for youth, allowing them to escape problems for a short time. However, the problem always returns, and emotionally and physically tires them. They begin to feel they have nothing to live for;
- Break-up with their boyfriend or girlfriend: They feel like they have lost the one who completes them. Who else are they suppose to turn to now? Drugs and alcohol help to erase the pain, even if it's only for a short time;
- Racism from friends, teachers, counselors, police, community members and others;
- Depression, not only caused by drugs and alcohol;
- Abuse in every form: physical (rape, molestation), mental, verbal and emotional;
- Arguments with family, friends, and others in the community, or some problem that may arise between them that they feel can't be resolved;
- Negative role models and bad influences: The youth feel that there are always adults around them that are telling them not to drink and do drugs, but these adults don't practice what they preach. The youth feel they are lacking positive role models in their lives;
- Lack of work experience for youth in the communities, and too much time on their hands;
- No counselors in the communities: Even if there were counselors, the youth feel they couldn't be trusted because they have been betrayed before, so there is a fear that they will do that again;

- Lack of parental involvement: They feel their parents are not there for them;
- Not getting along with parents, or sometimes with people in general;
- Unplanned parenthood and no preparation for it: Teen pregnancies leave youth feeling their lives are ruined. This feeling prevails in both sexes, but is worse for females;
- Failure in school: Sometimes they feel that the teachers play favorites;
- Fitting in: Reputations and popularity depends on their fitting in, and often bring in cliques. They feel peer pressure to do drugs and alcohol; They worry about what others think of them;
- Low self esteem and a feeling of little self;
- Stress, anger, depression, guilt, jealousy and greed;
- Worry about catching HIV/Aids, and Hepatitis C. Their minds can be "scary places" and will sometimes push them over the edge;
- Loneliness.

One youth commented, "Suicide is contagious. When asked to explain what that meant this was said:

"When someone commits suicide it's like a chain of events. Friends and family get depressed and they feel lost. It takes over some people. If one person does it, it's scary to think that somebody else may do it as well. This really says a lot about depression and losing people that you love and how hard it is. This is why it is so important for everyone to come together as a community and address this problem (suicide). When you don't keep it hidden and show that there are solutions, this is a great thing and to have the awareness and resource for us so we can do as much as we can to make healthy decisions and get help for our problems. When something like this happens its natural to go through many emotions, being sad, angry, and depressed and if you keep it all built up inside sooner or later you will snap. Unfortunately enough, this is how it works. The more it is hidden the bigger the situation will get. When you stop hiding it that is when you will start seeing solutions."

What activities and resources are currently benefiting the youth in your community?

- Being involved with culture, including native language, harvesting of traditional foods (seaweed picking), traditional weaving, and traditional native dancing;
- Friends and family are the main supports. Most of the youth expressed that they wouldn't go and talk to a counselor because of past betrayal and they feel that they can't trust them;
- Sports in the communities such as basketball, soccer and baseball, benefit young people who like sports;
- Teachers in the communities who provide education and also offer support when needed;
- Support and help from counselors that the youth feel they can trust;
- Community gatherings and celebrations: The youth feel this is something that benefits them because they have the sense that they're not alone and allows the community to come together as one;
- Teen centers and gyms provide safe places where the youth can go to stay away from bad influences, play sports, do fun activities, interact with peers, reach out for support from the workers and go to when there is nowhere else to go.

What activities and resources would be helpful in reducing the incidences of at risk behavior?

- Cultural centers and teen centers: They would like a place that teaches carving, weaving, and culture as well as having fun activities and games. Youth workers and counselors would have information and resource on the challenges that the youth have to face in their everyday lives (e.g.) HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis C, Depression, peer pressure, and everyday life, Signs of suicide, violence, teen dating, teen pregnancy, alcohol and drug awareness, healthy lifestyles and healthy choices etc.). These centres could also sponsor team sports that involve everyone. They could also have computers with internet, a science lab, video games, sewing and cooking, help with job seeking skills;

- Community gatherings to raise awareness regarding the youths' problems and concerns. The youth would talk and the adults would listen;
- A suicide watch for the communities;
- More cultural activities where everyone in the communities can come together. Potlucks and feasts are seen as a great asset to their communities;
- Opportunities to learn about their culture and their heritage, who they are and where they come from. The elders are the holders of culture. The youth want to be more involved with them so they can learn the teachings of their people, the language, how to prepare traditional foods, and have positive and respected role models and influences;
- Involvement of parents in their lives and issues. They want parents involved in volunteer work and want to learn how to be positive leaders and role models from their parents. Family picnics, and more family and community events are desirable;
- More job and volunteer opportunities to gain experience. The youth feel they have too much time on their hands. This would take some of it off, and help their minds from wandering in the wrong direction;
- Positive role models, such as teachers, counselors, youth workers, and parent, who are going to take the time to help them gain their own leadership skills;
- Less judgment in the communities and for people to stop stereotyping the youth because some of them make bad decisions. Everyone deserves a chance;
- They would also like to see: Old folk's homes, slumber parties for the girls and a beauty shop for the girls, day care center for all of the tired moms, athletics club, swimming pool, mall, drive in, indoor batting cages, and a bowling ally.

What does the word "community" mean to you when dealing with issues of suicidal thoughts and feelings?

Community is a place where:

- There are family, friends, teachers;
- There is team work and having everyone works together;
- Everyone knows the truth, so there are no rumors and there is a huge amount of support;
- Everyone learns something and helps everyone gain experience;
- There is support;
- There is co-operation within the community and everyone gets along;
- Your community is behind you and you don't feel alone;
- You get opinions and advice from everyone (elders, youth, adults and kids);
- Your community behind you because whoever is going through this is going through a really hard time, it lets everyone know, especially the person that they're not alone;
- Everyone is taught responsibility and respect, for not only themselves but everyone else in the community;
- There is support from everyone, not just your immediate family, more than one person to talk to;
- More people do fun and productive activities;
- There are friends and family to talk to, because most of the youth don't want to talk to counselors.

Everyone comes together like one big family—One Heart;

Why is it important to deal with risky issues, such as suicide, as a community?

- Everyone moves together, and everyone matters; no one is left out;
- If there was no support the community, the risk would be a lot higher;
- Everyone is aware of the risk and realizes that something needs to be done;
- Advice, and support for the person and everyone else. To know that everyone cares;
- Hopefully it will help to prevent it from ever happening again;
- It will assist with survivor guilt. Also if you attempt but don't succeed you will need a lot of support;
- The person who is dealing with suicidal thoughts will know that they are not alone and that they have people to catch them when they are falling;
- This issue affects everybody, and everyone should be involved;
- Everyone's involvement gives different points of views and different outlooks; someone other than immediate family may see something that they don't, such as particular signs that point to suicidal behavior;
- It helps to build self esteem, because everyone is working together;
- To decrease suicide, the awareness is provided to everyone.

It is hard to deal with suicidal thoughts by yourself, community offers a shoulder to cry on; knowing that you're not alone and knowing that people care.

What does the word "support" mean to you?

The youth defined support as:

- A foundation of trust built on a strong foundation of support. You have to work hard and have respect for everyone and yourself to keep the foundation standing strong;
- Being there for the person who is going through this hard time in their lives by listening to them, being kind, providing them with a lot of comfort

and helping the person feel stronger about themselves so they can overcome this situation;

- Non-judgmental environments, erasing negativity that causes a person to feel scared or unsafe so that they won't want to express themselves;
- Listening, talking, kisses and hugs are a way of building someone's self confidence, self worth and self respect, not only there's but yours as well. You build on trust, which is the greatest support;
- Holding the person up when they not strong enough to hold themselves up;
- Watching them at all times, and working together for the person;
- Having support systems in the communities that you can rely on for guidance; Counselors, AA, Family, Friends, Elders, your religion (church);
- Just having a shoulder to cry on;
- Natural support such as smiling, laughing, smiles and comedy.

Knowing that someone has your back, and that they will be there for you;

Who in your community would you speak with if you were having suicidal thoughts or feelings? And what types of things would you do if you weren't able to speak with somebody (productive things to keep your mind occupied)?

- Family, friends, parents, elders, siblings, grandparents, and girl/boy friend;
- Teachers, counselors, 1-800-Helplines and youth workers;
- People trained in talking to youth and helping them;
- Younger kids, because they will always have an open ear and great advice; they can also be trusted with thoughts and feelings;
- An animal because all they can do is listen and they will never judge or make fun of your feelings. Nor do they spread rumors;

- To be alone and reflect on the situation and feelings; think about what is bothering you and make value of it;
- Listen to music, which is relaxing and helps reflect feelings;
- Keeping a journal of thoughts and feelings, so that thoughts and feelings aren't locked away until you snap;
- Go for a walk, jog, run, or a hike to clear the mind and reflect;
- Scream in a pillow, punch a pillow or punch a punching bag letting out built up emotions;
- Singing and dancing to get into a separate little world and forget about everything;
- Everyone needs a good cry sometimes and it lets out all thoughts and feelings;
- Breathing and calming down when upset;
- Making comedy out of messed up situations.

Anyone that you can open up to and trust to speak to about how your feeling and what is going on in your life. People that you can relate to and people who have life experiences and have overcome the hard times;

What would you like to see come out of this year's forum?

- Drug and alcohol awareness, because this is one of the biggest concerns regarding youth suicide. Information on how drugs and alcohol can get you to the stage where you feel you have nothing left to live for;
- Information on addictions such as crystal methamphetamine, crack/cocaine, marijuana, cigarettes and alcohol;
- Leadership skills, and positive role models and leaders to help youth gain skills on how to have a voice and to stand up for what we believe in, such as having youth councils in the communities. Communication skills as well;

- More openness about suicide and what's going on in the communities, being honest and stop trying to hide the problem. If it keeps being hidden it will never get better. Teen voices, and real stories from real people who have been through the stages and phase of suicide and how they overcame it and what steps they took in doing that;
- Information and support on how to get more parental involvement in the communities;
- Cultural values and a lot of involvement and working with the elders, such as language, preserving art, food and who we are and where we come from;
- Knowledge on how to confront someone who may be at risk of suicide and how to help them and work together. Information on how to deal with the situation and how to prevent it from ever happening. Knowledge on how to help your friends/family when they are attempting suicide. "What do you do if you see your friend slicing their wrists?" "What do you do if you see your friend taking a bunch of pills?" Information on what to say to them and how to say it without pushing them further away;
- How to keep yourself safe from catching sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/Aids, Hepatitis C and awareness of these diseases, how to keep yourself safe from these things. Safe sex awareness and healthy lifestyles. Teen pregnancy awareness;
- Information on how hard it is to say no to peer pressure to do drugs, alcohol, have sex, and make unhealthy decisions. How to say no and walk away from unhealthy situations;
- How to deal with stress and depression caused by school, work, girl\boy friend, drugs and alcohol, sex and your parents and siblings;
- How to deal with arguments with your parents, teachers, siblings and friends and how to deal with how these things make you feel;
- Gaining listening skills, this is something that everyone should have because it is a big key in reducing the risks of suicide;
- Mandatory workshops that the youth must attend about preventing youth suicide and what leads up to it;

- Stopping the promotion of alcohol and drugs in the communities, how can the communities get any better or make any change with all of the promotion of these two things; How to help someone quit (slow suicide).

What happens when adults and communities listen to youth?

This is what the youth said:

- When young people feel they are being heard, they feel the communities care, value and respect them. If they are a part of the decision-making, they begin to build self-respect, self-esteem and self worth. They begin to look at productive and healthy alternatives in their lives;
- It helps them to be less afraid, and they begin to build leadership skills;
- They know that the future lies in their hands, and they want to be positive leaders in their communities. Having a voice and knowing it is valued, gives young people a path to make positive changes and meet the challenges they face. They would then be able to work with the adults in their communities, to overcome challenges and make positive changes;
- By listening to youth, adults will know what types of activities and resources benefit youth in their communities. This will help communities build on strengths;
- The people in the community are the main supports for youth. If they do not feel important in their communities, then they begin to feel lost and alone;
- The youth expressed that they want a voice and they want to be heard, they know that they are the future and that the future lies in their hands. If we don't step up and hear them now, they're afraid they will never be heard? Positive leaders are needed in the communities to help guide the youth in the process of change. The youth feel that not only their futures lie in their hands, but adults as well. Positive leaders and role models in the communities will help guide them;
- The youth want to be valuable and respected members of their communities. Being part of the decision-making helps them build on their self-respect, self-esteem and self worth, and helps them gain the much needed leadership skills.

Conclusion

Going into the communities was an exciting and wonderful experience. I was disappointed that I was not able to touch base with all the coastal communities. But seven communities were visited, and the young people there gave voice to their needs and their desires.

Talking to the youth also gave them an opportunity to voice their fears and concerns—concerns about suicide, about HIV/AIDS and other health issues, and about drug and alcohol addictions.

It is my fervent hope that I have been able to communicate faithfully what the young people told me, and that through this project, adults, decision makers, service providers and community leaders will understand what is important to young aboriginal men and women, who want to have a larger voice in their communities.