

## Legacy of Fear

SPECIAL REPORT: PART 3 OF 3



Robert Barron  
Opinion

## Nanaimo is a generous city

The generosity in this city, which is a poor one in many regards when compared to other municipalities in B.C., never ceases to amaze me. I was informed this week that the students at Coal Tye Elementary School had completed a very successful Christmas food drive to help supply needy families in their community with meals during the festive season.

The students at Coal Tye, with little help from the school's teachers during their ongoing job action, managed to fill more than 24 boxes with non-perishable food items during a 12-day period to help their less-fortunate neighbours.

It's not unusual for the Coal Tye community to come to the aid of people who are in need.

Students, staff members and parents at the school quickly rallied around 10-year-old Daniel Stump, a student from the school who was badly burned in an accident at home earlier this year.

They managed to raise almost \$2,000 and several boxes of food in just a few weeks to help Daniel, who underwent skin-graft operations at B.C. Children's Hospital in Vancouver, and his family through their trying time.

But I know from past years that many schools in Nanaimo-Ladysmith put much effort into food, clothing and toy drives each Christmas season so I contacted Donna Reimer, the district's veteran communications manager, for a list of some of the other efforts being made by local schools to help others this year.

I was shocked and pleasantly surprised when the ever-dependable Reimer sent me a lengthy list of projects and initiatives taking place in about 20 of the district's schools to help the needy during Christmas.

The kids at Ladysmith Secondary School collected more than 1,360 kilograms of food for use in their community, while Grade 7 students from McGirr Elementary School have been raising money for many weeks (with the total amount still unknown) to buy Christmas presents for poor children in Nanaimo.

The McGirr students have also been busy this week putting together Christmas hampers at Nanaimo's Hamperville, the city's annual Christmas food drive organized by the Salvation Army and the Loaves and Fishes food bank.

These are but a few of the many examples of the good work being done this year by the students in our local school district to help others, and they should be commended for their efforts.

After all, it's well known that Nanaimo-Ladysmith is one of the poorest school districts in the province so the efforts made by so many students to brighten the lives of others during the Christmas season, especially when many of them are facing their own difficulties at home, is particularly heart warming.

The news is usually filled with stories of kids out of control and being burdens on our society, but little attention is paid to those who go out of their way to do some good for people around them.

That's why it's important that these kids be recognized at this time of year.

» Contact reporter Robert Barron at RBarron@nanaimodailynews.com or by phone at 250-729-4234

# Traditional healing, science sought by aboriginal people

Efforts to combat high risk of disease mix cultural initiatives, modern modalities

DUSTIN WALKER DAILY NEWS

For Ellen White, health care means treating the spirit as well as the body.

The Snuneymuxw elder studied medicine along the rocky shores of Kuper Island, where her grandmother taught her how to listen to the plants, rocks and ocean. White learned how to "beg and plead" for nature's energy to reach her and how to connect with the natural world.

She is the last of 14 children who decades ago learned the ancient secrets of aboriginal herbalism. At the time, trained herbalists and shamans were common in First Nations communities. They used plants to help close wounds, ease sickness and even provide protection against harmful spirits.

Only a few herbalists practise in the Snuneymuxw community today. Fortunately, many young people are eager to learn the old ways.

"It makes people more aware of where they come from and what the ancestors did," said White, 89, as she sits in the living room of her Nanaimo home. She nods toward an old black-and-white photo hanging on the wall of her grandmother.

First Nations people are statistically at higher risk of disease compared to the rest of B.C., yet they access Medical Service Plan services at a lower rate. Health programs designed by First Nations, which often combine tradition with medical science, have been able to connect with aboriginal people in the central Vancouver Island region more effectively. These types of initiatives could become more common after a historic agreement with the federal and provincial governments was signed in October to develop a new B.C. First Nations Health Authority.

Every now and then, people with colds or fevers will knock on White's door. They're more comfortable with her holistic, traditional approach to medicine rather than the sterile environment of a doctor's office.

White believes that modern medicine and ancient First Nations remedies can work hand-in-hand. Sometimes, visitors to White's home will find stacks of coffee tins full of dried herbs like yarrow, known for its antibiotic properties, and columbine, which creates saliva and can provide energy. Creating herbal medicine often involves a combination of spoken words along with preparation of the plants that can sometimes take weeks.

"Certain medical people really believe in it, but others don't want to get mixed up in it," said White, adding that gradually, more health-care professionals are becoming receptive to traditional medicine.

White has dedicated herself to training other people in her community about traditional healing with the hope she can help keep the ancient practice alive.

The Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal



Snuneymuxw elder Ellen White is one of the few within the band to hold onto traditional healing methods. The effort to create better health for band members may include traditional healing. (DUSTIN WALKER/DAILY NEWS)

### Legacy of fear

This is the final installment of the Nanaimo Daily News' in-depth look at how health-care services are not connecting with many First Nations people.

» You can find the complete three-part series online:

**NanaimoDailyNews**

Friendship Centre in Nanaimo, which White helped found in 1965, provides a holistic, tradition-based approach at its health centre. Traditional prayer, pipe and smudging ceremonies are among the programs people can take part in.

Nanaimo's Peter Moon, 39, always turns to Tillicum Lelum first when he has a health concern.

"They're more accepting of who you are and where you're coming from," said Moon. "Being aboriginal, you feel like you're being judged no matter where you go or what you do. Especially with medical matters."

New initiatives — both provincial and local — have given central Vancouver Island First Nations leaders hope that people will have more access to health-care services they need.

The Intertribal Health Authority has been operating a successful mobile clinic that brings retinal screening devices into remote First Nations communities. This involves a team of medical professionals who test people for eye diseases caused by diabetes.

Health officials say the program reaches those who had



BOB

gone undiagnosed because of transportation barriers or fear of clinical environments. First Nations people are 20 times more likely than other British Columbians to have eye damage due to diabetes. Eye care nurse Shelly Ellis said she's met people who have never been to a doctor.

The Nanoose First Nation is also boosting people's access to medical services by developing a health-care centre in the community. Residents celebrated the groundbreaking last month.

The band had worked for more than a decade to provide additional access for those without transportation or who are too fearful to access clinics elsewhere.

"This means people can feel comfortable talking to our own health-care professionals (on site)," said Nanoose First Nations chief David Bob.

The 4,000-square-foot, \$2-million project aims to provide greater access to health services like addiction counselling and dentistry once it opens in fall 2012. The facility is among several in B.C. being funded by Health Canada to provide better access to health care for aboriginal people. And it could be a sign of things to come.

Doug Kelly, chairman of the First Nations Health Council, said past government decisions on health care involved little understanding of what works and doesn't work for aboriginal communities. He thinks the recent establishment of a First Nations health authority in B.C. will help change that. An agreement signed in October will see the federal government's authority, and millions of dollars in annual funding, transferred to the new agency over the next two years.

It will be responsible for on-reserve programs such as mental health services and primary care, while the existing six health authorities will still provide most acute services. However, the province will be working with the new health authority to incorporate First Nations' values and models of healing.

Kelly said he understands that things won't change overnight.

"There's some skepticism, there's some fear. I think once people begin to understand what's coming, they'll begin to support it," he said.

The First Nations health authority will be an equal partner with health authorities and governments when it comes to decision-making, said Kelly. This collaboration means that aboriginal people will have much more say about how they receive health-care services.

"That's one of the first steps to creating trust," said Kelly.

DWalker@nanaimodailynews.com  
250-729-4244

### MENTAL HEALTH

## Crisis line gears up for those stressed by the season

DARRELL BELLAART DAILY NEWS

As blue as Christmas may be for some, crisis line workers expect a surge in calls when the gift-giving ends.

Experience tells Vancouver Island Crisis Line workers calls will rise after Dec. 25.

It's a common perception Christmas, but for many the real blues begin once the year turns over, the relatives leave and the bills arrive.

The bright lights, parties and get-togethers that keep people distracted help to keep the blues at bay over the holiday season, but once the support of friends and family goes, sadness can well up.

Christmas can be difficult for anyone grieving, or otherwise going through loss, but going by the number of crisis calls made, late winter-early spring is when depression grips Islanders hardest.

"Spring has the highest incidence of suicide," said Heather Owen, crisis line spokeswoman.

The Vancouver Island Crisis Line, operated from Nanaimo took 30,893 calls between Dec. 1, 2010 and Nov. 31. Of those, 49% are mental-health related, 16% for information only, 13% are for personal and family issues, 7% are suicide calls and 5% are addiction-related.

The busiest month was March, with 2,938 calls. January was sec-

ond busiest, with 2,840, followed by April (2,798) and May (2,778).

December was the fifth busiest month, with 2,727 calls. So far 1,035 calls have come in by Dec. 15. In December those with the blues can make connections with family, friends and others. That can change in January.

"Maybe they got together with people and it didn't go as well as they hoped, maybe there were family conflicts," Owen said.

Year-round, 24-hour support

is available from 13 paid crisis workers and between 35 and 50 volunteers.

"Be prepared that some time in January, when all the lights come down and everything is put away there's going to be people out there feeling (depressed)," Owen said.

The crisis line is at 250-753-2495 in Nanaimo.

DBellaart@nanaimodailynews.com  
250-729-4235