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## Eastside life hits natives hardest

### Community leaders say education and strong cultural links are the key to improvement

By Cheryl Chan, The Province; With files from Elaine O'Connor October 7, 2009 9:40 AM [Comments \(2\)](#)

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**With a little help from his dad, his lawyer and his probation officer when he was 19, Eddie Taylor, now**

## **35, was able to rise above his former life on the rough streets of the Downtown Eastside.**

### **Photograph by: Arlen Redekop, The Province**

Eddie Taylor was scared, shaking and in tears when he called his dad, begging to be rescued.

Fleeing a childhood filled with violence and neglect — an alcoholic mom used as a punching bag by abusive boyfriends, older sisters who were sniffing glue, fights and brawls at parties, a series of foster homes — the nine-year-old Taylor and his twin brother left Edmonton to live with their dad at a hotel beside Oppenheimer Park in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

"It was a better lifestyle," recalled Taylor, who is from the Gwich'in First Nation on his dad's side and Cree and English on his mom's side. "I felt safer and more comfortable, and had better opportunities to be a kid and not be so afraid."

But it wasn't long before old habits crept back into Taylor's new life.

Having experimented with alcohol and glue when he was seven, Taylor started sniffing gasoline, inhaling the noxious fumes from parked cars with friends.

When he was 13, he started drinking — casually at first, then more and more until he began skipping class and getting into trouble.

One day, fed up with the boozing and late-night knocks on the door from police, his dad, a residential school survivor and recovered addict, kicked the two boys out.

Couch-surfing and living on the streets, Taylor started using cocaine and heroin and began getting arrested for drug possession, thefts, robberies, assaults, and break-and-enters, descending into the tumultuous world of addiction and violence he thought he had left behind in Alberta.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nowhere in Canada is there an aboriginal population as diverse as Vancouver's.

They come from almost every nation across the country, pushed out of their hometowns or reserves by lack of economic opportunities, abysmal living conditions and dysfunctional family relationships.

They come, drawn by the warmer weather, in pursuit of jobs, education, medical treatment, long-lost family members or a familiar face.

"It's the bright lights they talk about. But they come here and find out there's not really many bright lights, or they're not shining in our community," said Lynda Gray, executive director of the Urban Native Youth Association.

Many also struggle with social ills such as broken families, domestic abuse, alcohol and drug addiction — consequences of colonization, Canada's destructive policy of residential schools and the general failure of modern political leaders in Canada, both native and non-native, to find a way to undo the damage.

They come, seeking greener pastures, but with little money, few skills and inadequate education, many settle in the barren landscape of the Downtown Eastside, where on the streets, in single-room occupancy hotels and shelters, the faces of the poverty-stricken and health-afflicted are disproportionately native.

Although aboriginal people make up only four per cent of B.C.'s population, they comprise 10 per cent of Downtown Eastside residents. Because of the number of aboriginals living in the area, it is nicknamed by some the "Urban Rez."

"It's really a sign, a symptom of a larger problem of how native people exist within this community," said Gray, a member of the Tsimshian Nation who grew up near Main and Hastings. "It's the most blatant and obvious sign of damaged spirits."

In almost every measure of quality of life, B.C.'s aboriginal people lag behind non-aboriginals.

The drop-out rate of aboriginal students in the Downtown Eastside is 40 per cent, compared to a provincial average of 23 per cent. Teenage pregnancy among First Nations youth is also double the provincial rate.

Aboriginals make up nearly 25 per cent of inmates who are in B.C. and Yukon jails for violent crimes such as homicide, manslaughter and sexual assault.

Roughly 30 per cent of the homeless in Greater Vancouver are native, as are 60 per cent of sex-trade workers in the Downtown Eastside.

In health, improvements have been made in life expectancy, infant mortality and youth suicides, but overall, aboriginals still face greater health risks than non-aboriginals and are more likely to die from accidental poisonings or contract chronic diseases such as diabetes and Hepatitis C.

A recent study also revealed that aboriginal drug users are twice as likely to contract HIV/AIDS as non-aboriginals.

Some say the reason is social networking. Aboriginal drug users tend to stick together, and when sharing needles expose themselves to a higher risk of infection due to existing HIV-positive rates in the community. Others say there is a continuing lack of awareness about methods of transmission.

Gabor Mate, a physician who has worked in the Downtown Eastside for 10 years, has a simpler explanation.

"Because when people have been badly hurt, they take less good care of themselves," said Mate. "The more traumatized you are, the less kind you are to yourself, the less careful you are, and the more desperate you are for the drug."

Out of the patients he sees, about 30 per cent are aboriginal and "there isn't a single aboriginal woman I deal with that wasn't sexually abused."

It's this multi-generational damage that Dave Dickson has seen in 30 years of working in the neighbourhood, first as a Vancouver police officer and now as an outreach worker.

He has seen three generations of drug-addicted women work as prostitutes. He knew a 40-year-old rice-wine addict whose mother had sexually abused him and who drank himself to death. He knows of a mother who sold her 10-year-old daughter to a john.

He estimates only about five per cent of kids he first met in daycare grow up to lead healthy lives.

"If you look at the historical abuse they have suffered, I don't think any other cultural group comes close," said Dickson.

While pointing the finger at the past seems like a cop-out, Dickson believes that people whose childhoods were spent around needles, bottles and dirt don't know any other kind of life.

"They were born into that world," he said. "That's one of the biggest problems: How do you undo generations of damage with the resources that we have?"

Advocates and aboriginal leaders say it starts with education, especially since aboriginal youth aged 25 and younger make up 60 per cent of the population.

“We need to be able to show kids that they have an opportunity to make their lives better and it can be something different from what they have experienced so far,” said Calvin Helin, a successful lawyer and member of the Tsimshian Nation who has been critical of what he calls the “welfare trap” for aboriginal people.

“Sometimes it may not be possible to reach the generation of their parents, so we need to get to the children . . . In the Eastside there are a lot of kids who have both parents in jail or don’t get a meal in the morning, so we’ve got to reach them.”

Gray believes community, culture and self-pride is what can help her people.

“I would say 90 to 99 per cent of aboriginals who are leading healthy, strong lives [are doing so] because they have a strong sense of self, primarily through culture,” she said.

But many aren’t even aware of the legacy of residential schools, even if it has shaped their lives.

Growing up in a troubled home with an alcoholic mother, Gray herself didn’t find out about residential schools until 1995. “The first time I heard about it, a light bulb went off and my entire life made sense,” she said.

The knowledge helped her. “It gave me a sense that this doesn’t have to be the way it is for me and my children. It gave me a great sense of hope and purpose to fight against it.”

Mate said aboriginal people have suffered more, chronically and continuously, than any other segment of Canadian society.

“When you crush people, they need a lot more support to rise from that,” he said.

He acknowledges that individuals have to be responsible for their own actions. “But the question is, what can we do to help them take that responsibility?” he asked. “I can’t be responsible for their lives. I can’t change their lives, but I can help provide the conditions for that change.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Eddie Taylor, now 35, sometimes wonders why he was able to beat the odds of his disadvantaged childhood when his siblings couldn’t.

Three of his sisters are dead, killed by their addictions. Another sister is still hooked on painkillers and cocaine. His twin brother, who just got out of jail, still struggles with his demons.

His mother has been in hospital for a month, battling the ravages of a lifetime of alcohol abuse.

“I don’t know why,” he said. “I don’t feel there was too much pain there that I can’t deal with. Maybe my struggles and hurts and pains aren’t as deep as my sisters’ and brother’s, because their addictions are so prolonged.”

Even in the depths of his addiction and crime spree, Taylor knew he wanted something more for himself.

He’s seen a better life through his dad, who worked honest jobs after getting clean and who, despite being distant and a harsh disciplinarian, was a strong source of support.

As a kid, Taylor also had other aboriginal people in his community act as strong role models for him.

When he was 19, it was his dad, lawyer and probation officer who worked out a deal with the judge where he entered a rehab program in Coquitlam instead of jail.

He emerged clean eight months later and began working part-time in the community, including running recreational programs at Oppenheimer Park.

He completed his high-school equivalency and today works at Bladerunners, helping youth find jobs in the construction industry.

Now living in Burnaby with two kids — six-year-old Eddie Jr. and four-year-old Jesse — the proud dad has high hopes for the next generation of Taylor boys.

“I hope the best for them,” he said. “They can be hockey players or police officers or doctors, whatever they want.”

“I just want to provide them with a safe and happy and positive environment so they’ll be happy and successful and stay away from the environment I was involved in.”

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**Photograph by: Arlen Redekop, The Province**

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I would not be where I am today without my friend Eddie T.... he's true friend,we have been through alot when we were younger....

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Mr. Taylor, thank you.

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