

BULLETIN

Counsellor praises move to HSA

March 1, 1998

The Report: March / April 1998 vol.18 num.7

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Wedlidi Speck couldn't get enthused about the drive to unionize his work place. Infact, the counsellor at the John Howard Society in Courtenay was downright opposed to it.

It was an unusual beginning for someone who now takes an active role in his union. Infact, Speck, a nine-year veteran, helped negotiate the bargaining unit's first collective agreement.

A counsellor who uses both conventional and First Nations methods in his work, Speck applied a live-and-let-live approach to the unionization drive.

"I'm always in favour of a collaborative approach to resolving conflicts," Speck says. "I didn't want an adversarial environment. So I was one of those who voted no to the union. But at the same time, I also was prepared to go with whatever happened."

What happened, of course, was that some 50 workers at five sites of the North Island John Howard Society voted to join the Health Sciences Association. And Speck, always receptive, found that his fears of "old-style" confrontation were unfounded.

"I felt management was receptive, all the way through" the collective bargaining process, he relates. "I think my concerns were heard."

HSA membership helped standardize labour relations at the five work sites, clarifying and streamlining the grievance process, Speck says. "It's not like the old union days" at all."

Counsellors at John Howard deal with some of society's most difficult cases. Speck says there's no single method that works for all his young, often juvenile, clients.

"We're unlike most other John Howard facilities in Canada," says Speck. The majority of the programs are for teens, dealing with problems such as sex offences, alcohol and drug abuse, and uncontrolled anger.

Counsellors handle a caseload of about five clients per day, and average about 44 per year. The five sites serve about 33,000 north island residents. Therapy comes in a variety of forms.

Narrative therapy involves "deconstruction" questions that allow the client to externalize the problem. Bio-psycho-social therapy examines psychological and social factors in assessing alcohol and drug dependency. Positive reinforcement comes through "brief solution focussed therapy."

But Speck has additional options in what he calls his "spiritual tool kit." He combines conventional therapies with First Nations methods such as the sweat lodge, healing circles, storytelling and poetry. The process has rewards for the counsellor as well as the clients, says Speck. "This time in my life is the most fulfilling, powerful

and rich."

Speck thinks modern society suffers through spiritual impoverishment. "We have no right-of-passage ceremonies; we have no elders, so young people have been abandoned. I'm like a parent re-establishing a right-of-passage."

Speck acknowledges that he's "walked that kind of cultural path" many of his clients are on. He quit drinking back in 1975, and has been involved in Native therapy for 15 years and storytelling for the past 10. He joined John Howard nine years ago.

John Howard workers were divided into pro and con camps during the HSA drive, but most of those "feelings" have disappeared, Speck relates. "We're working maybe even closer together now. [The union drive] showed we could disagree about something and then sit down and discuss it."

"It gave us a tremendous opportunity to look at our value system. I think that's a gift in itself."

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