

Scared Straight

We were taken out of our hotel at around midnight on a cold fall night. I really didn't know what to expect other than we were on a tour of the down town East Side of Vancouver to hopefully scare us away from drugs. This was arranged through my Band, the Klahoose First Nation, along with the Scared Straight Tour for aboriginal youth. The adults and leaders of my Band hoped that we would gain some insight into what life is like for those who find themselves living on the streets of Vancouver.

Some of the kids were laughing nervously as if this was just a joke, "Obviously it would never happen to any of us, right?" They would say to each other, even though I could tell that many others were scared to be on the streets this late. Honestly, I was absolutely terrified. I was only twelve when we went on the trip; it definitely made an impact on my young life.

We had security walking with us along the streets to ensure our safety; later we discovered that our guides were actually recovering drug addicts. They told us their stories before we started our tour; after hearing them I truly understood how dangerous this trip was for a group of teenagers. It is hard to explain to anyone how greatly this trip impacted my life if you haven't walked through Blood Alley at 2 am where at any moment someone could just grab you or hit you to try and get money for drugs or even because they were just on a bad trip. I must start at the beginning so hopefully you, as a reader can try to understand the most amazing, but terrifying forty-eight hours of my life.

First, as I have already told you we met our guides. They told us their life experiences; they told us how much work they would go through and what terrible things that they would do just to get enough money to get high for a few hours. The guards were all very successful before they started using; one of them owned his own restaurant and a club. He was living the good life, then through his girlfriend he started using drugs and he lost everything he had ever had and ended up living on the streets for years. Now that he is a recovered drug addict he has chosen to do this program. He said that if he stops one person from going down the same path that he did he will be happy with his life.

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After we met our guides we went to a local soup kitchen to make and serve lunch for the homeless. Seeing how one meal could turn their day around made us all feel like we were making a positive impact. After we served lunch we were brought to one of the many rehabilitation centers in the area. We met more recovering drug addicts. All of the stories we heard started out very similar. When they were teenagers they would party once in a while, then it very quickly it turned into every weekend. They all started smoking pot, after a while they all got bored of drinking and smoking so they were constantly seeking a greater high. Before they knew it, it was too late to turn back; drugs now controlled their lives.

The part of the trip which had the greatest impact on me was when we walked down East Hastings, which is also known as "Blood Alley" late at night. The guards were still walking with us but that didn't calm my nerves at all. Everywhere we looked there were people sleeping on the wet, cold ground or shooting-up. On numerous occasions we would stop and talk to people. At the end they were always asked the same question "Is there anything that you want to tell these kids?" Every time we got the same response; "Stay away from drugs" or "Don't end up like me." They would manage to murmur out through their tears. They couldn't stand the thought of one more single teenager ending up on the streets.

We stopped to talk to a prostitute; she told us that she has been on the streets since she was fourteen, around the same age as many of the girls that came with me on the trip. She kept on stressing to us girls to not follow her path; she said it's barely a life worth living. There wasn't much that we could do to help her but one of the guards gave her twenty dollars so that she would hopefully not have to work for that night. I didn't understand how terrible that would have been for her, but looking back at it now it makes me feel sick to my stomach knowing that any woman has to struggle that much in life.

During the entire trip one thought kept on coming to mind; I couldn't stop thinking about my people and wondering how many of them have and will end up on the streets. Many dive into drugs and alcohol to try and get rid of the pain caused by years of discrimination, being forced into residential schools and having their culture being taken away from them. I never grew up on the reserve, but the youth that

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came with me on the trip did. They grew up seeing their elders and parents numb the pain with substances. I was so worried they my friends would walk down the same path.

A few weeks after we got home from the trip we were asked to look back on our experience and our thoughts about the trip. They asked if it changed our lives. I remember sitting there, thinking of my answer. All I could say was "I'm never going to be the same again". Looking back at the whole experience I'm so glad that my parents made me go on this trip. I dreaded it before I went, but in the end that trip helped made the person that I am today. I hope that the trip changed the lives of the other youth that came the same way that it changed my life.

First Nations Peoples have always been more at risk for becoming addicts, but it's our time now. It's time to change the stereotype and to start over; I know that if everyone truly tries we can improve the lives of First Nations all over Canada. I feel that if more aboriginal youth got to experience a similar trip that they would be better equipped to deal with the hardships in life and how to deal with pain; hopefully it would help them resist drugs. I cannot stress how much this experience impacted my life, the only way you can truly understand it is to experience it yourself.

Author's Statement

I am an Aboriginal student currently in high school. I am Coast Salish and originally from a small island off the coast of Vancouver Island called Cortes. My band is Klahoose, we're a very small, less than 200 people.

I chose to write about my experiences in Vancouver because drugs, alcohol and addictions are a growing problem with Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal people all over Canada. I want other teens to have a chance to have a similar experience so they can have a real chance of reaching their full potential. Drugs are more dangerous than people think; I have personally dealt with family members using and it tears people apart. Family and friends are such an important part of life; without those strong bonds life is such a struggle. I hope this story can positively impact at least one person.

Thank you so much for considering my work, I hope you enjoy it.