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Finding a path to sobriety through spirituality at a Long Beach sweat lodge

1/5



Paul Navarro, of Los Angeles, looks up to the sky after exiting the sweat lodge at the American Indian Changing Spirits Men's Recovery in Long Beach, CA. Thursday, July 14, 2016. Navarro graduated from the alcohol & drug rehab program and comes back to sweat and show support to the men going through the program. (Photo by Thomas R. Cordova, Press-Telegram/SCNG)

PHOTOS: Changing Spirits Men's Recovery Sweat Lodge Ceremony

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The men stand in a semicircle as they support one another as they exit the sweat lodge part of an alcohol & drug rehab program American Indian Changing Spirits Men's Recovery in Long Beach, CA. Thursday, July 28, 2016. (Photo by Thomas R. Cordova, Press-Telegram/SCNG)

As the heat from a burning August day dissipates, Jimi Castillo, 73, takes his place on a bench among a circle of men who have hit the bottom and never want to be here again.

"I want you to know that just because I am in this position," Castillo said, "it doesn't mean I am above it all. I've had tracks up and down my arms."

More than a dozen men are looking back at "Uncle Jimi" in his wide-brimmed hat, an eagle's feather poking out. Some nod, others smoke cigarettes.

• **Photos:** [Changing Spirits Men's Recovery Sweat Lodge Ceremony](#)

"One can't do it all alone," Castillo tells the circle as the men sit behind the program's dorms.

Castillo has been sober 30 years. He knows the ravages of drug addiction, the power of redemption and the human need for healing. With roots in the Tongva and Acjachemen Indian tribes of Southern California, he is a sort of spiritual and cultural adviser to Changing Spirits, a men's recovery center unlike any other in Southern California.

THE PROGRAM

Housed at a former naval housing complex in Long Beach, Changing Spirits incorporates Native American traditions to guide male addicts back to sobriety and themselves.

It began more than a decade ago after funding ran out for Los Angeles County's only two drug and alcohol programs for American Indians.

Frustrated there weren't enough programs that addressed this group's unique needs, a former ordained minister, Amy Jo Kindler, started the program with the help of Cheryl McKnight, the head of the American Institute at Cal State Dominguez Hills, and Robert Sundance, who was born on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in North Dakota.

Funded by Los Angeles County and tribes such as the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, the 30-bed rehab program over the years has accepted hundreds of men struggling to find their footing.

THE MEN

The men are young and old and arrived at the program for different reasons. Some come after a run-in with the law, others reach a revelation themselves or are steered here by family.

Sitting around the benches with Castillo that summer day, a few begin to open up. It's ceremony day and some of the men aren't even in the program at all. They are alumni or looking for support in their sobriety.

"I was starting to get violent and have these violent thoughts," one man told the group. "It's not the person I am."

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Another said he returned after falling off the wagon. "It's good to be back in the circle."

Director Raul Garcia said what makes the program so attractive to American Indians is that it reconnects them to traditions they abandoned using drugs; there are deep taboos in American Indian tradition against mixing spirituality with intoxication.

The U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration estimates illegal drug use among Native Alaskans and American Indians over the age of 12 was nearly 15 percent in 2014.

BATTLING ADDICTION

The fog of drugs robbed Juan Valdivia, a 30-year old from the Tachi Yokut of the San Joaquin Valley, of his 20s.

Raised on a small reservation in Central California, Valdivia began using drugs at 14. First, he smoked marijuana, then graduated to PCP at 16. A year later, he said a girlfriend introduced him to methamphetamine, a highly addictive stimulant.

After that, he bought from a drug dealer who set up shop at the casino across from his reservation. It made him “forget about a lot of things,” he said.

Valdivia never finished high school and saw his sister nearly die from an overdose when he was a teenager.

Strung out for days, he hallucinated and eventually found himself on the street before getting picked up by cops and landing at Changing Spirits.

The hardest part is learning to wake up and sleep sober, he said. But finally the hallucinations that haunted him have stopped, and he finds solace in the sweat lodge.

“That’s the life for me,” he said. “That is where I get a solid head, just talking to the god of my choice, the creator. It’s a humble experience.”

THE SWEAT LODGE

The Lakota tribe from the North Dakotas call them inipi. In southern Mexico, the Mayans named them temezcal. Sweat lodges hold a sacred value. They are the womb of mother earth.

Generations of indigenous people throughout the Americas found healing and purification inside them. They are places of prayer and resolution that honor the natural world.

On the night Castillo sat with the circle, the sky was swimming-pool blue. Burning wood from a fire filled the air.

“When we come to sweat, we are here for one common goal, and that is to clean ourselves, to purify ourselves, to purify our minds and bodies and purify our thoughts, to purify our hearts, emotions, what we are feeling,” said volunteer Roberto Jacobo, who led the ceremony.

The men sat in the shade of a mesquite and willow tree as the sun began to cast a shadow. Near Jacobo, the fire pit glowed with rocks, each with special significance. Next to that sat an altar made of willow branches and objects the American Indians consider sacred, including a deer’s head that West Coast natives consider the chief of the four-legged animals.

After the men are swept with smoke from burning sage to cleanse away negativity, they enter the lodge where rocks are placed. The heat rises and then the song prayers begin.

“I find a place in there, something happens, something good happens,” said Eric Riske, reflecting on the night. “You might end up crying, screaming, confessing things you have done or you might end up not saying a word.”

Riske is part American Indian and used methamphetamine for years before landing in jail and finally cleaning up. He showed up tonight looking for solace. Though not in the program, he’s come to sweats before, saying it is the only thing that keeps him grounded.

The lodge is sweaty and cramped. Men can claw at the earth to cool down, but they endure just like they must with sobriety.

Riske looks up, calm. “When you come out of there and the steam is coming off of you, you feel like a new person. You have made a change.”