

William Greenland's Story:



My story began when I was growing up in a small northern town in the Northwest Territories, Canada (above the Arctic Circle in the Mackenzie Delta). Back in those days, there was never anyone to tell us what was right and what was wrong in the post-residential school era. We basically learned from experience and what we saw.

My mom and dad drank a lot, and my siblings and I seen many fights between them. This carried on for many years in addition to also seeing my older siblings fight and drink a lot too. As a young boy this is what I seen and was exposed to almost every day. I think the only time I didn't see it was when my dad was at work. He had a good government job, and my mom began to work too at the hospital as a custodian. When I became a teenager the problems continued and I began to drink and smoke dope, which made it harder to go to school. I eventually dropped out of school while at the same time continually witnessing my Mom and dad's relationship problems continue. This resulted in my dad always leaving us.

As I grew up, I never did spend much time with my dad. Today I think about the things I wish I would have learned from him. I have always been told he was a good man in the bush and was a good dancer, spoke many languages, and was a good hard worker. I recall one time when he went to a treatment center in the late 1970's, and we as children were never told about what to expect when he came home and how we needed to treat him or support him. There were never any of those kinds of supports back then because of what residential schools did to our families and communities. When he did eventually come back, I was already well on my way to regularly drinking daily. He also eventually started drinking again and left the family once again.

In 1980 he died from the drinking when I was only 19 years old. I was angry with my dad for a long time because I didn't learn much from him about being a good man other than to drink and be angry. I carried that with me into my adult hood and when I got into relationships I was just like my dad, angry and fighting my partners, always in broken relationships. I had a good job as a radio broadcaster for many years, but could never keep the work because of the drinking. I went to treatment centers 12 times and I just kept going back to the drinking when I came out. I eventually ended up on the streets for a few years at a time. Things got really bad when I was in my late 30's and early 40's as I could not keep a job or stay in a relationship anymore and I just wanted to give up. I attempted suicide a few times but I was afraid to follow through with it completely.

I almost died when I was on the streets of Yellowknife, NT, in 2000 when there wasn't anywhere to sleep that night. The Salvation Army would not open the door to me because I was too drunk, and it was very cold out that night. I fell into a snow bank and decided that was it. The RCMP found me and brought me into a detox center where I stayed for a few days. When I sobered up and they let out, I went right back to the drinking. I stayed drunk for another 3 years before I made a huge decision to quit for good. I was tired.

I wanted to stop drinking but was too afraid to

I want wanted to die but wanted to live too.

I knew that one morning I needed to change something but was too afraid to get up and face that day because I was too scared of the hang over again. I was laying in my own mess and needed to do something, or I would not make it another day.

I began to pray to creator.

I asked for help and said I would never come back to this place again and that I would always remember what I prayed for. I eventually had a huge seizure and came very close to death. This was the turning point in my life. On April 26th, 2004, I stopped drinking and had to work very hard for the first 2 years to stay sober, which I found to be the hardest. I went back to work at the radio station after being sober for 6 weeks and did everything I could to stay away from people I knew who drank. I began to look for sober people to hang around with; however, I felt like nobody trusted me those first few months. This made me feel bad, but I didn't want to let myself or my family down. I just kept praying and looking for good places to keep me busy and away from the drinking and doing drugs.

Even during the difficult times in my adult life I knew about Indigenous spirituality. The times I did sober up for a little while I would try and connect to try to stay sober. I began to know about the ceremonies and how to pray for myself but I always went back to drugs and booze as there was no one place at home where I could stay connected back then. With more exposure and connection to the land and my indigenous traditions I was able to maintain my sobriety. I have done a lot for myself to maintain my sobriety, going to many meetings and ceremonies over the

years and staying humble too. I eventually found my place in the community to give back for what I was given to stay sober. I even recorded my first Native American Flute Album which was nominated and began helping other men to begin their journeys too.

My traditions and culture is what keeps me strong and I hope to continue to give support to those other men now on the street that are lost and stuck in bad cycles. Now, compared to before, when I go home back to the land where my family is from, a place where our people lived and survived for thousands of years, it's like going back in time before contact with outsiders. I feel at peace. I feel a connection that you can only find if you really want to it and work hard for it. Sometimes the old people in my region would say, "If you want it you have to go and get it yourself, only then will it be yours".

It takes a lot of work to learn these old ways again and live in today's world. It becomes possible only if you work at it. Learning my culture isn't easy. Our old ways have been torn from us a long time ago and not too many of our people know their culture; however, what we have today of the past is rich and strong amongst my Gwich'in people if they chose to remember. Prayers helped me and learning to sing the traditional songs kept me grounded so I can be able to help others. Supports from others who have also begun their journeys back to our ancestors and who have become mentors have always encouraged me to *not to give up*.

Today, with the many supports and spiritual elders who have guided me along this journey, I am now ready and able to help others. I am now able to help others learn to accept their pasts and all the things that have happened to them. To help them understand how to *forgive themselves* and others, to take control of their emotions so we can all begin to live a better way of life with ourselves and our communities.

It makes me feel good that I can help others today.