

First Nations: The great divide

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For nearly two hours, the tiny single-prop eight-seat plane has been buzzing north from Thunder Bay through a cloudless sky.

To the edges of the horizon stretches an unending carpet of green, spotted with countless lakes and streams, untouched, it seems, by humanity.

Finally, a small settlement hugging the edge of a lake comes into focus.

The plane glides onto the gravel runway and taxis to the small building that serves as the airport for Big Trout Lake, a First Nations community of about 1,400 people that lies about 300 kilometres south of the Hudson Bay shore.

For 10 months of the year, the daily flights on tiny Wasaya Airlines are Big Trout Lake's only connection to the outside world. In the dead of winter, for two months, maybe three depending on the weather, there's an ice road — but that's a nine-hour journey south just to reach the main highway at Pickle Lake.

Two band members hired to provide security at the airstrip begin combing through the luggage that's just been unloaded.

At Big Trout Lake, bags are inspected on arrival, not departure.

They're looking for alcohol, yes, because Big Trout Lake is supposed to be a dry community.

But more importantly, bags are being searched for smuggled pills, primarily the powerful painkillers OxyContin and Percocet.

In the band office, Chief Donny Morris points to a soft drink can on the table. "What's that?" he asks.

He takes the can and carefully begins to unscrew the silver top from the base. He tilts it and inside is a compartment that could hold dozens of pills.

"We were starting to wonder why so many people all of a sudden were coming back with cans" of the citrus beverage, Morris says.

Substance abuse, particularly OxyContin, is a big problem here.

It's one of the symptoms of the crushing boredom and isolation that accompanies life at a fly-in native reserve, along with high rates of unemployment and low rates of formal education.

And like other remote native communities in Ontario's Far North, there's also an epidemic of teen moms.

Between 2006 and 2010, Big Trout Lake had the fifth-highest rate of teen moms in all of Ontario. Nearly 30 per cent of the mothers who gave birth over that time were teenagers, about eight times higher than the Ontario average.

The four communities with higher rates are also remote fly-in native reserves located, like Big Trout Lake, in the sprawling Kenora district that covers the province's northwest. Together, about one baby in three at these five reserves is born to a teen mom.

"A lot of our young moms and young boys are together at an early age, so that's (an) issue," said Morris.

"Right now, common-law is a major thing, where a lot of kids are brought into that (type of) relationship and the sincerity of belonging to a family trend is not there," he added. "We have to go back to our roots, use our elders to start explaining what it was in the old days.

"Even though, I have to admit, will we ever go back? I don't know."

Meet Joy Quequish

She's 30 now but was a teen mom earlier in life.

She sits at the dining room table in the Mamow Against Drugs Healing Centre, a log cabin-style home overlooking Big Trout Lake with room for six women at a time.

"Mamow" means "together" in the Oji-Cree language. The home, which opened more than a year ago, acts as a detox centre for young women.

For eight years, Joy has been battling her addiction, with varying degrees of success. She started with cocaine and crack and then became hooked on OxyContin.

She's told about the soft drink can in the band office, and she laughs.

"That's nothing," Joy said. "There's air fresheners like that, two-litre bottles of pop, body sprays, everything.

“It’s a huge problem,” she added. “It’s not just here, it’s everywhere. All the reserves are into it.”

Joy ended up at the detox centre because she says she wants to stop once and for all.

“I lost everything,” she said. “My kids, my house, my schooling, just everything.”

“I’m just tired,” she added. “I want to be back the way I used to be before I moved here.”

“I was clean, I never did drugs, I barely even drank, maybe a couple of times a year. I was always there for my son, I always worked.”

“I lost all my jobs in the past six years because of my addiction.”

Joy spent part of her youth living in Cambridge with her father, a native, and his non-native girlfriend.

She returned to Big Trout Lake to live with her mother and became pregnant at 19. Her own mom had her first child at 18, and now has eight children and 23 grandchildren.

“I was raised by a white family and nobody ever had a kid in their teens down south,” said Joy. “I didn’t know any teen who had a kid until I came here.”

At Big Trout Lake, she said “it’s almost like everybody’s so used to it that it’s not even noticed. It’s nothing anymore for a teenager to have a kid.”

With Joy at the table are two other women who were also teen moms.

Janice Barkman and Ruby Gliddy are both 28 and they, too, are trying to kick their addictions to OxyContin.

It’s the withdrawals that are the worst part, they say. Achy bones, cold sweats, bad headaches. Tired and sluggish yet restless and unable to sleep.

“You feel dead,” said Janice. “You sit there and just want to end it.”

OxyContin not only robbed the women of their physical and emotional health, it also robbed them of their money and belongings.

“I’ve sold everything I could, my clothes, anything, to get it,” said Janice. “I’m slowly getting all my stuff back.”

OxyContin pills are often cut into pieces and sold in quarters or halves.

At Big Trout Lake, a quarter of an OxyContin pill will sell for the staggering sum of between \$160 and \$180.

Even young kids have become familiar with the terminology and the culture, Joy said.

“They know what quarters are, or halves, they know what the clamps are that we use to shave them, they know not to touch their parents’ needles,” she said.

“Some people have a little tool bag with their rakes and spoons and our kids know not to touch any of our stuff,” she added. “That’s just how bad it is.”

Meet Ruby

She was 19 when she had her first child. “I was drunk,” Ruby explained.

She now has five children, including twins, but none of them are in her care. Only two are living at Big Trout Lake.

“I stopped using for awhile when the twins were born,” she said. “One of them went into Oxy withdrawals.”

The twins were taken from her at the hospital right after they were born and they now live in Sioux Lookout. Ruby has seen them twice in the past three years.

Janice became pregnant at 15. She, too, was drunk at the time. “And I liked the guy.”

She eventually had three kids with the same man. “They just kept popping out,” she said.

She and the children’s father are no longer together. He’s taking care of one of them, his grandmother is taking care of another and Janice has one.

It’s a common theme at the reserve — children being raised by extended family members, sometimes on other reserves or farther south in Sioux Lookout or Thunder Bay.

“It’s almost expected from every family,” said Joy, whose own two kids live

with their father. “There are a lot of kids being raised by their grandparents.”

Inadequate housing compounds the problem. Morris, the band chief, flips through one of his financial documents and says the band has only enough money to build four new homes in the next three years.

Meanwhile, he said, “we see these young moms living with their parents or grandparents, raising their kids in one bedroom, sometimes three or four kids in one bedroom.”

At the end of Highway 671, about a 90-minute drive north of Kenora, you’ll find Grassy Narrows First Nation.

Visitors are greeted with a large, ominous hand-painted sign warning that trespassers face possible imprisonment.

Here and there, fields are littered with the metal carcasses of automobiles. At times, it’s hard to tell which homes are occupied and which are abandoned.

But Grassy Narrows does have one thing that Big Trout Lake lacks — a year-round road, in this case to Kenora, that provides 24-hour-a-day access to doctors, a hospital, shopping, even potential jobs.

Yet even with this direct connection, the rate of teen moms remains as stubbornly high as those of the remote fly-in native communities to the north.

Grassy Narrows had the ninth-highest rate of teen moms in Ontario between 2006 and 2010. Just over a quarter of all babies were born to a teenager.

Wayne Hyacinthe is the health director at Grassy Narrows. He cites a familiar laundry list of potential reasons for the high rate of teen moms — low income, lack of employment, higher dropout rates from school.

“With the lack of opportunity comes low self-esteem, which, I would think, translates to them dabbling in more adult-oriented activities, such as sexual activities and addictions,” said Hyacinthe.

He speaks bluntly about some of the issues that plague Grassy Narrows, which has a population of 800.

“Parenting skills are low, as opposed to mainstream society, where they’re

all given values, told that that's wrong, this is right," said Hyacinthe. "Maybe it's the loss of identity and livelihood and just no sense of direction.

"The native culture at one time was self-sufficient, before first contact," he said. "When the monetary system came in, we became a culture of welfare.

"You're waiting for that next handout."

Hyacinthe is a band member, but grew up in the mining town of Red Lake, then came to live on the reserve.

"So I'm maybe not subject to that mindset," Hyacinthe said. "I was told by my dad, 'Get off your ass, go get a job, it's not going to come to you.'

"Those values are instilled, and I'm trying to instil that in my son. But I don't see that going on in other households."

Grassy Narrows has been in the national news before.

Back in the 1960s, it was discovered a paper mill in Dryden had dumped massive amounts of mercury into the river system that served Grassy Narrows.

In 1970, the federal government shut down the local fishing industry, and within a year, according to one report, unemployment on the reserve rose to 95 per cent from 5 per cent.

Alcohol abuse and solvent sniffing, which band members claim were nonexistent before the waters were contaminated, subsequently became serious problems at Grassy Narrows.

The band received a settlement of \$8.6 million in 1986, but the money couldn't make up for 16 years of lost opportunities. Unemployment remains a persistent problem.

Hyacinthe is proud to point out, however, solvent sniffing has been virtually eradicated, thanks to what he calls "the iron fist concept."

"It was tough love, right, but it worked," said Hyacinthe. "There's one solvent user in this community to this day and he's actually getting treatment."

It was the same tough-love approach that was used with drug dealers.

A number of years ago, Hyacinthe said, a group of people confronted a band member who was dealing cocaine and OxyContin on the reserve.

“They went to that house and kicked the crap out of him,” said Hyacinthe. “So he had a choice.

“He left. He didn’t come back to this day. He lives in Winnipeg.

“He’s been told that if you come back, we’ll split your head open,” he added.

Back at Big Trout Lake, Joy is frustrated with being cooped up at the detox centre.

“It’s like jail,” she says, glumly. “You can’t even use the phone.

“There’s lots of people out there who are trying to get us in trouble or try to get us kicked out,” she adds. “I don’t know what I’m going to do when we’re done here.”

The closed nature of the reserve makes it difficult for people like Joy, Janice and Ruby to escape their problems.

Behind the band office, on a hill overlooking the lake, is the community cemetery.

The graves are surrounded by white-picket fences.

Scattered across the cemetery are rows of tiny white rectangles, marking the gravesites of babies, many of them born and dead on the same day.

In the middle of one site is the grave of Joyce Muckuck, born Sept. 21, 1952, died May 9, 2005, at the age of 52.

Muckuck had flown down to Sioux Lookout to have a checkup, had a heart attack there and died.

Surrounding her grave are seven little plots, each with a small wooden enclosure, representing seven of her grandchildren who died as babies.

Why is the cemetery filled with so many babies?

Chief Donny Morris can’t say for sure, but he hints at the underlying problem.

“You take that chance, I guess, when you experiment with drugs,” said Morris. “I don’t think they deliberately lose their child just because they don’t want it.”

The chief and the three women at the detox centre all say the same thing.

Boredom, isolation and the lack of activities, particularly for young people, contribute to the high rates of teen moms and the substance abuse problem.

The isolation also results in other, more practical problems.

Something as simple as eating a healthy diet is a challenge at Big Trout Lake, where it costs almost \$15 for a four-litre jug of milk and \$10 for a five-pound bag of potatoes. Yet a can of Coca-Cola sells for \$1.25.

There is a bowling alley and an arena, which operates with a natural ice surface once the weather is cold enough.

But it's not enough, Joy said, and some of the problems are filtering down to kids who are younger and younger.

"There's absolutely nothing they can do," said Joy. "There's nothing for them to do except hang around and get into trouble and find their own ways to have fun.

"What can you do when there's nothing there for you to do?"