

Thetelegram.com: "Dancing the demons away"

By Adam Randell

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Dancing the demons away

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Sheshatshiu man finds spirituality and strength through self-expression

Vince Fiddler has been living a sober life for 10 years and wants to reach youth with his message of clean living. He uses spiritual dancing to help him grapple with his past addictions, but also to educate.

Born in Waterhen Lake, Sask., he grew up on a Cree reservation and now lives in Sheshatshiu. His parents were alcoholics and he started down his own path of alcohol and substance abuse when he was just 13 years old.

Still, growing up, he developed strong ties to his culture. As a child he would attend powwows and sweat lodges. When he went to school he learned to drum and sing from an elder.

"The dancing came along after, because I had a friend who was a grass and hoop dancer," Fiddler said.

"We were going to a show one time and he asked me to dance because they needed an extra dancer."

Fiddler wasn't too sure about it, but tried to follow his friend's lead.

After the event was over he continued to learn grass dancing from his friend.

The dance involves footwork, hops and turns, with the movements and the sway of the fringes on the clothing representing the sway of the grass.

The headdress can have antennae, like that of a grasshopper.

Materials used in the traditional costume include moose, porcupine and beadwork.

The grass dance and others are used in memorial round dances, which are friendship dances that also represent lost loved ones.

"We have the memorial round dances to help the spirit lift up to heaven," Fiddler said.

“We have a feast, visitors come in, we give these people respect and elders participate.”

There are also powwows and dance competitions.

People can only take part in the powwow if they are alcohol- and drug-free, he explained. As Fiddler moved into his “dark times,” he gave up dancing.

“People were not allowed to touch the outfits when you are under substance abuse,” he said. For the next 13 years he struggled with addictions.

In 2000, at the age of 26, he decided to quit drinking after he met the woman from Sheshatshiu who would become his wife.

“I was drinking at the time, but (my friend) said, ‘I know a woman from Labrador. Would you like to talk with her?’ And she came into my life a year after,” he said.

By then he’d had enough of living with alcohol and drugs, and decided it was time to change. He boarded a plane and headed to Labrador when he was three days’ sober.

Fiddler said although he had quit on his own accord, it wasn’t easy. He left his past behind and moved to another area, and his wife and her family didn’t drink, but he still found sobriety difficult.

He went through 10 weeks of rehab in Ontario, where he learned to deal with his past. “It really taught me about who I am and where I come from,” he said. “They say only five per cent of it is the alcohol. The other 95 is your behaviour.

“I’m still dealing with it today. You have to take it one day at a time.”

As a part of his sobriety, he started attending support groups, sweat lodges and church, and picked up grass dancing again.

He said it’s the spirituality involved that helps keep him on the straight and narrow.

Fiddler has come to terms with his addictions and is comfortable talking about them to others. Growing up in an alcoholic home, he said, drinking alcohol just seemed normal.

“I was so used to seeing that side of the bad that I was drawn into that darkness,” he said.

“Kids are living that same way today and I don’t want it to be that way for them.

“I’ve been there. I know what it’s like to be home by yourself or your mom not there, or no food on the table, or to watch your mother get beat up by your father.”

That’s why Fiddler wants to get his message out and help youth make the right decisions.

In the coming months, he hopes to reach a larger audience, to talk to more youth about his culture, grass dancing and his struggle with addiction.

He said it's important for youth to hear from someone who's made it through hard times.

“(They) don't have to walk that way and (I want) to encourage them to do something with their life, get an education and be who you can be without using alcohol or drugs,” he said.

“I think it's a very important message, because every native reserve has people struggling with the disease.

“I want to tell the youth to stay strong, stay positive, stay in school, don't drink or do drugs, walk in a good way, the way your grandfathers and elders did.

“I know peer pressure is a very hard thing today, but you have got to stay positive.”

Fiddler hopes to one day become an addictions counsellor.