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Tribe Sends Kids Away to Dry Out

□ Faced with an epidemic of gasoline-sniffing, a Labrador town begged authorities to take control of its youth. The Innu say Canada has caused problems by stripping their identity, but critics lament a culture of dependency.

By MAGGIE FARLEY, Times Staff Writer

SHESHATSHIU, Canada--Charles Rich, 11, was sniffing gasoline with his two brothers in their basement during the summer when he dropped the bag of gas near a candle. His gas-soaked clothes exploded into flames. Fumes from his breath ignited, and the fire screamed down his throat to his lungs. He burned to death in front of his brothers.

Brendan Benuen, an Innu in Sheshatshiu, Canada, sniffs gasoline with others. *TED OSTROWSKI / For The Times*

That should have been enough to scare anyone straight. But brothers Carl, 11, and Phillip, 13, still sniff gas. Phillip told CBC Television that he does it because that way he can see Charles again, a comforting angel in a gasoline mirage.

But others in this small native Canadian community on Newfoundland's Labrador barrens see nothing but danger and sickness and death spreading like a plague they can't control. More than half of the town's 636 children say they have sniffed gas, used illegal drugs or contemplated suicide, a recent study found. Nearly a quarter said they have tried to kill themselves. Three in the past year have committed suicide.

The community of Sheshatshiu decided it had no choice. The tribe could not ban gasoline. Many of the parents, struggling with alcohol problems of their own, were unable or unwilling to help their kids. And so on Nov. 15, Innu leaders--who have long lamented that the

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Canadian government took away their land and their culture--begged the provincial government to take away their gasoline-addicted children.

A week later, a dozen kids--the youngest only 8--boarded a blue school bus thinking they were going to a pizza party in nearby Goose Bay. Instead they were taken to an air force barracks to begin their wrenching withdrawal. Now, joined by seven others, they are continuing treatment in foster homes and wilderness camps. No one knows when they'll return.

"It's crisis intervention," says Leila Gillis, the tribe's director of Community Health Services, who led the recent study. "We're looking at it like an epidemic, a contagious disease that has to be stopped." Removing the core sniffers for treatment in effect places them in quarantine so they won't infect others.

But will it work?

"If you take a dying fish out of a polluted river and put it in clean water, it will get better," says Jack Penashue, the director of the newly built Charles J. Andrew Youth Restoration Center here, who says he beat his own gas-sniffing and drinking problems. "But if you put it back in the poisoned water, what happens? It's not just a matter of healing a person, we have to treat whole families. The whole community needs healing."

It's not that they haven't tried. In this town of 1,200, whose name in the Innu language means "mouth of the river," new buildings line the few roads, each one a monument to misery: the youth drug treatment center, an alcohol rehabilitation facility, a hospital, a women's shelter, a group home. But the newest additions are simple white crosses in the cemetery--10 this year, all of them marking alcohol- or drug-related deaths.

Irene Penunsi, 19, is one of two in the group of the hardest-core gas sniffers who are of legal age and not under supervision of the provincial social services. She is living temporarily in a shelter for battered women with her mother.

There's a blizzard outside, with a sharp wind that makes you aware of your bones; it's too cold to go out and sniff gas, though Penunsi and a friend are craving its noxious fumes and sweet escape. Penunsi says the cold usually doesn't stop them.

"Sometimes at night, our parents lock us out. They say, 'You smell like gas' and close the door," she said. "So we go to the woods, build a fire and sniff all night long. We don't feel the cold." Penunsi was hospitalized three weeks ago with frostbitten feet.

If Gas Tank Is Locked, They Just Bore a Hole

She describes the ritual of inhaling gas siphoned from cars, chain saws and snowmobiles; if there's a lock on the gas tank, they just bore a hole. And they take no pains to hide: They sniff right in front of the youth center, at a hot-water tank in the middle of town or in the woods between the new houses of the tribe's chief and the council president.

"You put it in a garbage bag and breathe it in," Penunsi says. "It burns your throat a little, it makes you cough. But pretty soon you hear things, like singing. You see things, as real as a movie. I see my cousin who died. He talks to me. He says he misses me."

Penunsi knows that sniffing gas is extremely damaging: that it kills brain cells with every whiff, that it weakens the heart, that it stays in the system so long that six months after you quit your sweat still smells like gasoline. With her friends all in detox, it's the perfect time to quit. But she chooses to keep sniffing.

"I'm never going to stop," she says.

Life here offers few options. Only 20% of adults have jobs, and the main business is building or working in one of the town's treatment centers. Just 5% of students graduate from high school, and five people in Sheshatshiu have college degrees. Many children can't read or write English, and their parents fret that the kids are even losing the Innu language, its vocabulary inadequate outside the bush.

One mother says her 13-year-old daughter took up sniffing after the other kids were taken away, for the chance to go away to a treatment center. She worries that addiction, not achievement, has become the ticket out of town.

If substance abuse is an epidemic in Sheshatshiu and other native communities in northeastern Canada, it is one that has been germinating for decades. The Innu were a nomadic people, traveling in small groups following herds of caribou. But a cyclical drop in the caribou population in the 1930s made it harder to keep up the traditional way of life. When an air force base was built on their land during World War II, bringing a non-Innu community with it, the hospitals and jobs attracted some Innu to settle down. In the 1950s and '60s, missionaries hungry for converts put them in religious schools and a government eager for a supply of factory laborers gave them houses.

But it turned out to be a bad bargain for the Innu.

Priests confiscated their sacred drums, scorned their gods and abused their kids. Government agents seized their shotguns, dammed their rivers and mined their land for nickel. By taking away the land, which is all the Innu knew, the government stripped away the Innu's identity.

That, the Innu say, was the beginning of their problems. After scores of lawsuits, this year Canada's four major churches compensated and apologized to Newfoundland's natives for long-term sexual and physical abuse. Negotiations with the government over the land and its riches drag on. But the Innu still have trouble reconciling their old ways with their new life.

Francis Penashue is typical of those in that first generation who tried to make the transition to a settled existence.

"In the country, my father was peaceful and strong, an educator and a good father," says Jack Penashue, 33, the youth center director. "In town, he was a mean alcoholic who beat me and my brothers. When you're in the bush, you know exactly who you are and what your duties are. But when he came here, he lost control of his life, his identity. No wonder my dad turned out the way he did."

Francis Penashue passed on his knowledge of the country--but also his drinking problem. Three of his sons--Jack, Peter and Max--told *The Times* that they also have been treated for alcoholism. Francis Penashue's wife, Elizabeth, contributed to a book on Innu women called "It's Just Like the Legend," in which she discussed her own and her family's battle with alcohol.

In this younger generation, it seems, it's mostly the sickness that is passed along, the heritage becoming lost in a miasma of addiction, abuse and neglect. Solutions have been stifled by a culture of noninterference. In the bush, when two parties had a disagreement, one would simply move away. The community still has not come up with a good way to solve its collective problems.

"Innu people don't talk truth to each other," said Jerome Jack, a 38-year-old former tribal council member with the telltale purple-veined nose of a long-term alcoholic. He has been sober since Nov. 7, he says, when he and his 15-year-old, two-six-packs-a-night son made a pact to stop drinking.

"We're not really honest with each other, not even with ourselves," Jack says. "We just let things happen and only act when there's a crisis."

After two alcohol-related suicides in the summer of 1999, the community decided to act. Sheshatshiu banned alcohol with the help of the Mounties, setting up a 24-hour watch and roadblocks to search cars. But many town leaders were smuggling in alcohol themselves, other people challenged the prohibition as a violation of human rights, and the ban lasted only two weeks.

The community hopes that the children can do better.

"I recognize that to keep blaming the past means we won't be able to move forward. We have to take

responsibility ourselves," says Peter Penashue, the president of the Innu Nation. "But to do that, we have to have resources."

Some See an Effort to Extract Guilt Money

Penashue and tribal chief Paul Rich, a cousin of Charles Rich's father, have been effective at bringing national attention to their people's plight. But some say sending the children away was a well-timed maneuver by community leaders to wring money from a guilt-stricken government as the tribal coffers are running low; a recent provincial audit revealed financial irregularities.

The children were taken away at the height of the federal election campaign, turning the Innu's problems into a political issue. On the eve of the Nov. 27 elections, Innu leaders from Davis Inlet, about 160 miles north of here, presented Prime Minister Jean Chretien with a videotape of their kids sniffing and stumbling.

Chretien, a former Indian affairs minister, pledged to help and quickly used the issue to score political points against his leading challenger, free-market candidate Stockwell Day. "We still have some very difficult social problems in the land," he said election night, "and that type of problem will never be resolved by market forces."

Since the day the children were taken away, the provincial government has promised Sheshatshiu a new local detoxification facility, along with a family treatment center to address broader problems behind the symptoms. The federal government also pledged more funding, but even more important, it agreed to include the Innu under the Indian Act. The tribe had refused inclusion under the act in 1949 when Newfoundland became a province, fearing its members would be put on a reservation.

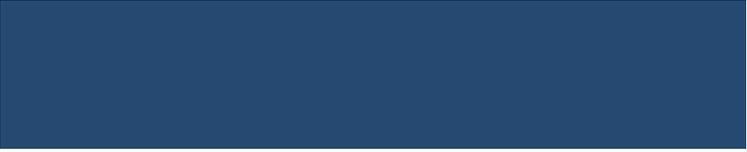
The act will exempt the Innu from taxes, include them in federal programs and give the tribe authority to ban the sniffing of gasoline, which is not a controlled substance in Canada.

Innu Being Killed by Kindness, Critics Say

But critics say Canada is killing the Innu with kindness. Noting that the government last year gave the town \$6.6 million (U.S.), or about \$5,500 per person, the National Post said in an editorial: "A mountain of government money has done nothing but create a culture of dependency and a financial black hole. . . . If the government stops undermining their self-reliance with free money, they will prove tough enough to build a future for themselves."

Said Peter Penashue: "Consider the money as royalties for what the government has taken from our land."

With or without government support, many in the



community still have hope. The most important factor in changing the behavior of youth, health care director Gillis found in her study, is whether parents talk to their kids about substance abuse,