

# HEALING OUR COMMUNITY

## THE KAKE PEACEMAKING CIRCLE

*"What's going on among us is a quiet revolution."*

*-Mike Jackson*

*"We are sparks and together we will start a big fire that will change things for Alaska Natives."*

*-Jada Smith*

Circle peacemaking is a group process used for suicide prevention, interventions for alcoholism and drug abuse, domestic violence, personal and cultural traumas, and restorative justice work.

The circle peacemaking process is simple and can be taught by example. A circle deals on an emotional level, in a safe and supported environment, with a range of individual problems. The circle focuses the caring and compassion of a diverse group of people, to improve health and strengthen community bonds.

Peacemaking circles are built on values of loyalty, love and compassion. Participation is voluntary, and the circle is open to all. Each circle adopts its own ground rules. They generally include respect, confidentiality by request, consensus, honesty, and caring.

### **The Kake Story**

*(based on an interview with Mike A. Jackson of Kake, Alaska)*

Kake's Peacemaking Circle was started in 1998 by the Healing Heart Council, a group of concerned residents who took their name in honor of the Craig Healing Heart Totem. The totem is a symbol of sobriety, of living a drug and alcohol free life, and it is a symbol of healing from all kinds of losses. Kake's Youth Court also uses a peacemaking circle for its restorative justice work with high school age youth.

The Kake Peacemaking Circle meets twice a month. All are welcome to sit in the Circle as either supporters or as those who bring a problem for resolution. The Circle also reaches out into the community, going to people who might benefit from participation.

The first time the Kake Healing Heart Council held a circle, it was at the request of the Alaska Division of Family & Youth Services. A woman in Kake had gone for alcohol treatment thirteen times in an effort to keep her children from state custody. A Circle and follow-up Circles were held and the woman has stayed sober and kept custody of her children. As magistrate for Kake, Mike Jackson has held 80 restorative justice circles and follow-up circles for 60 residents. Each has been a success.

In addition to being the magistrate for Kake, Mike A. Jackson is the president of Keex Kwaan, the Kake IRA Council. He also holds a Masters in Fine Arts from the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. Here Mike tells the story of the changes that have happened in Kake and about the start of the Healing Heart Council and the nature of its work.

*"They go around the circle three times; twice to talk about the problem and share insights; the third time is to develop a consensus plan. Speakers hold either a feather or a talking stick."*

*-Jada Smith*

## A Quiet Revolution

"When I was growing up, we never heard of suicides and we hardly experienced alcohol—it's a pretty contemporary thing that happened. I can attribute it to when the logging camp moved in, in 1964 or 1966—210 people from down south came. About that same time the city owned alcohol store moved in here, too. There weren't many deaths to alcohol prior to that that I knew of. When I went out to school I heard about people passing on, but I didn't know what it was from. When I came back I found out the truth—that it was from suicides. At one time there were 21 people that died in one year from suicides. One hundred percent of it was because of alcohol. I doubt if they would have done that to themselves if they were sober.

"We started talking with our father and grandparents and they said it was a loss of souls and a loss of dreams and a loss of hopes. People were moving away from their culture, their traditions and their ceremonies. To me that was real sad. So we were challenged by our elders: 'The (IRA) tribe is good for social issues,' they said. 'Look at it.' So we activated it in 1982, with the goal to move on with programs to address our social problems.

"The local ANCSA (Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act) tribe donated money to bring people from RuralCap and Susan Soule in the suicide prevention area and she gave us money to start a program. We didn't do too much in regard to hiring people, but pointed it towards doing positive things with the elders. It was an integration that worked. Like they said, the younger generation was falling away from the elders and our customs and doing things we shouldn't do to ourselves—like suicide and drinking.

"It came to a head in 1988 when the Anchorage Daily News wrote a week-long article, *People in Peril*. And this made us look right in the mirror. People who had been affected by it were just shocked. In what we call the 'western way,' you have a right to kill yourself whether through alcohol or just walking off a cliff or taking a gun to your head. No consequences. But as tribal people here in Kake, we all are together in our life. We don't lead somebody up the cliff and let him jump. We don't let anyone handle a gun who is intoxicated, if we're around.

"We brought in consultants. You pay for what you want to hear, but we are left. With that realization we said, 'We have to do this ourselves.' There was a long debate about what was right and what was wrong and what was religion, what was tradition, and the common values of love, respect and forgiveness. That sent us on the road of recovery, healing. We haven't had one suicide in years and years.

"The circle is traditional in families and in tribal dispute resolution. In our traditional circles, the victim was the most important part because they had to know that they didn't do anything wrong to deserve what they experienced. You needed to get past blame to mending broken relationships. Mending those relationships took healing words. Like they say, words can be like clubs or spears. But healing words will come like eagle down and will land on you if you let them come from the heart. If you just sit there and let your heart open up and wait for the eagle down to fall on you—that's forgiveness.

*Eagle down symbolizes peace and reconciliation in Tlingit culture.*

“We started our Kake circle after I heard a presentation in 1998 at a Magistrates Conference on restorative justice among the Canadian Tlingit, bringing back their customary and traditional ways of resolving disputes. That just brought it all back, just like a flood. I couldn’t wait to get back home to tell our group. We formed our Healing Heart Council to address the issues of our young people, to make sure they were protected at all costs, and that we celebrate the good side of Kake.

“The Healing Heart name was influenced by the Healing Heart totem that Stan Marston carved and by the ‘Carved From the Heart’ video that Ellen Frankenstein and Louise Brady of Sitka made. We couldn’t believe it, because we knew them all, all the players in it. But we found out what we were doing was just what they were saying—the healing heart—that’s ourselves.

“To encourage the goodness to come out to help one another in our community, to be a better community but also a better people to ourselves. To stop the suicides, to encourage kids to do good. There are so many contemporary messages out there that say, ‘It’s good to drink beer.’ That’s not our way. We have to stop them, because too many of us have already been lost. Thousands of years wasted here in Kake, and that’s way too many years wasted. So the circle heals, celebrates sobriety, celebrates goodness, and celebrates life.”

- Mike A. Jackson, Kake



Photos courtesy of Merry Stensing



## **Carved from the Heart**

A film by  
Ellen Frankenstein  
and Louise Brady

*An Alaskan, Stan Marston, loses his son to a cocaine overdose. As he grieves, the Tsimshian woodcarver decides to create a totem pole and invites the town of Craig to help. The people brought together in this process tell their stories of loss, intergenerational grief, substance abuse, suicide, and violence. The film connects the process of carving and raising the Healing Heart Totem Pole with these powerful stories and the experience of healing.*

*Carved from the Heart shows the importance of culture and ceremony for surviving tragedy, and how communities can provide support for their people. The companion film, Words From the Heart, features people from around the world talking about the ways Carved from the Heart has encouraged individual healing and action within their own communities.*

*Carved from the Heart and Words from the Heart are available from:*  
**New Day Films**  
**(201) 652-6590**  
**[www.newday.com](http://www.newday.com)**

## Voices from the Circle

The following people belong to the Kake Healing Heart Council and speak about the meaning of the Peacemaking Circle.

*"The circle saved some lives and it works here in Kake, maybe just because people are so generous with their time. With restorative justice the wrong doers are notified that they did something wrong and they are willing to make it right, to mend relationships that are very important in the day to day life in small villages. That's what the circles are about—to make people well, to make sure they can see straight again and make decisions for the generations yet to come."* -Mike Jackson

*"I was a drug abuse/alcohol counselor for SEARHC (Southeast Alaska Regional Health Consortium) and I used to feel responsible for each person. Now it's not just on the shoulders of one person, but on the whole community—where it needs to be. It is too big, too powerful for one person to have credit for—it's the whole community."* -Jada Smith

*"The circle has been a very powerful tool among our people, not just now but for generations. When we come together in a circle you can feel the power instantly. It's not just us sitting here. We represent our families, our fathers, our forefathers, our ancestors. It is such a privilege to work with our people. To love one another, to honor and respect each another enough so that we not only live for today, but our lives go on through our children and our grandchildren. The circle is a 'living treasure' because it takes people who are alive and confident and powerful and concerned enough to come to the circle to make it work. It is hard to step out and do your part and talk from the heart, especially for our young people, to speak from the heart sincere words of compassion, love and concern. I know that it will be used for a long time because even now our children are using it. You can see into the future when you look at our children and it is a hopeful future—there's not one who's*

*going to be defeated. We are not victims any longer. We are survivors. Even gone past survivors. We are now empowered."*

*-Jada Smith*

*"There's a real service the circle has provided. I know that some of the people we have seen and talked to and encouraged and all that, there's been a marked improvement in sobriety. The youth are forming their own circles and doing a great job at it. It's a real asset to this whole community and to the world."* -Stu Ashton

*"I like to see people heal. I want to express just a little bit what the power of love does to people—from concerned people, concerned, so concerned that they want to reach you no matter what. My own story of what happened years ago started out with a person that had an act of love, wanting someone to change really badly. It changed our lives."* -Evans Kadake

*"To me the circle is about compassion. We've been working with it in the justice system, but also we've been using it as an intervention, supporting, uplifting people. We don't just do it when someone's in need. We do it when we know they're doing good, to encourage them, and that seems to be helping. They know that people care for them."* -Justin McDonald

*"The other thing I've see in the circle, the people there in support are also being touched by it. You hear people say they learn about themselves. That's what really made me a strong believer in the circle. We can have from 5 up to 30 people and every person is leaving feeling good, their heart feeling strong, as well as the person we are gathered there for. We heal the community that way, by helping other people. After I started giving my time to the kids, the more I gave the more I started seeing that it was healing and strengthening my spirit, my soul, my heart. I get these results just by giving of myself. And it doesn't take any money. No one has to pay for it."*

*"Other approaches to suicide prevention don't work for Natives. The answer is in the circle where people can see the caring they need and feel a part of the community. The circle is a way to deal with intergenerational grief and learn about the past and move on. We need to quit hiding and blaming. It takes the simplest things ... You don't need a big degree or mountains of money. You need to laugh, to cry, to talk. The more you give, the more you get back."*

*"I've seen the immediate effect the circle has on the people that are there for whatever reason. Everyone leaves here feeling good. Everyday you are going to learn something; everyday you have to give something, too. Keep that balance. You need to have that laughter, need to have that crying, need to have that nurturing, need to have the caring, the giving. All of these things play a big part in the circle." -Paul Aceveda*

*"The goal is a healing community, for the young ones. The challenge is to start sooner, in schools, so kids can see alternatives to resolving problems. The Tlingit way is not punishment; it is nurturing."*

*"We are rebuilding the community. It's like the rivers—flowing peace and accepting each other—enriching a new family. If we're going to get healthier as a people, as a family, as a community, as a nation, then those very institutions that govern us have to take a good look at themselves and see how they can start to complement our efforts and help us return to the place of spirit. And perhaps we can help them. When people in the communities realize they have something very important to give, a very, very precious gift to give, then maybe the institutions will realize how dysfunctional they are. That's going to be a healing for the communities, for the families and for those who are caught up in the system that has failed us horribly since it's been here."*

*"We need to work together. We need to complement each other's efforts and we need to put back the spirit into everything we do. In that way I think that we will have hope. The circle is just a way of sitting and counseling on an equal basis. This is a starting place that will get us back to a healthier place. All are welcome to sit in the circle and gather strength and learn and grow together. We are going to rebuild relationships again. Hopefully, people will realize that they are very, very important and that they've got the answers inside them and maybe they'll start sharing them a little more. I'm grateful for that opportunity to encourage, to help us get back to that place." -Harold Gatensby*

*"The circle, I wish that I had that when I was a teenager, I might have saved myself a lot of grief. I think that since being with the circle, I've seen lives change, so it can't be anything but good as long as the people are coming, have something valuable to share." -Ned Ortiz*



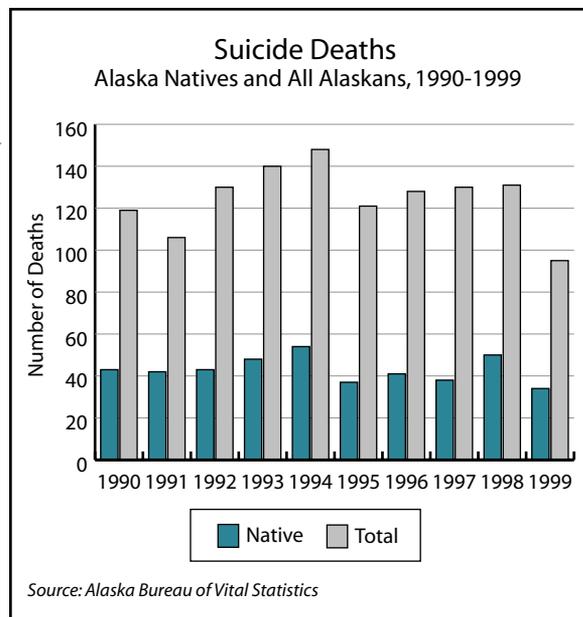
## WHAT NUMBERS CAN TELL US

### Suicide in Alaska

Ninety-five Alaskans died from suicide in 1999. In another 26 cases, the “intent” of death was classified as “undetermined”—in other words, it could not be determined if the death was a suicide, homicide or due to an unintentional injury.

Suicide was the sixth leading cause of death in Alaska. Only five states had higher suicide rates than Alaska in 1999. The rate for the United States was 11 per 100,000 people compared with the rate of 17 per 100,000 in Alaska. Men were three times more likely to commit suicide than women. Guns were used in 58% of the suicide deaths.

(Alaska Bureau of Vital Statistics, 1999 Annual Report, [www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/bvs/statistics/99annualreport.htm](http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dph/bvs/statistics/99annualreport.htm))



Alaska Natives were twice as likely to die from suicide as white Alaskans—that is, the rate of deaths per 100,000 people was twice that of white Alaskans, and nearly four times the overall rate for the United States.

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

Not every community is the same. Only the community can identify a strategy that will work. Peacemaking circles may be a powerful tool to address the physical, psychological, social and spiritual dimensions of a variety of health issues.

**Based on Kake’s experience, the following are some things other communities might want to consider:**

- Communities can learn from each other
- Some solutions involve going back to traditional ways
- Improving community health is a long process that evolves in response to leadership, information available, community readiness and learning what works
- Listening, respect, compassion and trust are healing
- Individual healing heals communities
- A Circle is simple; training is available; you can do it
- Circles don’t take money

## Restorative Justice & Peacemaking Circles

Restorative justice is an approach that holds offenders answerable for their behavior, expecting them to undertake efforts to repair the harm caused to their victims and to contribute to restoration of the public trust.

Restorative justice shares an emphasis on dialogue, negotiation, and problem solving with the Talking Circles of many indigenous peoples. Alaska Natives, American Indians, Canadian First Nation people, and Australian aboriginal people all work within their communities to establish Peacemaking Circles as alternatives to criminal justice and court systems.

Restorative justice sees crime as a break in the relationships between people. The goal of restorative justice is to restore the balance, peace and status of victims, communities, and offenders by asking them three fundamental questions: What is the harm? What needs to be done to fix the harm? Who is responsible for this repair?

The restorative approach promotes offender accountability and victim restoration. Restorative justice enhances public safety. Offenders receive support and supervision and help to change. Victims participate in developing sanctions and defining what it will take to remedy the injury done by the offender.

Restorative justice works as a collaborative effort among state agencies, the community and the victim.

Peacemaking Circles allow a group of people, including the offender, victim, and community members, to respond to a particular crime or incident. They create a place where the members work with accountability, restoration, and healing.

*"A healing-based community justice model starts from the recognition that both offender and victim are part of the same community. Each victim and each offender is also part of a family. What affects the offender and the victim will also affect families, as well as the community as a whole. It is seen as a community responsibility to deal with the offender's actions and the underlying causes of his or her criminal behavior in the community."*

*-Understanding the Role of Healing in Aboriginal Communities, Marcia Krawll, for the Ministry of the Solicitor General of Canada July, 1994*

## TO FIND OUT MORE

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P.O. Box 243  
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Division of Alcoholism and Drug Abuse  
Suicide Prevention Program  
1 (800) 478-7677  
(907) 269-3790  
[www.hss.state.ak.us/dada/suicide.htm](http://www.hss.state.ak.us/dada/suicide.htm)

Alaska Suicide Prevention Council  
Coordinator Merry Carlson  
[merry\\_carlson@health.state.ak.us](mailto:merry_carlson@health.state.ak.us)  
(907) 269-4615

Rural Alaska Community Action Program  
(907) 279-2511  
[jkennedy@ruralcap.com](mailto:jkennedy@ruralcap.com)  
P.O. Box 200908 (731 E. 8th Ave.)  
Anchorage, Alaska 99520  
[www.ruralcap.com](http://www.ruralcap.com)

Peacemakers Training, Nares Mountain  
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[hgatensby@yt.simpatico.ca](mailto:hgatensby@yt.simpatico.ca)  
1 (867) 821-4821

## REFERENCE CHAPTERS IN HEALTHY ALASKANS 2010, VOLUME I

Chapter 4. Substance Abuse  
Chapter 5. Mental Health  
Chapter 6. Education and Community-Based Programs  
Chapter 9. Violence and Abuse Prevention

## About Restorative Justice:

State of Alaska Division of Juvenile Justice  
(907) 465-2212  
[www.hss.state.ak.us/djj](http://www.hss.state.ak.us/djj)

National Institute of Justice  
U.S. Department of Justice  
[www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/rest-just/index.htm](http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/nij/rest-just/index.htm)

Alaska Native Justice Center  
(907) 278-1122  
[www.ciri.com/about\\_ciri/anjc.htm](http://www.ciri.com/about_ciri/anjc.htm)

Center for Restorative Justice and Peacemaking  
University of Minnesota  
(612) 624-4923  
[www.che.umn.edu/rjp](http://www.che.umn.edu/rjp)

Native Law Centre of Canada  
University of Saskatchewan  
(306) 966-6189  
[www.usask.ca/nativelaw/intro.html](http://www.usask.ca/nativelaw/intro.html)

Department of the Solicitor General of Canada  
Restorative Justice: An Evaluation of the  
Restorative Resolutions Project  
[www.sgc.gc.ca/publications/corrections/  
199810b\\_e.asp](http://www.sgc.gc.ca/publications/corrections/199810b_e.asp)