

"FOOD - A BALANCE TO LIFE": A RESPONSE TO THE FOOD AND NUTRITION NEEDS OF NATIVE MEN IN TORONTO

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A balance to life contributes to well-being. Part of this balance is learning to be healthy through good habits in food, sleep, exercise, work, and so on. Knowledge increases awareness resulting in physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. Ancestral societies addressed, in many and varied ways, the concept of the human spirit. In modern society the sacredness of the human spirit and its struggle for survival are our primary concerns. The challenge to bring forward the concept of Native human spirituality into contemporary Native society is the task of our Native people working in the field of human services.

Diet and nutrition are links to the cycle of life and as such are inseparable from the concept of life itself. To live or survive in modern society each of the links in the cycle of life must be given respect and understanding which, in turn, increases our esteem for human vitality and honor for all creation.

(Food - A Balance to Life 1987)

INTRODUCTION

Although the percentage of Native Canadians in major urban centers in Canada remains small compared to the total Native population, Natives nonetheless represent a sizeable urban population. Census data on Native Canadian populations in urban settings have been questioned, however, due to migration flows and difficulties in determining precisely the residence of off-reserve status Indians, non-status Indians and Metis. These difficulties are further compounded by problems in survey methodology.

An example of the confusion that exists regarding demographic data on urban Natives can be seen from conflicting

estimates of the Native population of Toronto. Whereas the 1981 census shows the status and non-status Indian and Metis population to be 4,400,¹ the 1981 Ontario Task Force on Native People in Urban Settings gives a figure of 20,000 (Maidman 1983). In addition, the Native organizations in Toronto estimate the number of Natives in the city to be between 30,000 and 45,000.

The demographic profile of urban Natives is characterized by working age single individuals 25 to 44 years old, having educational levels well below those of the average Canadian, experiencing a high rate of unemployment and consequently a high level of welfare dependency and low average incomes. This population is often likewise further disadvantaged by sub-standard or over-crowded housing due to both lower incomes and discrimination (Shah and Farkas 1985).

Native men are in a particularly disadvantageous position in Toronto, according to a study conducted by Ryerson Polytechnical Institute's School of Urban and Regional Planning in 1982 (Mars 1982). Native men were found to be highly transient, moving in and out of Toronto mostly from necessity. The high cost of living, the lack of inexpensive decent housing and the scarcity of job opportunities were seen to have a negative effect on this population. The study cited the urgent need for residential housing and lifeskill support services for Native men in Toronto. The purpose of this paper is to describe an agency established to provide some of these services.

THE NATIVE MEN'S RESIDENCE (NA-ME-RES)

The Ryerson study cited above was commissioned by the Toronto Branch of the Ontario Native Women's Association. Responding to the challenge presented by the study, a volunteer Board of Directors was established and by 1983 the Native Men's Residence was incorporated.

The Native Men's Residence, NA-ME-RES, opened its doors in 1986. It provides a temporary home, food, and support services for Native men 16 years of age and older. Its programs assist Native men to live an independent lifestyle, to be self-sufficient,

and to re-awaken Native pride, values and cultural identity. The major criteria for admission to NA-ME-RES is that the resident be motivated to help himself, be it through education, upgrading, or working for first and last months' rent. To be eligible a man must be referred from a Native or social service agency. Men can stay at the residence for up to three months, which is renewable. Each man, on being admitted, expresses a sincere desire to attain a positive place in Canadian society.

NA-ME-RES is housed in a renovated four story building in the north-west area of downtown Toronto. A 26 bed home, it has double and single bedrooms, a large lounge, recreation room, kitchen and dining facilities, roof deck, and offices for staff and counsellors. The residents, through assigned chores, are responsible for upkeep of the home.

PROFILE OF NA-ME-RES RESIDENTS

Eight hundred new clients have been in residence in the past two years (this figure does not include men who have repeated their stay). The age range is 16 to 60+ years with an average age range of 26 to 35 years. Sixty percent of the men come from Ontario, with the majority coming from mid-northern Ontario followed by northeastern and southern Ontario, British Columbia, and the eastern provinces. Native men from the United States and Bolivia have also been residents.

Although no statistics have been gathered on the health status of residents to date, the major health problems identified by the staff include: allergies, cardiovascular disease, dental problems, diabetes, epilepsy, eye problems, injury, mental health problems, other medical conditions requiring special diets, skin diseases, substance abuse, and under-nutrition due to poverty and neglect.

Most of the men are in Toronto to look for work, while others are obtaining out-patient medical treatment, going to school or doing educational upgrading. Other reasons for coming to Toronto include "running away" from something, be it a wife, children, the law, problems in home communities or alcohol.

BARRIERS TO UNDERSTANDING THE FOOD SYSTEM IN THE CITY

The food system in a large city differs greatly from that of a small community or reserve. In their home communities men have a place to live and eat, and most likely someone in the house who prepares meals. However, for many Natives growing up meant living with the problem of alcohol; there was more focus on alcohol than on food. Many Native men coming to Toronto are single and must buy food for themselves. For many of these men money is limited and the promise for employment is contingent upon factors such as needed skills, consistent job history, familiarity with the job ethic, and confidence. Their knowledge of purchasing inexpensive but nutritious food, basic cooking skills, food storage, and nutrition are sadly lacking.

In home communities food can be obtained from familiar shops where there is a limited variety of food items, credit may be available, and a relaxed atmosphere prevails. In contrast, obtaining non-restaurant food in Toronto may involve purchasing at large food markets with lower prices but without credit, a great variety of items, and a busy, hustling atmosphere. The latter factors often result in Natives buying food at small corner stores where food may be more expensive. In addition, the lack of low-cost adequate housing in Toronto results in limited and poor food preparation and storage facilities. Consequently many Native men in Toronto eat and run, making use of fast food outlets, "greasy spoon" high-fat meals, and "junk foods."

While information on food selection, costs, preparation and nutrient content abounds in Toronto, this information is not accessible to Native men because of their low academic achievement and literacy level. Furthermore, the material is usually aimed at people with a more affluent lifestyle, which makes the message irrelevant to the men.

The counsellors and staff at NA-ME-RES were sensitive to the fact that the residents were in need of skills to understand the food system in the city and to enable them to achieve a healthy self-sufficient lifestyle. The remainder of this paper will

describe the NA-ME-RES Lifeskills Program, and the role of the "Food - A Balance to Life" program within it.

THE LIFESKILLS PROGRAM

The "Food - A Balance to Life" portion of the Lifeskills Program at NA-ME-RES is only one component of this program. The Lifeskills Program introduces participants to problem solving behaviours for the management of personal affairs, which are applicable to many life situations.

The initial Lifeskills Program at NA-ME-RES was presented on weekday evenings, at which time five areas of life responsibility were presented: self, family, leisure, community and job. An evaluation was done at the end of each session and participants were requested to list other areas that they would like covered for future sessions. Many of the requests were for nutrition and food related issues. Examples of topics the men wanted covered included the effect of salt on blood pressure, the value of vitamins in foods versus supplements, the definition of junk food, the type of foods one should eat if diabetic, how often you should eat, explanation of what constitutes a balanced meal, how to buy and cook for one or two people, and how drugs such as caffeine and alcohol affect the individual. It was realized that there was a need for the development of a program to address these issues. To this end the staff, residents, Board members, advisors and volunteers of NA-ME-RES worked together in the development of the "Food - A Balance to Life Program." Funding for the program was obtained from the Native Community Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture.

The completed program consisted of the "Food - A Balance to Life" handbook, a poster duplicating the handbook's cover suitable for hanging on a refrigerator door, a lesson plan, and a carousel of slides.

A. The Handbook

The spiral bound handbook includes sections on Native traditional concepts of food and balance, meal planning (what,

where, how and when), sample menus, a healthy fast-food restaurant eating guide, basic supplies needed to stock a cupboard and kitchen, shopping tips, a food storage guide, terms used in cooking, cooking measures, and a section on food and drug interaction. Pre-tested recipes are given for one to four servings using both oven and stove top cooking methods. The recipes are presented in sections reflecting the Canada Food Guide's four food groups. A short discussion is given regarding the need for, and recommended amounts of, different nutrients.

The literacy level of the handbook is approximately a grade nine level.

B. The Poster

The cover of the handbook, designed by a Native artist, is duplicated in a poster suitable for hanging on a refrigerator door.

C. The Lesson Plan

A page by page discussion and analysis is made of the "Food - A Balance to Life" handbook. Slides are used to supplement the handbook's message. The slides include illustrations of basic cooking utensils, cooking methods, prepared recipes and sample menus. The program utilizes the human senses: sight, in reading the material and watching the slides; hearing, in interaction between the Lifeskills counsellor and the residents; and taste and smell, in sampling foods and drink.

USING THE PROGRAM

Presentation of the program has resulted in many humorous moments. For example, as the program slides were done by NAME-RES staff, the colours were often not true to the actual food colours, and some of the pictures of the prepared meals were unrecognizable. It was suggested that the residents not judge or pick foods by the colours and shapes shown in these slides! Evaluation of the materials was made by encouraging feedback from the residents regarding which lessons were liked and disliked,

which lessons needed expansion, and by being attentive to words and concepts that proved difficult for the men.

When a resident leaves NA-ME-RES he takes with him a copy of the handbook, a poster, and skill in using them.

It is important to realize, however, that only through practicing new behaviours can there be any lasting change. This realization has led to planning a more action oriented program which will include visiting supermarkets, cooking lessons, recipe preparation, and practicing food habit change.

An example of practicing change in food habits was seen in connection with a lesson given on caffeine. This lesson came about as a result of residents complaining that they could not sleep at night and that they were feeling anxious. It was soon discovered that the men were drinking caffeinated coffee up until they went to bed. As the lesson on caffeine progressed, one of the men came to the realization that he was drinking fifteen cups of coffee containing thirty teaspoons of sugar each day. On hearing of the effects of caffeine and excessive sugar on his system he resolved to cut back his intake. One week later he reported that he was able to cut his coffee and sugar consumption in half. By the time he left NA-ME-RES he was down to five cups of coffee and was using low calorie sweetener in place of sugar. This food behaviour change took about two months.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to note that although food and nutrition is only one component of the Lifeskills program offered at NA-ME-RES, it is a significant part of the Lifeskills training. And although no detailed evaluation has been made to date of the food and nutrition portion of the program and the "Food - A Balance to Life" handbook, the positive comments made by NA-ME-RES residents and former residents indicates that these resources are helping to meet the needs of Native men in Toronto.

NOTES

¹The 1986 census was not sensitive enough to pick up useful statistics. Hence the 1981 census is still the most reliable data regarding urban Native populations.

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