Opasquia Times Editorial

Men’s Support Group

“I’m not telling you it is going to be easy; I’m telling you it’s going to be worth it.” Anonymous

Submitted by Denise Duncan

Know that there is hope for you if you are a man (over the age of 18 years) who needs the support of other men in our community. Be open to share, listen, and guide each other through difficult life experiences. The notion that you must go it alone is left behind through supportive consistent meetings that allow men to talk openly and honestly about their life experiences. If you are feeling disconnected, lost, full of anger, fury and resentment this group may be what can bring back that upward life spiral feeling. Men supporting men.

Zacc Harris has lived a life full of trauma, drugs, in and out of jail, foster homes, as well as experienced his friends dying around him in his adolescent years. In his late twenties, Zacc made the choice to make a better life for himself and mend relationships with his mother and community. He wants others to know that he cares and wishes to share his personal experience to let you know that you are not alone, and change is possible. He has changed his life 180 degrees and now works towards helping others find themselves living a gang free, addiction free and supportive men’s group environment. This is Zacc’s incredible story of restoring his faith in himself and finding a purposeful direction that is full of balance, family and traditional parenting.

As a young boy (11 years old), Zacc was influenced by peer pressure, growing up on a reserve and not having the father figure to guide his personal growth. His mother found it exceedingly difficult to deal with Zacc, as he was one of many children (5 sisters and 2 brothers) and in his words, was bad. Zacc admitted that he was hard to handle and started drinking to alter his mood. His mother could not handle this behavior, so she made the decision to foster Zacc. The trauma continued in foster care and he longed for a sense of belonging. At 16 years, Zacc found the sense of belonging that he was looking for. It was a bad choice as it led to his life as a gangster and eventually sent him to live the life of a prisoner in jail. He succumbed to peer pressure and was led down the path of bad choices. Once involved with the gang, he was forced to do a lot of hurtful things that he would never consider doing otherwise. The gangster life was not a pretty one. Once in the gang Zacc turned to drugs to cope with the lifestyle. His drug of choice was injections of opioids. Opioids are medications that relieve pain. When used improperly they can cause addiction, overdose and death. Zacc was fortunate to be wise to the advice of one of his correctional officers at the Agassiz Youth Correctional Center. One guard spoke to Zacc on being too young to be in and out of jail. He said to him: “Look you are a baby”. Zacc was witness to close friends dying all around him and living on the streets as they could not turn their lives around.

While in jail, Zacc learns the skills to become a leader. He used them when he got out in all the wrong ways. He learned how to manipulate the system and how to read peoples feelings. He used these skills from jail to work against community once released to form his own gang. Zacc leads the gang and continues to live the life of a gangster. Then one day, everything changes. Zacc looks at himself growing up in the system and decides that he wants to do better for himself. He chooses to do the work to change his behavior and faces his demons straight on. At the age of 29, he chooses to leave the gang life behind him. He arranges for a medical detox in order to clear himself of the opioid addictions. He states that he is suicidal and arranges to be hospitalized to come off the drugs. He revisits his past and starts to express himself emotionally to deal with the complex issues that were slowly killing him. He is supported by his wife, Alycia Whitehead, who stands by him during this scary detoxification. Ultimately, Zacc remains resilient and focused completing the detox and accepting further extensive treatment from a northern Healing Center operating out of Nelson House. It is through this decision and asking for help that Zacc completes his journey back to a clean and purposeful life. At the healing center he learns to connect back to true self and life direction through exploration, counselling, and opening to new possibilities. During his two-month treatment, Zacc sees life without drugs as well as is equipped with the tools to help himself. He has a cultural reawakening and finds himself in sweats, Sundance’s, smudging, praying and traditional indigenous practices. In his words, Zacc states: I found myself. I am not a gangster. I am Zacc Harris. I am a traditional father; I am a mechanic. I will do anything for my children. My Family is my primary focus.

He mentions that the hurt and trauma subjected to the indigenous youth in the mid 80’s was more than the average person and believes that he was hurt to the core. He is on the mend and now working towards creating a life that is meaningful for his family. He also wants to give back to those who are suffering. Out of this he has created a Men’s support group that meets once a week each Sunday at 5 p.m. to help other men reach a place where they can move forward, free from addictions and full of self-worth and life appreciation.

The Men’s support group is just one way of Zacc giving back to community. After finding his way with the supports of the Nelson House Healing Center, Zacc proposed A case for support for the Northern Healing Lodge for Body and Spirit for people who live in the Swampy Cree Tribal Council Region of Manitoba. He believes with the right supports that many people who are suffering with addictions and unhealthy life situations can be helped. He approached Frank Turner of the Cree Nation Tribal Health Center to support the idea. Frank states in writing: “I am tired of seeing the rich potential of our young people and our communities simply fade away. We need to start building the Northern Healing Lodge as soon as possible” Peter Constant, Addictions Advisor, National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program states: “When you have an addiction, your spirit is not well. The spirit has to heal to overcome addictions.”. The Healing Center will sharply reduce the number of deaths and hospitalizations caused by drug and alcohol abuse. The center will give people the tools to lift themselves out of despair and build meaningful, contributing lives.

Through recovery, Zacc sees the world with clearer eyes. He has reclaimed his Indigenous identity and is proud of who he has become. He is Zacc Harris, father, provider, husband, mechanic. He is one of the people who has overcome addictions, gang life, and is now giving back to help others who need a hand up.

If you would like further information about the Men’s Support Group or how you can get involved in supporting the Northern Healing Lodge for Body and Spirit initiative, contact Zacc Harris at (431) 355-0359 or Email [Zacc@opased.com](mailto:Zacc@opased.com)

Recovery did not open the gates of heaven and let me in. Recovery opened the gates of hell and let me out.