

EDUCATION *Kinoomaagewin*

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Beausoleil students learn compassion during challenge day

By Sharon Weatherall

BEAUSOLEIL FN -When Rich Dutra-St. John and his team arrive in a community to host their Challenge Days events they expect to see hugs... and lots of them.

The international program provides youth and their communities experimental programs that demonstrate the possibility of love and connection through diversity, truth and full expression.

On Nov. 17 some 40 Beausoleil First Nation citizens participated in the first day of a two-day program that involved interaction with parents, elders and community members.

Day two was for high school-aged aboriginal youth from four area schools, along with some teachers and school staff. All information shared by participants at Challenge Days remains confidential.

The adult session filled the Christian Island community centre with pent-up emotions that were released through tears of fear, sadness and happiness. It was a day of awakening and promises for future improvements involving youth.

"The turnout was great for the adult session; it was amazing to see so many interested community members," said Dutra-St. John, a California motivational speaker who founded the Challenge Day concept in 1987.

"There was a lot of emotion and positive work done. The most

important was the message of safe love and the celebration of the kids - you can really make a kid feel good if you let them know you believe in them."

Dutra-St. John and his wife Yvonne decided to create Challenge Day so their children wouldn't endure the teasing and humiliation they experienced in school, he for being the smallest student in the seventh grade and his wife for being overweight.

"I wanted to kill myself before Junior High School but instead I worked out," he said. "Even though I ended up being accepted into the jock group I still didn't have the courage to speak out against kids that were treating others badly. I graduated with honours and became a teacher because I wanted to make a difference."

Day two of the Beausoleil program drew heightened emotions, tears, personal confessions and apologies from the kids involved.

They learned that hugs and compassion towards others are stepping stones towards healing and not to hold feelings inside where they can damage people physically, emotionally and mentally.

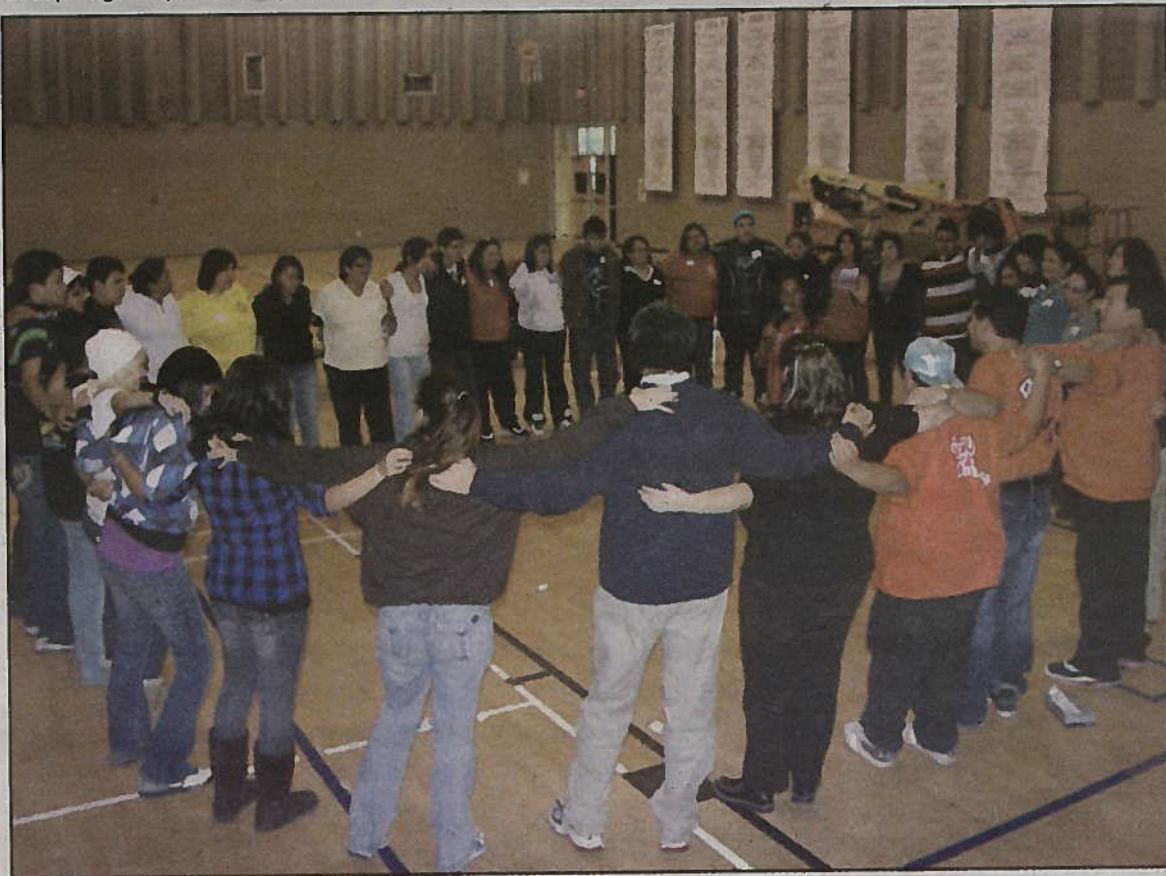
Challenge Day teaches that "being a good listener and feeling what a person is feeling" is the best gift you can give to someone who's hurting - it allows people to connect.

The mission of Challenge Day is to inspire people to be the change they wish to see in the world, starting with themselves, through compassion and service using a formula for change - "notice, choose and act".

"The response this program has brought to our community and the kids is something that is really needed here on Christian Island," observed one young mother. "I just hope what we have learned is not forgotten but continued by the community because that's where it starts."



Group hugs help break down barriers between participants at Challenge Day on Beausoleil First Nation.



Students from four area schools participate in Challenge Day in November at Christian Island Community Centre.



Rich Dutra-St. John