



**Photo by Colin Oswon.**

Rena Joe, Gloria Bigsorrellhorse and Richard Jackson Jr. drum to open the conference on Wednesday, a day dedicated to the topic of crystal meth.

## **Facing addictions head on**

**By Colin Oswin**

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Local community groups and addictions services celebrated the completion of another successful anti-drug conference last week.

The Gathering Of Voices Addictions Conference, held at the Merritt Civic Centre between Nov. 14 and Nov. 16, brought an array of experts to town so the young and old could learn the dangers of drugs and alcohol. Organizer Richard Jackson Jr. said that the conference was designed to prevent Merritt youth from becoming addicts.

"We need to let people in the community know the consequences of taking drugs and alcohol." Jackson said.

The conference featured keynote speakers in the mornings, followed by smaller seminars during the afternoon. Topics in the afternoon sessions ranged from HIV and AIDS to the impact of crystal meth. One

session, held by former addicts who described how drug addiction affected their lives, had a powerful effect on the young attendees. Many were visibly upset as they left the room. Marilyn Tolmie, one of the session leaders, said that while their message can be harsh, it does help keep kids from becoming addicts.

"If we can save one person from going down the road that we went, what a reward that is." Tolmie said.

During the session, the speakers described how they turned from recreational users into addicts and where their addictions took them. Tolmie's husband Dan, also a former addict, explained how his drug use destroyed his liver. Tolmie said that her husband's liver failure means that his past drug use will kill him soon.

"Drug addiction is not funny," she said. "It hurts and it affects people in more ways than you can ever imagine."

Phabion Sutherland, a Grade 12 Merritt Secondary student, said that even though he doesn't use drugs, he wanted to attend the conference anyway.

"I figured it might be interesting," Sutherland said. "So far it has been."

For Sutherland, the most effective seminar was on the effects of crystal meth. During the session, the speaker, Lee Mason, an addictions recovery specialist, showed the audience photos of crystal meth users taken over a period of years. The photos demonstrated how meth use leads to rapid premature aging.

"They were gross, I had to leave because of that," Sutherland said. "I had to come outside to stop myself from getting sick."

Mason said that he doesn't try to gross out kids in his talks, but he does give them all the information he can and some of it can be unpleasant.

"What about the alcohol, how does it work? What about the drugs, what's in the drugs?" Mason said. "This is the kind of stuff they need to know that they're not getting. I talk about everything they need to know more about, the real truth"

With young people right now, Mason said that alcohol and marijuana rank as the most urgent drug-related problems.

“Definitely, without a doubt they’re the major problems, and then crystal meth is following close on their heels,” Mason said.

Danger signs to look out for include withdrawing from friends or family, neglecting jobs or schoolwork and an unusual focus on drugs or alcohol. A combination of these behaviours may indicate that one’s drug use is spiraling out of control.

Drug abuse is often a symptom of a deeper problem. Mason says that addicts can’t get better without first dealing with their underlying trauma.

“People have to deal with the issues they have,” Mason said. “Whether it’s losses that they’ve experienced that they haven’t grieved for properly, whether it’s abuses, neglect, things like that.”

Mason recognizes that some people can use drugs and alcohol without becoming addicts, but these people should be aware of the way they use these substances.

“There are people who have a social drink, there are people who have a social toke; I don’t have a problem with that,” Mason said. “It’s when it becomes something that controls their life or destroys their way of life, then it’s a problem.”