

Dealing with suicides in north

YELLOWKNIFE (CP) — In Fort Resolution, a community of 450 people on the southern shore of Great Slave Lake, six young men have killed themselves in the past three years.

The suicide victims, aged 17 to 24, were all unemployed and had a history of either alcohol or drug abuse.

Among the victims were two of Paul Boucher's oldest and closest friends.

"It's pretty scary. It's like part of my childhood has been wiped away," says Boucher, who is an alcohol and drug counsellor at the local community centre.

The suicides left Boucher feeling somehow responsible.

"At first I wondered, should I just kill myself too?" he recalls. "But I knew that I shouldn't think that way and that maybe through my work or my example I could help someone else avoid this."

Last week, Boucher engaged in a series of meetings with local Indian elders as well as school, health and RCMP officials to try to come up with a community strategy to deal with the problem.

A recent national task force report showed that on a per-capita basis northerners kill themselves at a dramatically higher rate than people in southern Canada.

According to the report, the suicide rate is 35.1 per 100,000 people in the Yukon and 25.5 per 100,000 in the Northwest Territories. The national rate is 12.9 per 100,000.

The differences reflect the fact that two high risk groups — native people and those who abuse alcohol — are heavily represented in the North, where support systems are scarce.

Bruce Stewart, a social worker with the psychiatric unit at Stanton Hospital in Yellowknife, believes the changing life-style of natives contributes to the high suicide rates.

"What if you are a seal hunter and you can no longer hunt seal?" Stewart asks. "What do you do? Watch TV until four in the morning, drink, do odd jobs when you can."

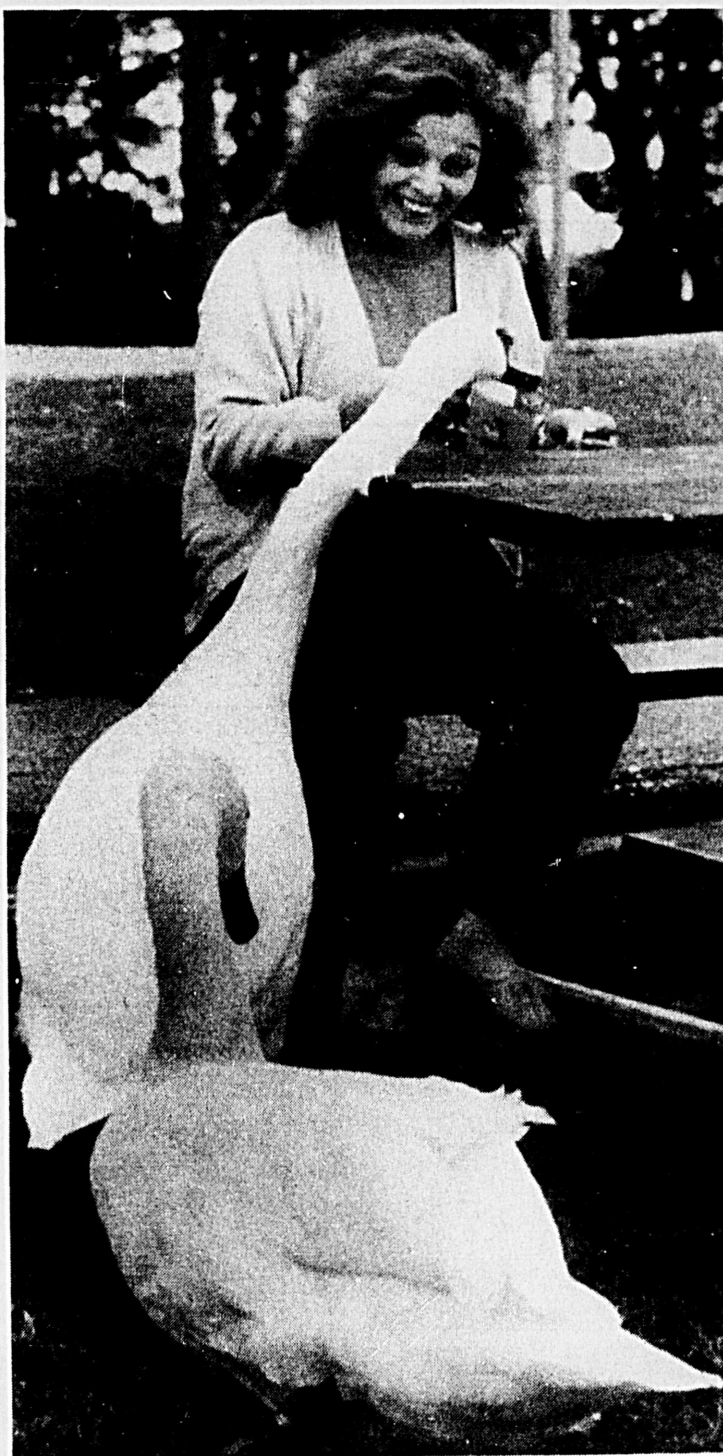
Stewart says this kind of "cultural dislocation" is strongest among the Inuit of the Eastern Arctic, who have been moving into the communities in large numbers only in the last three decades.

Of the 16 who committed suicide in the Northwest Territories last year, 10 were Inuit, one was a Dene Indian and five were non-natives. Half the victims were between the ages of 15 and 24. All but two were males.

Stanton Hospital's four-member psychiatric unit travels through the territory, but it cannot visit most communities more than once a year.

In the remote settlement of Fort McPherson, 1,000 km northwest of Yellowknife, residents shocked by a pair of suicides in the fall of 1982 formed a concerned citizens committee. It conducts workshops for families of victims and provides counsellors for those who may be thinking about killing themselves.

In Fort Resolution, meanwhile, Chief Robert Sayne says the key to combating suicide is to control the flow of alcohol.



Scrounging swans

Dawn Chowan of Waterloo, Ont., is surprised and amused by a swan stretching up to share her doughnut. The bird had only limited interest in her coffee.

AWOL bird outsmarted

by Canadian Press

Trudy Bakewell has her parrot back, thanks to a keen-eyed nine-year-old, a daring mother and crackers.

D.o.g. (pronounced Dough-gee), a red-tailed African grey parrot worth \$1,200, flew the coop from Bakewell's Edmonton home during the weekend.

Tommy Fletcher caught sight of the bird from a window of his family's home a few kilometres from the Bakewell house while eating breakfast Wednesday.

"I saw him fly by, so I went out

side, hopped on my bike and went looking for him," Tommy said. "I saw him on the awning, so I went running home to get some crackers."

While Tommy fed the bird a cracker, his mother, Mona, sneaked behind the bird and threw a cover over it. The Fletchers then took D.o.g. home and got in touch with Bakewell.

"I got a big kiss from him (D.o.g.) right away," Bakewell said.

D.o.g. has a vocabulary of 120 words but has been speechless since his recapture, she said.

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564-TIPS

Fun for rats could lead to pleasure for humans

EDMONTON (CP) — The white plastic cabinet looks like a small refrigerator, but it houses a kind of pleasure palace for rats.

Dr. Andrew Greenshaw, a University of Alberta scientist, uses the rats and the cabinet to investigate the effects of antidepressant drugs.

When a rat is placed in a Plexiglas box inside the cabinet, a wire is hooked to its scalp. By pressing a lever, the rat can apply electrical stimulation to the pleasure centre of its brain.

"When they've learned to press the lever, they get excited before they go in the box because they know that it's available," Greenshaw, 32, said in an interview. "They'll keep pressing as long as the stimulation is available, for hours and hours."

However, testing is normally limited to one-hour periods, he said.

"If it's set so it's quite rewarding, you can put your hand into the box and gently lift their tail or back leg and they'll ignore you and just keep pressing the lever, presumably because they like the brain stimulation so much," said the behavioral pharmacologist — a specialist in studying the effect of drugs on the brain and behavior.

However, Greenshaw's aim is not simply to make rats feel good — he wants to find out more about how antidepressant drugs work. He also hopes to find out more about how the brain functions and how human moods are controlled.

"Treatment of depression is a major problem," he said. Depression, which affects up to 10 per cent of the population, can be alleviated in many cases through the use of drugs, said Greenshaw, a soft-spoken man who was born in England, but came to Edmonton after working in Wales, Czechoslovakia and at the University of Saskatchewan.

An obvious obstacle — the inability to communicate with rats — dictates the research method of using pleasure to find out about depression. Greenshaw has no way of knowing if his rats are depressed.

"Asking an animal how it feels is wellnigh impossible." Greenshaw said it is possible to observe behavior change in primates like rhesus monkeys who, when separated from other monkeys, become withdrawn. But such studies are expensive and antidepressant drugs do not alleviate such symptoms in the rhesus.

Greenshaw approaches the problem from the opposite direction: he gives his rats a pleasurable experience and measures their attempts to re-create it. After he knows their normal response, he gives the animals doses of antidepressants and compares their response.

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