

WEEKEND

ROLLING ON THE RHINE

Bike and barge adventure **D8**



'MISFITS AND ODDBALLS'
Unlikely war heroes **D4**

SASKATOON STARPHOENIX SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2016

SECTION D



Jason Isbister says when he moved to La Ronge from Vancouver to be with his biological family, it was a "culture shock" and drinking was a way to bond with his family. **KAYLE NEIS**

'IT'S GOT TO STOP'

'Pervasive' alcohol problem in La Ronge drives band to seek funding for treatment centre, writes **Andrea Hill**.



Jackie Ballantyne, a worker at the Scattered Site Outreach Centre, describes La Ronge as a "frontier-type drinking town." **LIAM RICHARDS**

La Ronge has a drinking problem.

It's so severe that the local fire department has a nickname for an alarmingly common booze-related mishap. "Kraft Dinner gone bad" is the phrase used to describe houses that burn when drunk people put pots of noodles or hotdogs on the stove and then pass out.

Meanwhile, the La Ronge liquor store racks up sales four times the provincial average, dispensing \$1,870 worth of booze for every La Ronge and area resident aged 15 and over last fiscal year. The provincial average during that time was \$516.

Why all the drinking? To people like Jason Isbister, it seems that's all there is to do.

The Lac La Ronge Indian Band member grew up in Vancouver with an adoptive family, but packed his bags and left the big city when he was 14 years old to return to northern Saskatchewan to be with his biological family.

The move was "a culture shock," he recalls now, at the age of 38.

Everyone in La Ronge drank, so Isbister did, too.

"It's all everybody ever did, it's all anybody does here, so for me it was a way to bond with my family."

Isbister drank so much that he couldn't hold down a job and ended up living on the streets.

"It was too hard, I just gave up and just drank all the time," he said.

These days, he doesn't drink as much — he just got sick of it one day — but he remains unemployed and a regular at La Ronge's Scattered Site Outreach Centre. He doesn't see many of his friends anymore because he knows they would encourage him to start drinking again.

Stories like Isbister's are not uncommon in La Ronge. The town — and the neighbouring Village of Air Ronge and Lac La Ronge Indian Band — have a long history of alcoholism and addiction.

"I'd probably use the term pervasive," La Ronge town councillor Erin Carter said when asked to describe drinking in the community. "It is everywhere and it covers all socioeconomic areas."

La Ronge has no theatres, leisure centres or youth centres, but the community of nearly 3,000 people situated roughly 400 kilometres north of Saska-

toon boasts five bars, a liquor store and a couple of off-sales within five minutes of each other along the downtown stretch of La Ronge Avenue. People who live in the town say they're busy — especially on days when welfare and family allowance cheques come out.

"This is a frontier-type drinking town," said Jackie Ballantyne, who works at the Scattered Site outreach centre. "This place here has a history of addictions and it's becoming progressively worse. People's ability to just say 'no' has deteriorated."



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Many buying booze are residents of La Ronge, but others are from out of town, having travelled into the large northern centre to shop, go to the hospital, attend court or access any of the other amenities that aren't available in smaller, more northern centres. Some come from surrounding dry reserves such as Stanley Mission and Sucker River specifically for liquor.

According to an alcohol management plan completed by community leaders this summer, constant drunken partying causes damage to houses on the Lac La Ronge Indian Band reserve and prevents new housing starts. The band's education department says students are attending school under the influence of alcohol and that drinking is leading to skipped classes and suicide attempts.

SEE DRINKING ON **D3**



Kaylee Waite who has worked at all five bars in La Ronge says they are busiest when welfare and family allowance cheques come out in the community of 3,000. PHOTOS: KAYLE NEIS

CALLS TO LIMIT ALCOHOL

DRINKING FROM D1

“It seems like it’s taken all our young people away in death and in not being interested in work at all,” Lac La Ronge Indian Band elder Miles Charles said of alcohol use in the community. “It’s got to stop some place, it’s got to — too much of our people committing suicide, children are committing suicide, people getting hurt real bad and stuff like that. I’m just hoping that the young people realize what they’re doing to themselves.”

The La Ronge and area community alcohol management plan was completed this year in an effort to

be changes to the days when the liquor store is open. Whether and how those and other suggestions come to pass is still being explored, but everyone agrees buy-in from the whole community will be needed for whatever initiatives are undertaken.

Jeanne Langhorne, an outreach worker at Scattered Site, said she was surprised some of her clients support moves that would make it harder for them to get their fix.

“But they do because they’re concerned for their kids, their grandkids and their great-grandkids,” she said.

In addition to making booze less accessible, people also said more needs to be done to help alcoholics who want to quit. There are no long-term addiction treatment centres in the community and families aren’t always supportive.

Staff at Scattered Site remember a young man who came to the centre one winter morning about five years ago. He had spent the frigid night in a culvert, wrapped in cardboard to keep warm. His family had kicked him out because he didn’t want to drink anymore.

There’s a short-term detox centre at the La Ronge health centre, but Langhorne said that’s not enough to help people break their addictions. Today, many people who come to Scattered Site for help are advised to go south to use facilities in Prince Albert or Saskatoon.

“The northern people, they go south and they get totally lost because they’re so out of their element,” Langhorne said. “There’s nothing from home there. You’re not going to feel comfortable and you’re not going to get better. It needs to be in the north.”

The Lac La Ronge Indian Band hopes to be “the catalyst for change,” says Chief Tammy Cook-Searson. The band has plans for a \$17-million in- and outpatient treatment centre that would incorporate traditional medicines and cultural practices, such as getting people back out on the land.

“We need to do something different because we know a lot of people that get into trouble with the justice system or even end up in the hospital, a high majority of it related to alcohol or drug use,” Cook-Searson said.

She has already met with federal and provincial government representatives about the plan and hopes to secure funding for it and start construction as soon as possible.

“As soon as we build it, I know it will make a difference for people,” she said.

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Tammy Cook-Searson

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better understand La Ronge’s struggles with alcohol and to explore possible means to address the problems.

Many in the community applauded the work and say understanding the problem is the first step toward fixing it and ensuring people in La Ronge lead safer, healthier lives.

Nearly everyone surveyed in the study — more than 99 per cent — said there are alcohol problems in the community. All said they are getting worse or staying the same; none said they were decreasing.

More than half of those approached said they support efforts to limit alcohol availability in the community — 72 per cent said public events involving families should be banned from serving alcohol; 71 per cent said there should be limits to how much alcohol people can buy; 60 per cent said there should



Top: The Scattered Site Outreach Centre’s main entrance. Many who come for help with their addictions are advised to go south for treatment. Above: Kathy’s Korner bar on the main strip in downtown La Ronge.



A truck full of beer kegs at one of five bars in the small town.



Erin Carter



Miles Charles