

At the "Wogixete Wi" traditional pow wow hosted by members of #StoptheStigma and the Ho Chunk Nation, Sen. Vinehout learns about their efforts to remove the stigma of drug addiction and give people a place to seek help in a loving and nurturing environment.

ALMA, WI - "I lost my granddaughter to heroin addiction," Anita told me. "We've lost so many people," Tena added.

Recently, former Marine Tena Quackenbush and her friends, including Quincy Garvin, Jasime Funmaker, Lori Pettibone, Cindy Ward hosted a gathering to promote and encourage recovery from addiction, especially the scourge of heroin addiction.

Ms. Quackenbush started #StoptheStigma, an organization with a mission to stop the stigma of addiction. She was joined by members of "Natives Against Heroin" in hosting the event.

"Wogixete Wi" was a traditional pow wow. Translated from Ho-Chunk, wogixete wi means "Loving Us." Reaching out with love to those in recovery and to those still suffering from addiction was the theme of the pow wow.

I was honored to be one of the speakers at the gathering.

“You are making a difference,” I told the pow wow attendees. “Building a culture that heals. Putting aside our differences and working to bring love and healing to all who suffer.”

Traditional drummers joined us, including the Red Bone drummers from Minneapolis. The Andrew Blackhawk Legion Post #129 assisted in organizing the event. Ho-Chunk members of all ages danced in brightly colored costumes adorned with intricate beadwork.

Eighty-one year-old Clyde Bellecourt mesmerized the group with his stories. The famous Native American civil rights organizer co-founded the American Indian Movement (AIM). Mr. Bellecourt is a White Earth Ojibwa. He shared how a group of a few motivated people can change the world.

“AIM was started with fewer people than you have here,” Mr. Bellecourt told us. “And mostly women and children.”

At the potluck dinner following the pow wow, I was seated with some of the elder women. They shared with me many sad stories about the scourge of heroin addiction.

Celeste told me, “My grandson OD’d in my home. I didn’t even know he was there.” She found all types of drug paraphernalia hidden in her house. The boy just turned 25 and is now in jail.

Tena showed me a photo of the dresser in the room where a woman recently succumbed to addiction. On it were two bottles of Naloxone, more commonly known as Narcan, which blocks the effects of narcotics. Even with this prescription antidote, the woman died of an overdose of heroin laced with a deadly elephant tranquilizer.

“This is murder,” tribal elder Anita told me. “Johnny just buried his daughter yesterday.” Johnny was sitting right behind me. As I gave him a big hug, he thanked me for coming to the pow wow. “We don’t want her to die in vain,” Anita continued. “This is all so senseless…we are fighting. We need something done immediately.”

The discussion continued with important questions asked but not answered. Why the moms and dads didn't pay attention to their young ones? Why the police showed up too late to an area where a "heroin party" took place? Why are the young girls willing to "sell" themselves to the dealers who got them hooked? Why aren't the tribal police watching the "party houses"? Why aren't the abandon "party houses" boarded up?

"We have to close down the houses," Anita said. "They talked of policies and procedures, but people are dying."

Closing up the abandon houses as soon as possible is something Tena's group #StoptheStigma is working hard to accomplish. They boarded up some abandon buildings. There are policies and procedures to work though, but the group has been successful. Tena even received permission to open up one of the buildings as a house of sobriety and recovery.

Getting people into treatment is a challenge. "It shouldn't take three weeks for an assessment and six months for treatment," Tena told me. People need "a safe place to go. They are in immediate crisis and they need intervention."

For all of us, as Tena says, "Our goal should be saving lives."

Tena and her friends started the group because they and their mentees/sponsees in recovery suffered hateful posts on Facebook. They realized the stigma of addiction not only added to the difficulties of recovery but also made it harder for someone suffering from addiction to BEGIN the long recovery journey.

Changing the culture takes longer. The Wogixete Wi Pow Wow was a beginning. Each one of us can continue "loving us" and act to help #StoptheStigma.