

Vail Daily

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Aspens contend with insects

Another kind of critter joins the notorious pine beetle as a threat to the Vail Valley's trees. **A4**



Health seekers turn to American Indian tradition

Sweat lodges help modern users who suffer from cancer, multiple sclerosis and addictions to alcohol, practitioners say. **B1**



SPORTS

The Roy

Rookie receives
mark with the



Sweating to Heal

An American Indian tradition cleanses Vail Valley patients



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Steve Jourdain smokes a pipe before a sweat-lodge sweat in Eagle on Thursday. Jourdain, of the Ojibway tribe, has been leading sweats with his wife, Iris, for almost 25 years.

By Sarah Mausolf

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EAGLE — At dusk, the cleansing process is under way at the Two Thunderbirds Ranch in Eagle. About a dozen women sitting in a circle pass around a peace pipe. Wisps of sweet-smelling smoke drift over their bodies.

Steve and Iris Jourdain have traveled from the Lac La Croix reserve in Canada to lead the ceremony. They pass around bowls of blueberries and salmon as invitations for the bear and eagle — two powerful symbols of healing in their culture.

As a fire crackles nearby, the group files into what looks like a

patory mood settles over the sweat lodge as Robert Wagner, the service coordinator for the Next Step Institute of Integrative Medicine in East Vail, begins fishing rocks from the fire and transferring them into a pit inside the sweat lodge. Glowing orange like molten lava in the dark, the rocks emit sparks as a woman brushes them with sweet grass.

The door to the sweat lodge flaps shut, and now it is pitch black. Steve splashes the rocks with water from a bucket, sending thick waves of steam over the group.

Blind, the participants chant and shake rattles they have carried inside the lodge. Next, people



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The inside of the sweat lodge. Hot rocks are placed in the center pit of the lodge, and the door is shut, creating a hot, pitch-black environment.

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Sweat lodges provide cleansing, 'emotive therapy'

SWEAT LODGE
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take turns saying prayers while holding an eagle feather. Over the course of this great unburdening, the participants talk about loss, health troubles, family and exciting developments in their lives. The exact details are between the participants and their creator — what happens inside a sweat lodge can never be shared with outsiders.

Spiritual therapy

Once banned in the United States and Canada, American Indian sweats have been gaining momentum in recent years.

For the past two years, The Next Step Institute in East Vail has been offering sweats as part of its integrative medicine program. The program combines clinical medical care (Dr. Gary Weiss, trained at the Mayo Clinic) with therapies like Chinese medicine, American Indian healing and counseling.

Draped with a towel inside the Two Thunderbirds Ranch after the sweat ceremony, Cathleen Brooks Weiss, institute executive director, said sweats help patients release toxins.

"It is spiritual in nature, and so our belief at Next Step is that it's as powerful as any other kind of medicine," she said. "If I'm going to prescribe chemotherapy for a patient, I might also prescribe meeting with Iris and Steve and doing emotive therapy."

In keeping with American Indian tradition, the institute holds a sweat whenever a patient asks for one, which is usually once every two weeks. Sweats have proved a powerful healing tool for patients with life-threatening illnesses like cancer or multiple sclerosis or addictions to alcohol. The sweats have enabled patients to release emotional baggage.

"We have patients who really put their emotions out there because it's dark and it's safe,"

Brooks Weiss said.

In fact, the Jourdain are recovering alcoholics who found salvation through the sweat lodge. They brought the tradition back to the Lac La Croix reservation in hopes of saving a culture under assault.

'A floodgate opened'

The Lac La Croix reservation stands on 75 square miles of virgin forest in Ontario. With a village of just 400, the community offers a picturesque view for tourists who pass through.

Yet the Ojibway people have been plagued by alcoholism, sexual abuse and the lasting effects of a government attack on their culture.

"I don't know when alcohol first came to our people," Steve Jourdain said. "I was born into that."

Whatever its origins, alcohol tore through the community like a wrecking ball. The Jourdain started drinking as teenagers and soon found themselves tangled up in the addiction. For Steve Jourdain, 65, the pain he was trying to drown in substance abuse ran deep. At age 6, he was among the many children in the village who were seized by priests and taken to live in schools outside the reservation. He describes the capture as a government program gone wrong. Steve Jourdain said Canadian officials had entrusted the churches with integrating American Indian and mainstream cultures, but the effort amounted to teaching Ojibway children to be ashamed of their way of life.

"They expected us to fall in love with this new culture," he said. "They destroyed who we were."

By the time Steve Jourdain returned to the reservation as an adult, "we had imploded on each other," he said. A little girl admitted that she had been sexually abused by her grandfather, setting off a chain of similar



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People wait before entering the sweat lodge at dusk. Archaeologists believe the practice dates back 10,000 years.

confessions. A drunken 16-year-old boy fell off a boat and drowned. In fact, most of the deaths in the village were direct results of alcohol abuse.

The Jourdain were, perhaps, heading for a similar fate when they discovered sweating. A man invited them to his sweat lodge in the Blackfeet Indian Reservation in Montana. For Iris Jourdain, 63, the sweat was a spiritually profound turning point.

"It's almost like a floodgate opened up, and I started to sob," she said. "I felt and heard the flap of wings in the distance, and then I felt the eagle. I think he was cleansing me of the alcoholism that was coursing through my veins."

For Steve Jourdain, the sweat was less dramatic. But it was just as profound because it marked his introduction to a belief system based on love.

"This sweat lodge — it became

a place where I could maintain my sobriety and a place to heal from the things that I had done to other human beings," he said.

Steve Jourdain received his own sweat lodge from the man in Montana and brought it back to the reservation, where he served as chief from 1971 to 1991. As chief, Steve Jourdain led his people in the battle against alcoholism. A formal ban on alcohol in the reservation went into effect in 1977, but the problems persisted.

For a long time, the Jourdain used the sweat lodge by themselves because their people harbored fear about the practice. Theirs was the first sweat lodge in the community in at least 100 years. Sweating slowly caught on in their community, but eventually fears surrounding Iris Jourdain's social work there resulted in the couple being ostracized.

The Jourdain spent time in Florida, where they introduced their sweat lodge to the Palm Bay branch of Next Step. Today, the Jourdain travel to Vail once every two months to conduct sweats. They also taught Gary Weiss how to conduct the ceremonies, so he can hold them for patients.

The Jourdain accept no payment for their work. For the pair, the rewards are purely spiritual.

"I've had people give me credit for healing them," Steve Jourdain said. "I feel uncomfortable with that. I don't have that kind of power to heal anyone, but anyone that comes into the sweat has the ability to heal themselves. The healing takes place between the person and the creator."

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