

**MARK BROWNE &
ALANNA JORDE**
Third Quarter, Second Prize

We need healing; Two ex-employees charge child abuse, cover-ups and corruption rampant on Esquimalt Reserve

SEPTEMBER 18, 1996

A dozen children have been sexually molested and more may be victimized if the Esquimalt Nation government doesn't admit there is a problem, say two former employees of the band.

In an exclusive interview with the News, the two women made chilling allegations about sexual abuse, cover ups, and corruption on the Esquimalt Indian Reserve.

The women, who asked not to be named and who we will refer to as "Karen" and "Cathy" told the News that so far 12 youngsters between the ages of nine and 15, have disclosed they've been sexually abused by members of the Esquimalt Nation.

Colwood RCMP, who are responsible for policing the band, confirmed Monday that they are investigating charges of sexual assault.

"We can definitely confirm that we

are investigating allegations of sexual assault," Sgt. Bruce Brown said, while pointing out that no charges have been laid and no other details can be released at this time.

"I'm just crushed because four of my children have been abused by (a member of) our community," says "Karen," adding that "we have nothing to hide ... this all has to come out so my people can begin healing."

She and "Cathy" claim that one of the elders whom they described as a "powerhouse" in the Esquimalt Nation has been notorious for sexually abusing children on the reserve.

"He's done it to all his children, his nephews, his nieces — everybody, and they all just have to keep their mouths shut," says "Cathy."

The two women allege that some members of the native community are deliberately trying to keep the sexual abuse a secret.

"They'll do anything they can to keep it shut up," "Karen" points out.

She claims that the wife of the elder who has allegedly committed sexual abuse has told the victims to "keep quiet" and "to learn to forgive."

"Cathy" echoes "Karen," adding that some bizarre tactics are being used to intimidate the victims into remaining silent.

"They scare a lot of the younger chil-

dren with black magic," she claims. The two former Esquimalt Nation employees say that Esquimalt Nation councillors don't want reports of sexual abuse to go public because they may jeopardize a proposal to develop a multi-million dollar marina and hotel on the reserve.

"Right now, the only things on (the Esquimalt tribal council's minds) is that marina and money, "Cathy" says.

The two women claim that the investors for the marina development have told the band's council members that they will "pull out of the project if any of the sexual abuse allegations do get released to the public."

They also claim that some high ranking community members have been misusing Esquimalt Nation funds.

"Cathy" showed the News a document that indicated that band manager John Briggs was forgiven by the three-member council as well as several members of the band for stealing money from the band.

She also claims that about \$140,000 set aside for education has gone missing from the band's bank account.

"The last four band managers that have been in there have just cleaned house," she alleges.

"Cathy" points out that Esquimalt Nation Chief Andy Thomas tried to fire the council a few weeks ago in an effort to begin repairing some of the band's problems.

But the dismissed council members subsequently hired a lawyer and were reinstated by a judge.

The two women also charge that they were "wrongfully dismissed" from their jobs with the band even though Thomas refused to sign their dismissal papers.

"Cathy," who was employed as a social development worker, claims that she was fired for being "too much by the book" and she intends to launch a "wrongful dismissal" suit against the band.

She alleges, for instance, that she was criticized by council member George Thomas when she followed through with orders from Indian Affairs to cut off his social assistance when his pension was kicked in.

Band officials have had very little to say when pressed about the allegations.

The band's chief, Andy Thomas, refused to comment other than to say "things are pretty sensitive around here right now."

Councillor George Thomas would neither confirm nor deny the charges and Briggs said he knew nothing about any corruption or cover ups. ■



Alanna Jorde

Esquimalt News, Third Quarter

After Alanna and reporter Mark Browne wrote a lengthy piece on abuse, crime and corruption at the Esquimalt First Nations, she expected something would happen. But nothing did. So Alanna wrote her occasional personal column on the topic. She had three objectives in mind: to make readers feel the emotion of the story, to give hope to the abuse victims that help would come, and to remove some of the desensitization about abuse. Alanna writes her column only when a topic moves her in some way. She tries for a writing style that resembles a conversation with anybody off the street, and hopes it cuts through the forced distance between reader and writer. Alanna began her career four years ago at a paper now owned by Cariboo Press. She moved to the News Group just over two years ago.

COMMENTARY -- WINNER

To be touched by an angel

OCTOBER 9, 1996

The Esquimalt Nation must come up with some kind of strategy to help itself before the community as a whole can heal — in other words, butt out and let the community solve its own problems.

This argument seemed so wise, so reasonable, so logical when presented to me by Peggy Mahoney, the executive director of the Child Abuse Prevention and Counselling Society of Greater Victoria.

And so very different than the message my gut was sending me after hearing two discouraged and demoralized ex-Esquimalt Nation employees paint a graphic picture of child abuse, corruption, and coverups at the Esquimalt Nation.

I confess, following a front page News story detailing the women's chilling allegations, I expected some agency, some government department, somebody would spring into action to help the poor, defenseless victims.

I figured somebody or someone would play guardian angel to the Esquimalt Nation people and do the exact thing Mahoney said shouldn't be done — descend upon the Esquimalt Nation people and, in one fell swoop, solve all of the problems plaguing the community.

I wanted to believe the community could and would be transformed into a happy, content, warm and fuzzy utopia

in less time than it took Elizabeth Montgomery to wiggle her nose in that '70s TV program 'Bewitched'.

I didn't really care what this mythical guardian angel did as long as she, he, or it did something, and quickly, even if it meant taking the children away from the only families, homes, and culture they've ever known.

I just wanted a quick fix.

Ironically, in my zeal to see wrongs made right at Esquimalt Nation, I found myself willing to condone the very behavior that I find deplorable. I'm sure many of those who came up with the bright idea to pluck native children from their homes and transplant them in residential schools probably thought it was for the childrens' good too.

According to Mahoney, mainstream society's traditional method of dealing with abuse among native communities by taking charge and forcing change doesn't work.

She says it's better to sit back and wait until native communities seek help.

Until Mahoney so succinctly spelled it out, it never occurred to me that perhaps the Esquimalt Nation community neither wants nor needs outside intervention to solve its problems.

Still, as reasonable, rational, and logi-

cal as Mahoney's argument sounded, I found the more I considered it in the wake of charges of abuse, corruption and coverups at Esquimalt Nation, the angrier and increasingly frustrated I got.

I concluded that maybe it's too much to expect a community of people who've been wronged generation after generation to suddenly possess the capacity to do the right thing — especially when the problem is as complex and sensitive as sexual abuse.

By going public with their accusations at least two members of the Esquimalt Nation community made a loud cry for help.

What more do we need to happen before we begin offering that help? More children to be victimized?

We are, after all, talking about the physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being of children. If ever there was a time for somebody or someone to take charge, it's now.

My only hope is that when the so-called guardian angel descends from Heaven to extend a helping hand, the Esquimalt Nation people will be able to recognize her, him, or it.

After the years of mistreatment, oppression, persecution native communities have had to endure at the hands of the white establishment, I wouldn't blame the Esquimalt Nation if they were more apt to see my so-called angel as the devil incarnate. ■

ALANNA JORDE
Third Quarter, Second Prize

Bike cop for a day

AUGUST 7, 1996

A buzz of excitement breaks the calm at the Esquimalt Police Department. A suspected drug dealer — found with \$2,500 cash, some cocaine, and a beeper — has been arrested. His partner — a 25-year-old clean shaven white male with curly blonde hair — has eluded custody.

Cst. Rob Dibden, who is quietly typing away on a computer, springs into action. He throws on his helmet and hastily hops onto his colorful BRC police mountain bike.

In a flash, he's off.

The mercury hovers around 30 degrees Celsius; Esquimalt Road is teeming with motorists returning home from work. But Cst. Dibden is oblivious to this as he weaves gracefully through traffic in hot pursuit of the "runner."

His cadence quickens and he accelerates through the intersection of Esquimalt and Admirals roads, undaunted by a red light. The bold white letters 'Police' on the back of his Sugoi bike shirt glisten in the late-afternoon sun, growing smaller and smaller until they eventually disappear.

Just one event on a typical day in the lives of Esquimalt Police Department's

(EPD) two bike cops — Rob Dibden and Tom Woods.

Don't be fooled. This job is not all guts and glamour — chasing down "runners" and booking drug dealers.

It's hard work.

I discover this shortly after my shift with the EPD bike squad begins.

Heading up an embankment at Saxe Point Park on a mountain bike that Cst. Dibden has loaned me for the day, I suddenly stop dead in my tracks and stumble off the bike. Directly behind me, Cst. Woods finds himself in a similar plight.

"Not again," says Cst. Dibden, looking down at the two of us trapped under our bikes.

Noticing my perplexed look, Cst. Woods confesses with a grin: "I always wipe out there."

We continue on our way, stopping every now and then so the EPD bike squad can chat with Esquimalt citizens and check out various nooks and crannies around the community.

"I guess you could say we're just really, really nosy," says Cst. Wood as he peers through some trees to examine an obscure area of the beach.

Then it's off to Fleming Beach where we say hello to a group of youngsters taking a swim before touring around Buxton Green and Macaulay Point Park.

When we approach Fort Macaulay, Cst. Woods points out an area that is a popular hang out for local teens, noting that a few weeks back he and Cst. Dib-

den interrupted some unsuspecting partyers.

I try to soak up everything they say but it's difficult to listen. I'm too preoccupied negotiating rocks and curves along the trail, and trying to prevent myself from doing a face plant in the dirt.

So, at lunch, I ask Cst. Dibden to fill me in on the duties and responsibilities of the EPD bike squad.

"Our number one mandate is public relations and making contact with people. It's a lot easier to be proactive on bikes. In patrol cars that's a difficult thing to do ... and there's not much incentive because your main responsibility is to investigate cases," explains the 35-year-old, 15-year veteran of the Esquimalt force.

Positive interaction with people is important because it establishes trust, he notes, adding; "so many people don't like cops and they pass those attitudes on to their kids. If we can get to them while they're young, we can change that."

"We also assist the detective unit when required and we cover patrol shifts when need be," he continues.

"The only thing we can't do is transport prisoners ... and high speed pursuits are kind of difficult," offers Cst. Woods, 33, and a seven-year member of the force.

Enroute to the West Bay Walkway,

Cst. Dibden informs me that police officers are the only people who can legally cycle the walkway.

Unfortunately, he adds, most people are unaware of this clause and he and his partner are forever taking flak from irate pedestrians.

On one occasion, Cst. Dibden recalls, he was stopped by an indignant woman who demanded to know why he was cycling on the walkway. "Then she asked me why she never sees the police patrolling the walkway."

But today, anyway, no one complains.

Instead, most people we meet are friendly. They smile, nod approving hellos and seem genuinely happy to see two of Esquimalt's police officers in action.

We meet up with Cst. Woods who is buying Koolaid from some young Esquimalt entrepreneurs. They are excited about their sale and speak freely with us.

"We've made \$2 already," they proclaim proudly.

A short while later, attempting to make my way down a steep hill at Carin Park, I wonder, for a brief instance, whether this little trip is really a sick scheme to get even for every nasty editorial, unflattering photo, and negative article every published about the local police. Safely down the path, we respond to a complaint about loud music.

We find the origin of the offensive noise following a quick search of an

Admirals Road apartment building.

"Turn the music down and we won't come back," Cst. Woods tells a nervous-looking group of teenagers assembled at the front door of the apartment.

Back at the station, the EPD bike squad briefs me on the tedious task of filling out police reports.

When I ask for a glass of water, Cst. Woods shows me to the police officer's lounge. "Note the temperature change," he says with a hint of sarcasm when he opens the door to the air-conditioned second floor of the police station, "Hot, now cold."

We prepare to set out again but our departure is delayed. Flat tire.

"No problem, I can fix this," says Cst. Dibden.

It turns out both he and his partner are old pros at this sort of thing.

Bicycle repair and maintenance was a big part of a police mountain bike course that the duo completed before becoming EPD's bike squad.

"We spend a lot of our time doing this," says Cst. Dibden, adding that the routine of riding around 24 hours a week takes its toll on the bikes.

On the road again, we come across a set of licence plates that are registered to the wrong vehicle.

"I was just going to have them transferred," the owner of the car says when confronted.

"If you take care of this immediately, we won't ding you with the fine," warns

Cst. Woods.

At our next stop, Kinsmen Gorge Park, Cst. Woods shows me an area under Tillicum Road Bridge where troublesome youth like to gather.

"Youth in this area are a big problem right now," he notes, adding that the teenagers in question are a very disrespectful bunch who enjoy vandalizing the park.

Later, at the park's swimming hole, a group of inquisitive children flock to us:

"Are you policemen? Can I try on our sunglasses? Can I see your guns? Do you have a set of handcuffs? What are you doing here?" they ask.

Once through grilling the constables, they turn their attention to me. "Do you want to be a policeman when you grow up?"

Hot, sweaty, and a little fatigued, we decide to escape the merciless heat for a spell and break for a cold beverage.

"It seems really quiet today," I note, "is it always like this?"

Cst. Dibden nods. "On days like today. The heat tends to make people docile."

Sipping our soft drinks, we are interrupted by the EPD dispatcher. An angry welfare recipient is harassing a social worker at Esquimalt Social Services Ministry.

"We'll be back to finish these," Cst. Dibden tells our server when we bolt out the door.

Maneuvering through rush hour traffic, I am struck by how polite and cour-

teous motorists are. No one honks or hollers.

Ahead of me, Cst. Dibden bravely races through a red light at Lampson Street and Esquimalt Road. I opt to error on the side of caution and stop. Clearly, there is no room in this profession for the faint of heart.

Once at the ministry office, we find that another Esquimalt police officer is already at the scene.

So constables Dibden and Woods busy themselves ticketing motorists who are parked illegally in front of the building.

"We don't usually do this. Not usually, but sometimes," Cst. Dibden explains.

We spend the rest of the afternoon meandering through the streets of Esquimalt.

On our second trip down the West Bay Walkway, we pass by the koolaid saleskids we'd met earlier in the day. They cheerfully report that business is booming — "We've made \$19."

Then it's back to the station and those dreaded reports till the dispatcher alerts us that the "runner" has escaped the clutches of police.

We make a search but Cst. Woods has his doubts we'll find the perpetrator.

"Sometimes you'll just be about to give up and he'll appear in front of your eyes.

"You always know when you've spotted the guy you're looking for because — you can smell the fear."

We find nothing and return to the station.

While we were chasing down the "runner," his partner in crime has been arrested.

I sneak a peak at him on a surveillance monitor in the dispatcher's room and find he is surprisingly sedate, lying peacefully on a cot in the holding cell.

Cst. Dibden returns to his report and Cst. Woods assists with paperwork from the most recent arrest, taking a break every now and again to admire his penmanship.

His shift nearly over, Cst. Woods offers his take on what it's like to be a cop in Esquimalt.

"People are a little schizophrenic when it comes to us. Being police and firemen, they can never decide whether to hate us or love us."

I mull over his words for a moment and think: With officers like you and Cst. Dibden patrolling Esquimalt's streets, it's just a matter of time before attitudes and perceptions like these change.

The EPD bike squad shift over, I feel a little sunburned, battered, and bruised but oddly content, grateful for having shared in the experience of being a bike cop for a day. ■