**Troubles persist despite fresh start for former Davis Inlet community**

[Joe O'Connor](http://news.nationalpost.com/author/joe-oconnor) | September 20, 2012 8:30 PM ET  
[More from Joe O'Connor](http://news.nationalpost.com/author/oconnorwrites) | [@oconnorwrites](http://twitter.com/oconnorwrites)

**Natuashish: Former Davis Inlet community's troubles persist despite new start**

Twenty years ago Canadians were jolted by video images from Davis Inlet of a group of Innu youth clustered in a grove of fir trees, plastic bags in hand, sniffing gasoline. The kids were stoned, dirty, delirious, and they looked older than their years, while the water-access-only community they called home in Newfoundland and Labrador revealed a tapestry of social breakdown.

Gas sniffing among youth, alcoholism and drug abuse among parents, teen suicide, accidental death, physical abuse, family dysfunction, dissolution and dislocation. Davis Inlet was a mess and in 2002 the federal government relocated the community to Natuashish, on the mainland nearby. It was a planned development, a fresh start, but escaping the narrative of the past is proving difficult.

Brian Gavriloff/Postmedia News filesA youth peers through the window of a treatment centre in Davis Inlet before its relocation.

Gas sniffing persisted among teenagers, despite the move, and has persisted despite the passage of time. In recent weeks community members and officers at the local RCMP detachment have seen a disturbing new strain of the same old problem.

“We’ve picked up kids down here as young as age six or seven years old,” RCMP Sgt. Faron Harnum says. “Before it was older teens and young adults, which is still unacceptable — but a little easier to take than little kids.

“You find these kids pretty much anywhere in the community. Sometimes they are tucked away in the trees, other times they are hidden behind buildings and other times they are out behind schools during school hours or even walking down the middle of the street.’’

Police arrested a 21-year-old man last week. He was driving a stolen truck while sniffing gas. Before that it was three youths of varying ages stumbling through the community, sniffing gas with rifles in their hands.

“They are out of their minds on this stuff. They are hallucinating and they are unpredictable,” says Sgt. Harnum. “One took a bag of gas and threw it over another individual and he swallowed some of it and had to be taken to the clinic.

“It is something that we have been taking seriously for a long time — as are other agencies in the community.”

Gregory Rich remembers the first time he sniffed gas. He was alone in the basement of his family home in Davis Inlet. His parents were alcoholics, unavailable for heart-to-heart talks with a 12-year-old boy who felt lost and unloved, except by his friends — other Innu kids with similar backgrounds making similar decisions in their own basements.

“I remember being in my basement with a bag of gas and feeling euphoric that first time I sniffed. I felt high. I felt invincible,” Mr. Rich says. “I sniffed for maybe two years. The last time I sniffed gas was in 1982.”

He went from sniffing gas to drinking and taking drugs, a run of addiction that crippled him for years before the 43-year-old Mushuau Innu First Nation band councillor got sober in 2006.

“Gas sniffing has been an ongoing problem here,” the former addict says. “It’s been here all along. It’s not new, but there are some new faces on the list that are sniffing and that’s what is so disturbing.”

Mr. Rich says the root problem underlying the gas sniffing is a colossal breakdown in communication between parents and children. Davis Inlet left deep scars on the older generation, scars that people won’t talk about and that don’t go away. These past traumas, says Mr. Rich, trickle down to the new generation.

Brian Gavriloff/Postmedia News filesA ramshackle house in Davis Inlet. Little has improved for the community despite its relocation.

The councillor argues that the treatment for gas sniffing, as it exists today — which involves shipping troubled kids out to addiction treatment centres in other provinces — is inadequate.

“The solution should be to heal as a family,” he says. “To send not just the kids away to the treatment programs but the parents, too, so they can talk about things and heal together. I think that’s what is lacking in our community.”

Mr. Rich has a 16-year-old daughter, Mary Jane. She is a solid student with ambitions of becoming a nurse. Mary Jane Rich tried sniffing gas, an experience she didn’t enjoy and one she spoke to her father about afterwards.

“I try to communicate with my daughter, to give her the things I didn’t get as a child,” Mr. Rich says. “I hug her every morning, tell her I love her and how proud I am of her. My wife and I, we never had that as children.“Our parents were too sick from the drink.”