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High praise for Haisla youth

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Over eight years as educator with Chee Mamuk - an aboriginal program of the BC Centre of Disease Control - Melanie Rivers has been involved in a lot of projects.

But none have been as successful as the recent DVD production with Haisla Youth.

Rivers said Chee Mamuk offers "culturally appropriate education" on HIV, AIDS and sexually transmitted infections.

It works all over the province with all ages from youth to Elders, focusing in a holistic approach, "building on the strength of the culture and the strength of the community."

Rivers explained Chee Mamuk had been planning to do more workshops with youth on sexual health and was just getting involved with the Star in Your Own Stories project. The Haisla were asked if they would like to host one such project and the response was an enthusiastic yes.

So Chee Mamuk hired production Good Company Communications and came up Kitamaat.

After an "icebreaker" fun night which included 40 Haisla dancers and drummers, pizza and "a bit of education around HIV and sexually transmitted disease," Rivers said the project - production of the DVD - got under way in earnest.

The two-day workshop with 13 Haisla youth began with Good Company talking to them about creating key messages and isolating what the youth saw as their key messages.

That created the story lines for the DVD in terms of the youth coming up with their own solutions to the problems identified.

Rivers said the storyline the youth chose was Rumours - how they spread and how they hurt. "They did a whole acting scene around that."

The campaign slogan they came up with was Stand True: standing for the truth against the rumours and standing true in themselves." The second element of the slogan was Block a Lie and finally Spread the Good Stuff.

Those campaign ideas have also been put on mugs, notebooks and key chain holders, items selected by the youth themselves.

As for the DVD itself, Rivers said not everyone was interested in acting. "Some were more interested in working with the cameras and one young woman wanted to be the director."

So, with their roles figured out and the "script" decided upon, they started shooting the DVD.

While Good Company handled the editing to produce the 5-minute Stand True DVD, Rivers emphasized it was the creation of the youth themselves.

She believed the use of cameras helped draw the youth into the project plus there was a strong sense of teamwork and ownership.

Evaluations filled out by the youth at the end of the project were positive and they also outlined what they had gained from it.

"A lot of them commented how it was great learning could be fun," Rivers added.

And from her point of view, there was no doubt this was "the most successful workshop ever."

Rivers also noted five of the participants will be speaking at the Healing our Spirit conference scheduled for the end of this month about the project and the resulting DVD.