



Larry Howett emerged from prison nearly 20 years ago to find an unrecognizable world. Now, he offers his insight to support other ex-inmates coping with the stress of adjusting to freedom.



AT ISSUE

Life on the Outside

For newly released inmates, the free world can be a confounding and isolating place. A new UBC study is attempting to change that by connecting them with peers who've managed to find their way.

BY Amy O'Brian

ON THE DAY Larry Howett got out of prison, he was faced with something he had never seen before: an automated ticket dispenser at a SkyTrain station. As he quietly watched a couple push some buttons and buy their tickets, a pair of young men tried to pick a fight with him over a cigarette.

"I said to them, 'I've done more time than you've been alive. Don't make me go back in for smacking you.'" Instead of unleashing his fists, Howett walked away. The choice was a new one for him.

If he'd still been in prison—where he spent 31 years, 10 months and 28 days—he would have hit someone, he says. But upon walking out the doors, he decided to leave the jailhouse attitude behind and tackle obstacles with a cool head.

Howett tells his story while standing among tidy rows of lettuce and chard in a greenhouse in Mission. Around him, men work the soil, carry tools with purpose, tend to the plants. "That guy was in for murder," he says as someone walks by. "Your attitudes, beliefs and values →

are all things you need to change. They get warped in prison.”

Howett stayed the course and has made a good life for himself in the 18 years since his release. Having spent nearly half his life in jail for drug-related offences and armed robbery, he now works as a mentor with long-time inmates transitioning to life outside. Howett meets them for coffee or lunch, joins them for meetings, and occasionally explores new activities with them, such as beekeeping at the Mission farm. He’s not there to judge or reprimand them if they make a mistake. He’s there to encourage them when they struggle, to offer hope.

His work is part of a research project based at the Collaborating Centre for Prison Health and Education (CCPHE), located within UBC’s School of Population and Public Health. The John Howard Society is a partner in the project, which aims to figure out how to support men as they transition from prison back into the community, and to determine whether peer mentorship is beneficial to their health. Evaluation of the men’s progress involves monthly follow-ups, surveys and discussion of their health goals. Results are set to be released this month, and the study’s

project of its kind in Canada. Preliminary findings of a similar study involving women indicate that those with mentors have fewer criminal charges in the first three months after their release compared to those with no mentor. Other research cited by the CCPHE shows high mortality rates following release from prison, particularly during the first few weeks of transition. Alienation, stigma, anxiety and depression are common.

Many of the men in the mentorship study have been in prison for decades. They come out not knowing how to use a touch screen or cellphone. Motion-sensor toilets and taps in public washrooms confuse them, Martin says. Filing taxes, getting a driver’s license and finding a doctor can be utterly overwhelming.

Some will commit crimes hoping to be sent back to prison, where they can find comfort in the familiar, adds Howett. “A lot of guys try to go back because it’s what they know. Nothing frustrates me more.”

But with the help of a mentor—someone who has been out of prison for at least two years and doesn’t use drugs or alcohol—the transition can be less daunting.

The mentoring project hosts regular forums on topics such as smart

“Your attitudes, beliefs and values are all things you need to change. They get warped in prison.”

LARRY HOWETT

lead researcher, Dr. Ruth Elwood Martin, says one thing was clear from the beginning of the three-year project.

“When they come out [of prison], they are isolated, lonely. They want to connect with men who are doing well. They want to be inspired,” she says.

While it may seem obvious that support and community are key to a healthy life, this is the first research

phones, apps, naloxone kits and cooking. A workshop on juicing was a particularly big hit with the men.

“The men really, really want to be healthy,” Martin says. “If you’ve got a healthy mentor, it’s kind of like having a coach, or a big brother or sister.”

They want to see a bit of themselves in someone who’s made it, she adds.

“It all boils down to hope.” *TM*

LOCAL CULTURE



HEAR

Paul Weller

The tireless 59-year-old “Modfather” is a living rock ‘n’ roll legend in his native U.K., having logged more than 100 Top 40 entries as a solo artist and with his previous era-defining bands, the Jam and the Style Council. This year’s politically charged album, *A Kind Revolution*, brings him back to Vancouver for a two-night stand. *Commodore Ballroom, October 16 and 17*

LAUGH

Nick Offerman



Best known for his role as *Parks and Recreation’s* misanthropic libertarian, Ron Swanson, Offerman has a career in comedy dating back to 1990s Chicago, where he first made the acquaintance of a then equally unknown Amy Poehler. His *Full Bush* stand-up tour (fear not—the name is a reference to his beard) should be characteristically blunt, profane and hilarious. *The Orpheum, October 5*



READ

Fighting for Space

The solution of Downtown Eastside activists to their community’s drug epidemic—treat addiction like a mental-health issue, not a crime—was once considered radical but is now being adopted worldwide. Long-time *Georgia Straight* staffer Travis Lupick traces the movement’s history and examines what it might help achieve at a time when fentanyl- and opioid-overdose deaths are sweeping the continent. *Available October 1*