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.

@ Amy O’Brien

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

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

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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 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.

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