

Arts & LIFE

Recognizing Maplehurst's long-time volunteers

By Julie Slack
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

From making him feel better about reintegrating into society to keeping him in touch with the "free world," volunteers have made all the difference.

Maplehurst Correctional Complex (MCC) inmate Ronne participates in almost every program offered inside the facility. Those programs are facilitated by some 200 volunteers from the community.

This is National Volunteer Week, a Canada-wide event that celebrates the importance of volunteers in helping communities grow strong and resilient.

MCC's volunteers will be recognized at a dinner next week, organized by the correctional complex's volunteer services organizer Charlene Ellison. Among those being honoured are 40-year volunteers Roy (last name withheld) and Yolanda McCann.

The Milton residents said volunteering at Maplehurst has been extremely rewarding.

Ronne, who's being incarcerated until July for a driving disqualification sentence, noted the programs "give you so much outside benefit. In here, you're surrounded by inmates and these programs give you the knowledge and peace of not coming back here — not reoffending."

He said when he is released July 20, he knows that he's done with jail — for good.

Ronne is recognized for his exemplary status and is part of the community gang — four inmates who go out into the community to help Halton Region with tasks such as cutting grass in parks, stacking wood, picking up garbage and snow shovelling.

He says the programs provide him with reinforcement that he'll succeed once he gets his release. "For getting myself back into the community, they can vouch for the fact that I'm a registered volunteer once I return home to my family in Kitchener."

Among the programs offered at MCC are:



Maplehurst Correctional Complex volunteers Yolanda McCann and Roy, who have served at the Milton jail for 40 years, are flanked by Superintendent Mark Parisotto and volunteer services organizer Charlene Ellison. Julie Slack / Canadian Champion

anti-criminal thinking, anger management, Alcoholics Anonymous, worship centre programs, ADAPT program, seven-step program and life skills.

MCC superintendent Mark Parisotto said the volunteers are a key part of the facility's rehabilitation process.

"If it wasn't for the volunteers coming to the institution, the programs wouldn't be possible," he said. "Without you, they wouldn't be coming up with new programs that keep popping up. It's a little something (the inmates) will take out of here with them."

McCann, 87, said she'll keep volunteering as long as she can walk and talk.

"I got started because I met some of the inmates who would come in for treatment at my old job," she said. "I just thought it must have been so sad for them coming from another province or another city and being dropped in here. 'What if my son was away like that?'" she thought.

She wondered about whether she could do some volunteer work at Maplehurst.

A week later, a little slip of paper in hand, she'd been signed up to volunteer.

"It's been a blessing to my life and still is," said the outgoing, good-natured Miltonian. "God-willing that He gives me the power to walk and talk...I'll keep coming back."

She laughed when she explained that some of the inmates specifically request speaking with her.

"Why do these guys want to talk to an old lady like me?" the petite elderly woman joked. "I love them; they don't mind telling you about where they've been and the pain they feel. There's something special about volunteering here."

Roy, 85, reiterated her thoughts, adding that he's run into people he has helped in the past and is always pleased to see them get their lives turned around.

"It's rewarding to see someone who you've

helped or who you think you've helped," he said. "Sometimes you see the same ones again six months later (on the inside) and you think, 'Oh boy, there they are again.' But don't think they aren't upset with that. They feel like they've disappointed me."

Roy said he never regretted coming in and he braved all kinds of weather to make it to 'work.' "It was snowing like the blazes one night and I remember a guard asking me what I was doing there," he said. "I just said, 'Maybe someone wants to see me tonight.'"

Both Roy and McCann agreed that at the end of the day, if they've made even a small difference in one individual's life or in a group of individuals that it makes all the difference once they're back in the community.

"They're exceptional role models for the inmates," said Ellison. "When you give them a compliment or if they get returned, they're kind of ashamed, disappointed for the volunteers to see them again."

Of late, McCann has been providing one-on-one counselling to an individual inmate who enjoys her company and can relax and tell her what's going on in his life.

"The way I look at it is, I can't change the world, but I can make that hour a little more pleasant for them to live that day," McCann said. "My hope has always been to plant a seed. You can't change a life, you can't change the world overnight, but maybe there's something you can leave them with."

"Maybe one person will pick up that seed you left and if there's enough watering, one day your seed's a plant, a rose maybe."

McCann said that one person she's been visiting with has low self-esteem, so she told him that she admires him and that he has courage to share his story.

"That made him feel good; we all need that — not just the inmates."

To learn about volunteering activities at Maplehurst, contact Ellison at (905) 878-8141, ext. 2319 or Charlene.Lavigne@ontario.ca.

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