

She counsels natives in

Ferne King provides support, advice

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Every Wednesday, a small, dark-haired woman carrying a stack of newspapers passes through two steel doors and three security gates at the Brantford jail to sit in a small brick room with some men she may never have met before.

The woman is Ferne King, a counsellor with the Pine Tree Native Centre, and the paper is the Tekawennake News, the Six Nations community newspaper.

Ms. King, 39, runs a weekly program for native inmates in the Brantford jail.

She offers advice, support, and local gossip for the men who participate.

Led from cells

She's had from one to 13 men participate at one time.

Since the inmates only stay in the jail until they're sentenced and sent to another institution, she never knows how many men will be there, or who they'll be.

In a recent session, six men between the ages of 18 and 30 filed one by one into the cramped brick room, as they were led from their cells by the guards.

Only one had joined the group before.

When asked what he thought of the program, the response was a gruff "it's all right."

But the questions which followed showed just how valuable the program can be.

"How much do you know about the rules and regulations around here?" asked one man, a native from Hamilton charged with break and enter.

He wanted to have Sweetgrass in the jail, but wasn't sure whether he would be allowed.

"(The guards) understand the significance of Sweetgrass to us now," said Ms. King.

"We can arrange that." Sweetgrass is used in traditional native ceremonies and prayer.

He also asked if Ms. King could bring in books about native spirituality, or other aspects of native culture.

There was discussion of how to establish a "brotherhood," a native spiritual group that would be eligible for funding from the Ontario Ministry of Correctional Services.

Then the conversation turned to events in Oka, Que. where Mohawks are in an armed standoff

with Quebec provincial police and the Canadian army.

"If they take that barricade down we may as well all just give up. We've all had it," said a Six Nations man charged with assault.

This is what makes the program so important.

The men can talk about native spirituality, problems they encounter in a non-native institution — anything they feel more comfortable discussing with other native people.

Two visits a week

They are allowed two visits a week, but most say this is extremely difficult.

"Sometimes I wish (my girlfriend) didn't come at all. You don't got nothing to say.

She asks what I did today, and all I can say is, 'the same thing as yesterday, the same thing as always. What do you think?'" said the Hamilton man.

Since the Brantford jail is only seen as a temporary holding spot, there aren't many programs organized for the inmates.

There are a few education classes, some counselling programs and there will be a computer education program in the fall, but that's about it.

jail and gossip

For the men who end up in the jail for more than a year, waiting to stand trial and get sentenced, the time is almost unbearable.

"The worst thing about being in here is the boredom, man. It's the boredom.

"All you can do is sleep and eat and read," said a Six Nations man charged with attempted theft.

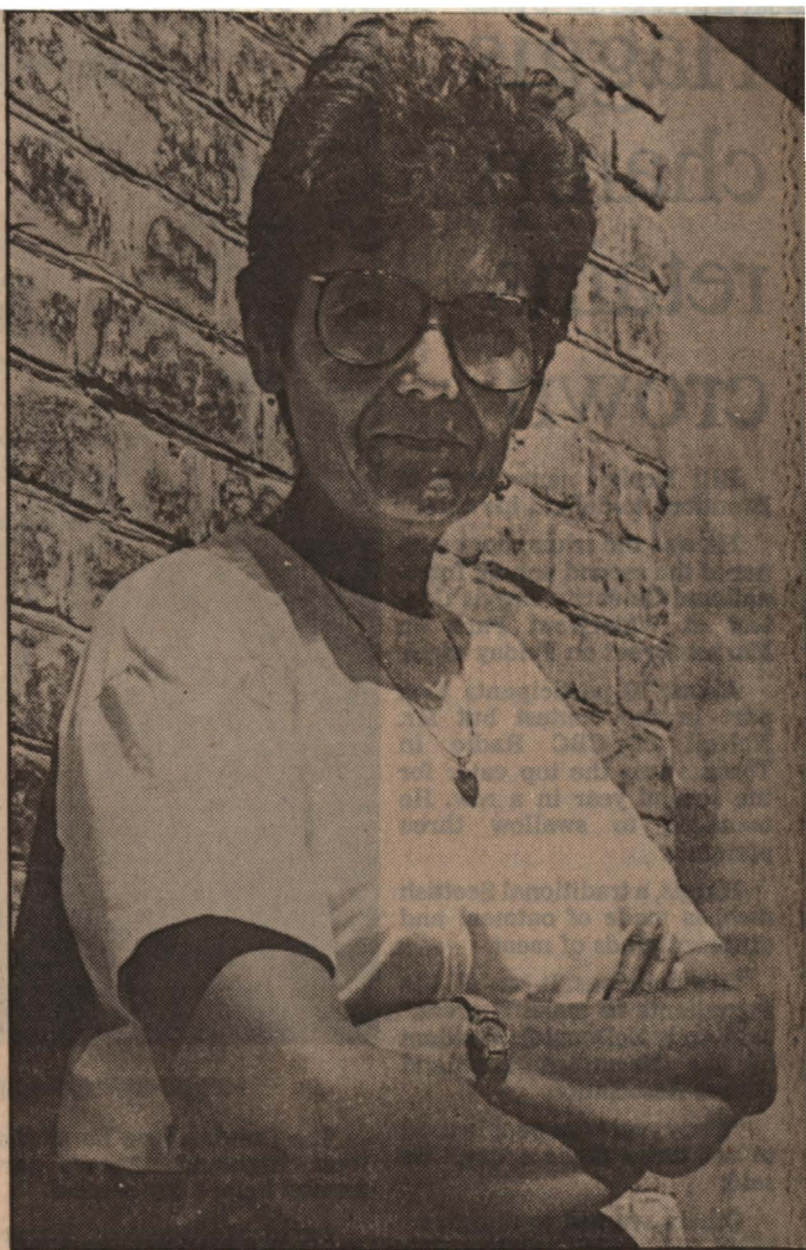
The native inmate program breaks that boredom, for a while.

Ms. King says it's difficult to run the sessions, since the men aren't always in the mood to talk.

The most important thing is to gain their trust and respect. "You've just got to be with them, let them know you don't think you're better than them," she said.

The work pays off when she sees men she helped in jail at the Pine Tree centre or in the city.

"Some day I hope to come in here and not have a native inmate. That would really be something. But the guards say it hasn't happened yet."



Brian Thompson, Expositor Staff

Ferne King never knows what to expect at Brantford jail.