

Mega Jails threaten loss of Native inmate programs

Treatment programs in correctional facilities such as those offered by Native Liaison workers may no longer exist with the introduction of mega jails over the next two years.

by Mandy Eason

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worse than when the went in."

Currently programs offered to Aboriginal inmates at correctional facilities such as Burtch, involve a healing of the entire person.

Spiritual teachings are incorporated into the programs. Porter and other facilitators deliver including sweat lodges and lectures from elders.

"We work with them on a number of different issues. We try to help build self-esteem, develop a post-release plan, we also talk about the victims of the offenses. Even in D and D (Drunk and Driving) offenses there are victims, their families who are without them suffer," said Porter.

The program was initiated by Pine Tree Native Centre in 1991, upon the approval of a six month grant to construct a program to address the needs of Native inmates in Burtch Correctional Centre and the Brant County Jail.

Porter had been recommended for his experience as a volunteer in the institutions as well as someone who had a first hand understanding of what it was like to be an Aboriginal person on the outs with the law.

His life experience gives testimonial to the healing properties of Native spirituality and the opportunity to a clean start.

Tony Bomberry a co-worker of Porter also understands what it is like to have a hard life.

Wanting to give back to society, Bomberry pursued a life in social services.

"I grew-up in the Children's Aid Society. Then I went on to take Social Work in school," said Bomberry.

Of the work he does now within the corrections system

he describes it as a challenge he enjoys.

"We are front line workers at a job that is different everyday. It definitely keeps things interesting."

During Tekawennake's interviews with Burtch Correctional Facility inmates, one could observe a sense of respect the inmates had not only for each other but for those who delivered the programs.

The purpose of the interviews was to explore the Native Inmate Liaison program. Each of the 20 participants were asked to explain what the program has taught them and the impact it has made on each of their lives.

Among their responses the most commonly heard was the revelation that they did not have an understanding of their heritage prior to entering the jail system.

The youngest inmate in the group was 18 year-old Terry Murray. "I've been bounced around back-and-forth from foster home to foster home. I never knew what it was like to be an Aboriginal or to belong."

Murray along with his three brothers are all incarcerated simultaneously. One of his brothers James Maurer, two years his senior, is also serving his term at Burtch.

"I didn't get all of my letters in for my parole hearing. They were due today, the tenth(March). My mom was suppose to write a letter but I don't really blame her. She's got a lot to deal with," says Maurer.

Aside from all four sons in jail James says his mother's husband is undergoing a 28-day treatment for alcohol abuse.

"She has to worry about all of us," said Maurer.

When asked to explain what the program room means to him, personally? "It means an hour or two of freedom. Away from that side of the door," said Maurer pointing to

the door separating us from the rest of the jail.

The story the brothers told was not uncommon amongst those in the group. In fact it reflected a number of the other responses.

As Murray mentioned it was his first exposure to his culture, as it was for older inmates, such as John Rebelo. "This has given me a lot of culture. I was raised as a

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Native Liaison Workers, Richard Porter, Tony Bomberry and Angela Powless with Burtch Correctional Facility inmates who participate in the Native Inmate Liaison Program.