

Sowing the seeds of change

Inmate gardening program growing

BY CHRISTINA TOTH, THE TIMES SEPTEMBER 3, 2010



Photograph by: Christina Toth, Times

Sherry and Glenn Flett say good relationships as well as vegetables are nurtured at the Mission Soapbox Community Garden. The garden is now being managed by LINC, Longterm Inmates in the Community, an ex-inmate support group that is headed up by the Mission couple.

A large gangly tomato plant off to one side at Mission's Soapbox Community Garden tilts into the sun, a few tentative yellow blooms promising fruit.

On his tour around the lush vegetable beds in the garden, Glenn Flett stops at the tomato plant.

He found it discarded somewhere, and decided to give it another chance

at the community garden. He's hoping it will thrive.

"We're not gardeners," he admits, "but we'll make it work. We're training ourselves as we go."

That tomato plant is somewhat symbolic of the group now tending the garden - LINC, or Longterm Inmates Now in the Community.

The group took over the garden this summer, in response to a call from the District of Mission for a managing group, said Sherry Edmunds-Flett, the executive director of LINC and who married Flett 23 years ago.

After more than two decades in jail, including a 21-year conviction for the 1978 murder of Hudson's Bay manager Theodore Van Sluytman during a robbery, Flett was paroled early in 1992.

He founded and now co-facilitates the LINC Society, a self-help group run by ex-offenders and the only one of its kind in Canada. An offshoot is LINC & Associates, which provides services to inmates in federal detention.

While in prison, Flett became a Christian and a fervent supporter of restorative justice, with its tenets of empowerment of victims and the aim of creating a safer community for all.

Since its start, LINC has supported hundreds of former inmates make the difficult adjustment to "living free," or life outside, to give back to society and to be a part of their communities. About 100 members attend LINC meetings in the Lower Mainland.

In Mission, LINC members help with the annual soapbox derby, Adopt-A-Block, the Mission folk festival, and now the community garden.

Flett believes strongly that offenders can change, and with ongoing support, can become positive contributors to society. He is proof that can happen.

In 1996, Flett received the University College of the Fraser Valley's volunteer of the year award for a program he developed called Partners in Learning, which pairs inmates with at-risk youth.

Last year, he reconciled with the family of the man he murdered.

While some may balk at the idea of criminals mixing with 'regular' people at the garden, Flett says that interaction is vital for ex-offenders trying to normalize.

A key part of "detoxing" from the tense prison environment and rehabilitation for ex-offenders is for them to feel that they can be included in society again, and the community garden is a perfect place for that, he said.

LINC escorts male and female prisoners on day passes, or brings in other members who are released, to pull weeds and or whatever needs doing at the garden. They can putter in the relaxed atmosphere of the garden, and "meet people who think differently," Flett said.

"People change. And one of the things that matters most is the connection with the community. I'm as scary as anybody but the bottom line is I've changed a lot," said Flett. "They [offenders] are not monsters. Yes, they've made mistakes, but we at LINC encourage them to be straight up, and we've been doing that with a lot of success."

But part of LINC's mandate is simply to give back, and it's doing that with the thriving Soapbox Community Garden, where families and groups such as the Mission Food Network look after plots of beans, herbs, peas, tomatoes, broccoli, even an arbour of grapes.

LINC also grows its own vegetables, some for the food bank and the community kitchen, and some to LINC members.

And some may be sold at the farmers' market, said Edmunds-Flett, to raise money to for a support network for families of homicide victims, and eventually for a healing centre for the families.

LINC volunteers, the Fletts and others, will be at the community garden until the fall, and welcome visitors to stop in and say hello.

If you want to know more about LINC Society and the work they do, visit their website at www.lincsociety.bc.ca, or attend LINC's upcoming annual general meeting.

The AGM will be Sept. 20, from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. at 7756 Grand St., Mission. The public is invited to drop by, meet LINC members and see what they are doing.

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