

Once redeemed, Glenn Flett is back in prison

Hero to Hard Time

By KEN MACQUEEN

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You couldn't have wished for more stimulating dinner companions. The group gathered four years ago around the dining room table at the Mission, B.C., home of Glenn Flett, his wife, Sherry Edmunds-Flett, and their young daughter Victoria, included a kidnapper, a female bank robber turned business student, and two convicted killers. The talk was about the difficulties of life after prison -- a subject about which Glenn Flett was painfully expert. He'd spent 23 years in jail for a series of crimes, culminating in 1978 with the shooting death of a Hudson's Bay store manager during a holdup in Toronto. Long story short: he found God in prison, as well as Sherry, then teaching adult education. He was paroled in 1992, and the Fletts founded Long-term Inmates Now in the Community (LINC), a non-profit society that has earned a large degree of credibility. Flett poured his energy and emotion -- perhaps too much of both -- into reintegrating hard-core cons back into society. He became as inspiring a story of redemption as the Canadian correctional system has produced.

But prison leaves its scars and tattoos, and bleak neighbourhoods of the mind where it's dangerous to wander alone. Today, at 55 and after 13 years of freedom, Flett is back in jail after pleading guilty to carrying a restricted handgun. He was arrested April 12, stopped by police near Merritt, B.C., for driving erratically. He was headed home after testifying as a Crown witness in the preliminary hearing of Eric Fish, a man LINC had recommended for parole, only to have him flee his halfway house in Vernon, B.C. While at large, Fish was charged with first-degree murder in the death of a 75-year-old man. Police found Flett stoned on a cocktail of pre-

scription drugs and pot. "I was a pretty sick guy," he told Maclean's in his first interview since his arrest.

Flett was carrying a loaded 9-mm semi-automatic pistol hidden in a shoulder holster under his jacket, some replica guns, a fold-out knife and a fake police badge. He was "a time bomb ticking that particular day and in the time leading up to it," said provincial court Justice Ronald Caryer, who sentenced him in August to one year in jail. The jail term, the minimum he could give, was delivered more in sorrow than anger. Flett had given more than most back to his community, Caryer said. "He is riddled, addled and saddled with guilt, some of which he should be, some of which he is carrying when he shouldn't."

Over the phone from Kwikwèxwelhp Healing Village, a minimum security federal prison in the Fraser Valley, Flett says it's time to atone "for the trust I have breached." It's a long list: friends, the community, Sherry, both as his spouse and in her role as executive director of LINC. Above all, Victoria. "It devastated her," he says, choking back a sob. Sherry tells the story of Victoria confronting Flett the week of his trial. "She looked at him and said, 'Daddy, you broke your promise. You told me you'd never go back to jail.'" He cried. She cried. But, says Sherry, "he needs to be accountable."

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The story Flett tells, one the judge accepted, was of an emotional breakdown, fuelled by stress, personal loss and the corrosive nature of his work. He began to ignore the successes and obsess over the failures: a man he helped spring from a segregation unit who was murdered in a prison riot, and Fish. Flett was sliding off the rails, smoking pot, and spaced out by antidepressants and medication for anxiety. This March, his best friend, who was also Victoria's godfather, was killed by a train. Flett says he found the handgun while gathering his friend's effects. "I don't really know why I kept it."

For all his mistakes, Flett still believes in the power of rehabilitation. "Had I been who I was 25 years ago, there would have been a dead policeman up on the highway there." Flett is up for a parole hearing Nov. 23. He won't speculate on his chance of release. "I failed," he says, "and I need to be held accountable for that." What hasn't failed, he says with pride, is LINC. It carried on, despite the blow he gave its credibility. "LINC is a great idea," he says. "I don't believe that great ideas can be destroyed by one person."