

Life on the Outside

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Prisoners Group Offers Link to Larger World

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Huddled around institutional style tables arranged in a rectangle, the group sipped coffee and focused on a man talking about difficulties getting along with a co-worker.

A middle-aged couple ~hared with the group concerns over their 26-year-old son's behaviour.

Down the hallway leading to the classroom-sized meeting space are suites whose residents come and go, but only at the discretion of the middle-aged women supervising them.

The meeting on the main floor of a small, nondescript Victoria apartment block might be anything from Alcoholics Anonymous to a tough-love support gathering. It's not. But it is about support.

Manchester House on Thursday nights is where murderers and other prison-hardened cons go to express their feelings with a few laughs, a lot of coffee and often some tears.

And it's not just for the criminal element. Anyone is welcome to go, either to share their life-skills or get advice from others who have been there. It's a place where former inmates who have made it on the outside and others try to help those just coming out of prison to get over the hurdles -- both practical and emotional.

It's a safe, non-threatening spot for people like double-murderer Jason and his wife Heike. After 14 years in prison, the William Head inmate is starting to think parole.

"It's a nervous anticipation," he said, adding he recognizes that a slow integration into the community will work

better than simply being released on full parole.

He's eligible for full parole in December 2004, but will be trying this summer for unescorted temporary absences leading to day parole, which means a period in a halfway house.

He is allowed two escorted temporary absences a month, which he uses to join Heike for support meetings at Manchester House.

The meetings are operated by the L.I.N.C. Society (Long-term Inmates Now in the Community) founded more than a decade ago by former armoured-car robber Glen Flett.

Jason and Heike, who asked that their last name not be used, say they are both benefiting from the support the meetings offer -- even though she is not a criminal.

Things those on the outside take for granted are a novelty to Jason.

Although the couple has been married seven years, they have never gone on a date. They met as pen pals, became friends, then decided they wanted to spend their lives together.

Jason, 31, has no driver's licence or social insurance card and has never used the Internet. Authorities recently have allowed him to stop on his way to meetings from the Metchosin prison. He hadn't seen a debit card used until he, Heike and his escort stopped for coffee.

He is overwhelmed by unfamiliar smells outside prison and curious about the way people dress today compared to

when he went in.

Virtually everything he experiences on his eight hours of passes is new to him because while others his age were experiencing the changing world, he was serving life with no parole for 15 years for two counts of second-degree murder.

He was 16 and raised to adult court when he pleaded guilty to the rage-, drug-, and alcohol-fuelled killings. He asks that details be withheld to protect him, his wife and his victims' family.

He admits his early years in prison were filled with drugs, alcohol, fights and whatever trouble came along, but then along came Heike, whose family life was admittedly dysfunctional.

She had poor self-esteem and was prone to choose men who would control her.

Jason saw that life could be different with Heike. He took all the rehabilitation programs the prison system offers, avoided trouble and began planning a future, which the couple hopes includes kids.

He also plans to earn his living with his art and the custom furniture he builds. But he knows there always will be those who look at him differently. "I wouldn't want to live beside some murderers," he said.

Heike, 31, found a man who loved her unconditionally, who didn't try to make her decisions for her. She has moved several times as Jason was transferred from one prison to the next.

She is working on the outside to help promote his artwork, which already has netted him a modest income, enough to send her to Disneyland, her first real vacation.

That despite her working two jobs.

"Two wrongs came together to make a right," Jason said.

He believes he has come to terms with what he did, what triggered his behaviour and how the murders affected not only his victims' family and his family but the community around them.

Despite appearing laid back and at times humorous. Jason could be the stereotypical con. He is buffed from years of working out. His arms, sleeved with tattoos from wrist to shoulder, are massive, as is his chest.

Yet there is an obvious gentleness, at least as he sits beside Heike, holding her hand and calling her "dear." Heike said she has no fear of her husband, despite his crimes being of a domestic nature. "I have never even thought about him hurting me," she said.

The couple says they have a solid network in the community, including friends and a woman Heike boards with who sees her as an adopted daughter and Jason as a son-in-law.

However, they also know that Jason will need as many resources as they can lay their hands on to make it on the outside.

That is where L.I.N.C. comes in.

Jason said their meetings are similar to but different from Alcoholics Anonymous. There is no 12-step program but there are other people in similar circumstances to lean on.

The first question asked at meetings is "how was your week?" For some, it may have been frustration over not being able to find a job or even get enough welfare.