

Life on the Outside

Redemption

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Paroled after serving 14 years for his part in killing a man during a bank heist, Glenn Flett atones for his sins by helping ex-cons adjust to life on the outside

Glen Flett chokes down tears when he talks about the man he killed. Flett's life of crime took its most serious turn March 27, 1978, during an armed robbery of a Brink's courier in Toronto.

We knocked the Brink's courier out, but as we were escaping the robbery, an innocent bystander --well, he was the assistant manager of one of the departments in the store--got in the way and tried to stop us," Flett recalls. "Both the guy I was with, and me, shot him. Killed him." Technically, Flett wasn't the one who fired the fatal bullet, but that doesn't ease Flett's guilt. "I've got to be honest with you...I consider I killed him. Not only that, but I allowed that other guy [to do it]. He was a young kid. It was partly my influence on that young kid that killed that guy."

The victim, Ted Van Sluytman, was a 40-year-old immigrant from Guyana and father of four children aged five to 18. As Van Sluytman was dying on the floor of a Bay store, Flett and his accomplice began a flight from the law that lasted weeks. They were eventually captured and Flett was sentenced to 21 years to life.

He turned 50 last week, a relatively free man. He was granted full parole in 1992 and settled into a stable existence in the Fraser Valley, though he will visit

a parole officer regularly for the rest of his life. He has three grown sons, including twins born in 1973, the same day Flett was sentenced to five years for robbing a gas station. With his current wife, Flett also has a daughter slightly younger than Van Sluytman's youngest son was at the time of his father's murder.

"I have a little girl who's three now," he says. "It impacts me a lot to know that I took that away from him."

The justice system perceived lenience with violent criminals like Flett is a hot topic. Some Politicians think murderers like him should never be released from prison; others argue he should have been executed. The issue goes directly to the root of why we have prisons. The word penitentiary comes from "penitence," meaning to atone for one's deeds. While it's true that no deed is worse than murder, and that nothing can be done to restore a life taken away, justice critics too often ignore the purpose underlying punishment in a humanitarian society: rehabilitation. For all the evil that Glen Flett has done, in the past eight years the world has been a better place for having him in it.

Little in Flett's childhood marked him out for a career in crime. He grew up in a middleclass family in the tweedy Victoria suburb of Oak Bay. Yet, he sought out trouble almost as soon as he could walk.

He began by stealing candy and

cigarettes, moving on to vandalism and what he calls “intimidation”: hanging around with a tough crowd and putting on shows of bravado.

“I didn’t need the money,” he says of his early petty theft. “I always had everything I wanted.”

At 14, he was carrying a stolen gun to school. When he was old enough to get a licence, he bought a motorcycle and began hanging out with bikers, smoking pot and trying heroin. At 19, he went too far, stabbing a clerk while shoplifting. He got a year and served nine months before getting parole.

Flett estimates he was responsible for 15 to 20 armed robberies and other serious crimes between 1971 and 1973. After being incarcerated following the Van Sluytman conviction, he continued to seek out trouble in Ontario penitentiaries, becoming involved in the murder of another prisoner. Flett was not charged in the attack and was not directly responsible for the deathblow though again, he takes the blame for not calling off his accomplices.

In Millhaven and Kingston, Flett maintained his caustic attitude toward the world, partly because of a feeling of hopelessness. “I didn’t really care about who I was,” he says.

That changed when he was transferred to the West Coast. His father and, later, his sons visited him in prison. Another woman, a minister, who had performed Flett’s first wedding and who was a friend of Flett’s grandfather, took particular interest, visiting, writing and offering a shoulder to lean on. He considered her his grandmother.

Under her influence, Flett realized he

wasn’t improving himself in prison and that his kids would have a low opinion of their old man if he didn’t do something to remake himself.

“I couldn’t carry on like that,” he says. In an effort to connect with people outside the prison environment, he visited the prison chapel, where he met a couple of new chaplains.

“They needed my help to understand prisons,” he says. And Flett, it turns out, needed their help to work through his emerging spirituality, as he became a devout Christian.

Cynics accuse violent criminals who find God of using religion to avoid taking responsibility for their actions. Flett seems to dwell inordinately on the consequences his crimes, although he speaks of the implausibility of human forgiveness.

“[Jesus] helps me cope with the fact that I’m guilty,” Flett says, adding: “But I am guilty. He made me realize how much of a sinner I am. You can’t change something you don’t recognize.”

At the same time, he began studying.

“I was doing the best I’d ever done in my life,” he says. “I went to school and learned how to be a cook. I’d never applied myself to anything in my whole life. The guy that taught me was the head of the chef’s association of B.C. and he said I could have been one of the top 10 chefs in Canada.” He also began academic studies through a University of Victoria prison program, and is only a couple of courses away from a BA in anthropology and sociology.

In 1990, Flett made day parole, which meant he could go free during the day and return to Ferndale Institu-

tion in Mission by curfew. He got a job in a top French restaurant and had an offer of a position in a prestigious restaurant in Europe. Unfortunately, three days after he made full parole, he became involved in a bar brawl, violating one of his main parole restrictions, and was thrown back in prison for another 18 months.

Nonetheless, he credits his eventual success with the gradual approach to freedom offered by the parole system. Day parole, he says, kept him structured, imposing much-needed limits.

As is the case with many lifers, freedom wasn’t easy for Flett.

“It’s out here that I’ve had to face the people I really hurt and had to think about the people don’t know that I’ve hurt,” he says.

His parents, now deceased, went through an emotional wringer. His relationship with his sons is often strained, the resentment of his long absence palpable in their reunions.

The private family visits in prison had been candy-coated.

“In a way, it was Shangri-la in there,” he says. “They didn’t want to upset daddy and daddy didn’t want to upset them, so everybody’s getting along. When I got out, I found out there was all this stuff that was going on that they didn’t want to tell me about.”

During his gradually increasing freedom on parole, Flett learned the basics of adult responsibility, skills he’d missed during his criminal years. The federal government paid for psychological help and vocational training.

Not all offenders have happy endings like Flett’s. One of his best friends, a murderer, lived for five years on the

outside before the combined stress of guilt, reintegration and whatever other baggage he was carrying around proved too much and he committed suicide.

Flett believes his friend's suicide was partly due to the lack of support for ex-offenders and their families, so he helped form LINC—Long-term Inmates Now in the Community— which offers counselling and support groups, among other services. The organization has grown from small beginnings to a non-profit agency with five full-time employees, including Flett. (His wife is the executive director.)

"The guys we work with are long-term chronic offenders, lifers too, who are so institutionalized that, out here on the street, we aren't doing them a lot of favours," Flett says. "LINC tries to entice these guys into seeing that this is worth staying out for. It's worth going over all the obstacles. It's worth reporting to your parole officer. It's worth two weeks of having them fine-tooth-comb you and ask you strange questions and come round your house at strange times of day and night."

Flett hopes that, by offering a hand up to a straight life, he can prevent others from experiencing the suffering he inflicted on Van Sluytman's family and countless others he traumatized during his life of crime.

As a direct result of Mr. Van Sluytman's death, I do what I do," he says. "I have an obligation to my victim, to Mr. Van Sluytman, to be the most decent person I can be." Some might say that Flett, whose life has taken such a dramatic reversal, is an exception to the rule, but statistics

indicate most offenders turn themselves around.

Kirsten Sigerson, a Corrections Canada employee responsible for reintegrating ex-offenders into the community, says the media do not report success stories.

She acknowledges that Flett is unusual for his remarkable articulation and for his work to make society safer from crime. But she insists he represents the effectiveness of the correctional system.

"There are a lot of people leading stable, law-abiding lives in the community and you don't hear about those," she says.

"Most people do have a valuable contribution to make and turn their lives around." In fact, only one in 1,000 offences are committed by a federal offender on parole. Statistics say 87 per cent of ex-offenders granted Full parole do not re-offend and 94 per cent of day parolees do not commit new crimes.

Nevertheless, activist groups like Canadians Against Violence (still known more commonly by the acronym CAVEAT) maintain that the system could be improved. Some prisoners should never be set free, says Ben Doyle, acting chair of the B.C. branch of Canadians Against Violence. "Our founding principle is the protection of society," Doyle says. "I think people that repeatedly commit violent crimes are beyond redemption in most cases. Rehabilitation in those cases is probably most rare, but I'm not saying it's impossible." MP Chuck Cadman is the deputy justice critic for the Canadian Alliance, with a special interest in victims' rights and young offenders. His son, Jesse, was murdered on the street in Surrey in 1992.

Six young people were involved in the attack and one was tried in adult court and convicted in the killing.

Cadman doesn't discount the possibility that criminals like Flett can turn themselves around, but he's concerned offenders are being released into society and halfway houses without adequate preparation for reintegration. The kind of programming that helped Flett is not always available to inmates when they need it, he says. "Ninety-nine of them might do quite well," he says. "But one of ~hem shouldn't have been there in the first place.

If that means going too far in the other direction – leaving reformed criminals incarcerated—Cadman is prepared to accept that, especially since analyzing who is at risk for reoffending is expensive and a less-than-exact science. "I'd rather err on the side of public safety," he says.

Ironically, Flett also knows the pain of victimization. In 1982, the minister who had supported him during his imprisonment was murdered during a robbery. In a bizarre and potentially dangerous twist, the woman's murderer ended up in the same prison with Flett.

"Not only could I have killed him myself," says Flett. "Bur most of [my fellow inmates] backed me 100 per cent." One word and someone would have done the job, for him, he says.

Instead, he eventually developed a relationship with the man and offered help, even testifying at the man's parole hearing.

Flett has strong views about the arguments of law-and-order activists.

"I dare [the Alliance Party] to show

me historically or any other way statistically that their approach is going to work," he says. It wasn't the toughness of the prisons that turned him around, he says, but his gradual acceptance as a contributing member of society.

"It was only when I started to feel some responsibility to my family, to people who loved me – that warmth. It wasn't the hatred, it wasn't the anger. The threats didn't change me. It was when they started to give me responsibility. I've committed myself to this community because they've given me a chance, not because they beat me up." It would have been easy for society to throw Glen Flett away, he acknowledges, that it wouldn't have helped anybody.

"We degrade ourselves by saying people are worthless," he says. "We can't afford to do that... It's imperative that we find a way to change people.

"I know at least a dozen guys who have contributed more than any straight john I know and they're ex-cons. There are some people who, if they'd been locked away and never let out, this country wouldn't be as good as it is. And how do you select them."