

the Sou'wester

Winter 2020

THE EXPERIENCE OF A VOLUNTEER AT COMMUNITAS



After I retired, I was looking for some **“meaningful” volunteer work. I’d been a social worker for 40 years, and had learned in my long life, that when you help another person, it feels good. I was still hungry for the experience of helping.**

By Marlyn

But after I retired, I couldn’t find volunteer work which offered a real connection with people. I could serve meals-on-wheels or work in a hospital boutique but the tasks I was offered were limited and precise. Then, about a year ago, my friend, Pam, who has volunteered at the Cowansville Penitentiary for years, brought me to Open Door. **“There is no better place to be in Montreal on Tuesday evenings,”** she told me. I had to give it a try.

At first, I was uncomfortable at the meetings. I didn’t understand what was happening. I learned about restorative justice, humanity functioning on a higher level. And what could be more worthwhile, I

asked myself, than helping inmates adjust to life after prison? So I persevered, attending Open Door and occasionally Table Talk on Fridays. And more and more, I liked both the participants and the culture of respect which characterized the interaction. The inmates and former inmates I met seemed kind, friendly, sensitive people. It was hard for me to imagine they had ever willfully hurt anyone. (It still is.)

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Charles Parr, affectionately known as **‘Charlie’, a long-standing** Communitas member and particularly of Open Door, passed away last November following a short illness.

Charlie was 90 years old – though you wouldn’t know it to look at him, and was there at the very beginning when Open Door started- that fateful day of September 11, 2001 (9/11) when the Twin Towers fell.

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The Sou’Wester name is a reference to Montreal’s Southwest, where Communitas began its work in 1999 and is still based today.

 @communitas_MTL
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THE EXPERIENCE OF A VOLUNTEER AT COMMUNITAS

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But what, I asked, could I offer to these gatherings? Do I possess the secret to the happy life? No way. How was I to bring comfort to men who had suffered so much, who had endured all the torments of incarceration, who had spent months and even years in solitary confinement, and yet seemed to harbor no bitterness? How was I to add a drop of wisdom or compassion to the get-together? Whenever I asked the question, Michele or Caroline or someone else would reply, "Just come here. You don't have to do anything. Be yourself."

Being myself posed a problem. Communitas was founded on Christian love, and **Jesus' teachings, and I'm 100% Jewish. For us Jews, there's no intermediary between man and God.** To varying degrees we believe in God, and to varying degrees we obey his commandments, **and even if we do neither, we're still Jewish.** Regardless of how I feel towards **Jesus, I'll never view him as the Messiah.** But it has always been my belief that Judaism and Christianity in their essence are very close. Our prophets told us to pursue justice, love mercy and walk humbly. The great virtue of Moses was his humility. In the days when we had a temple, virtuous behavior was what mattered to the prophets, not sacrifices and other trappings of religion. That I have not committed a crime and gone to prison does not make me superior to someone who has. **Our rabbis teach us, "Don't judge anyone until you have walked in his shoes."**

So I made peace with the Christian orientation of Communitas and allowed myself to be drawn in. I was glad to find that there were **other Jews at the meetings, though I've never inquired whether or not they are supporters of Israel, as I am.**

For Martin Buber, the Jewish theologian, human life finds its meaning in relationships. He writes in *I and Thou* :

"When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly , god is the electricity that surges between them."

In my perception, Communitas has created an environment in which people interact authentically and humanly not only because of its

fine aspirations but also because of the boundaries inherent in its structure. These boundaries are not walls to keep us apart. Rather, they are an understanding that each one of us is ultimately responsible for him or herself. Each of us can be open, kind and empathetic to the other because we know that when the meeting is over, we go our own way. I had first learned about boundaries in Social Work **school, where we were taught that the clients' problems belong to them and not to the social worker.** Compassion in social work walks **a fine line. I learned that if I were overwhelmed by the other's distress, I wouldn't be able to offer support because I'd be dealing with my own difficulties.**

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Another kind of boundary that prevails at Communitas is the idea that we can be satisfied with what we've got and that we can't have everything that we want. Wisdom means accepting such limits, in contradiction to the society in which we live that encourages us to believe that we **should have it all, and that a person's worth is related to his acquisitions and accomplishments.** In Communitas, all are accepted and all are equal. We are simply people meeting one another and spending

time together within certain very sensible parameters.

All in all, factors combine to give a sense of holiness to this little community. **As a volunteer, I don't have to be a helper. I'm getting help as much as giving it, and feeling very privileged to be part of a community that aspires to loving kindness.** I come home from meetings feeling uplifted, often deeply touched by what went down. I believe **that my character is improving. I'm much more tolerant, even willing to interact with Trump supporters.**

I am grateful to Communitas, to the people who attend meetings and to the Board which steers the assembly so well. I am grateful to Jeri for her beautiful animation of Open Door, and the grace with which she makes everyone welcome. May Communitas thrive and continue to provide support and wisdom to the community for many years to come, and may I be a part of it.

Marlyn

Charlie

(Continued from page 1)

For many years he assisted the homeless by helping to serve at food-banks and at the 'Sunday Lunches' for the needy hosted by Christ Church Cathedral once a month. And until he became too frail, he was the one at Open Door who prepared the coffee, just as previously he had helped with the coffee-making for Chapel activities during his time in Cowansville Institution.

Charlie was a stickler for the schedule, and would get upset if the planned event at Open Door went over the allotted time by even one

minute. At 8.30 pm on the dot, he would be out of his seat on on his feet if the speaker for the night had not already wrapped up their presentation. It was time for coffee!

He could be garrulous when engaged, and often were the times that the whole room was kept waiting for him to come to the end of whatever story he was telling.

Charlie was pre-deceased by his loving wife Florence.

Charlie, you were one of a kind. Communitas will continue to miss you. R.I.P.



HELPING FAMILIES OF THE INCARCERATED

Much is said and written about the conditions and well-being of the incarcerated. However, the needs of families of those imprisoned often get forgotten, dismissed, or written off. Yet those needs are great, for the families are often quietly ostracized by the community, and the children bullied because of the offending spouse or parent.

In the early 90s, out of concern for the effects of incarceration on families, the Canadian Families and Corrections Network (CFCN) came into being. The founders had a conviction that **sound, loving family relationships are important, and that prisoners' families are too often overlooked** in the rehabilitation process. The CFCN mission statement states the goal is to build stronger and safer communities by assisting families affected by criminal behavior, incarceration, and reintegration.

Research has proven that if the family stays connected, it helps the family, and also the reintegrating person, who re-offends less often and has a greater chance at a successful life. So Canadian Families and Corrections Network works to keep those families strong - offering them resources, support, and programming, and helping in being an asset to reintegration and public safety for the entire community. There is also a special concern for the children involved.

The emphasis on helping children focuses on several programs including an art contest for children during each month of 2020. The idea is for young people to create a picture in response to a different question each month. There will be one prize awarded monthly and other prizes throughout the year! A calendar will be made for 2021 with all the winning monthly entries from 2020. The February contest question was **"How do you show someone you love them?"** Contests rules can be found on the CFCN website at <https://www.cfcn-rcafd.org/contest>.

A second program is known as "Dad Heroes" which is designed to educate and teach dads about parenting, how children grow, and why their children need them. CFCN has spent a great deal of time re-

searching and building a lot of great exercises and activities to help dads learn in a fun way about the father-child bond, how to communicate with their child and how to work with a co-parent.

It starts with an 8-week parenting course that is offered in some institutions over and over again. From there the men will move into a Dad Group in the prison that will meet regularly to keep them connected about something positive - their children!

The project will also offer a Dad Group on the outside - to continue to help men in the communities of Moncton NB, Montreal QC, Kingston ON, Prince Albert SK, and Abbotsford BC. This group is for dads who have been in federal or provincial jail in the past to focus on community parenting issues.

The CFCN offers help through a toll-free support line, an extensive list of available resources as well as a directory of community resources. **The group's website contains downloadable help for families such as "Time Together", a survival guide for families and friends visiting in Canadian federal prisons, and "Telling the Children - How to Talk to Children about a Loved One's Incarceration". This resource was created to offer parents, caregivers, and teachers information and support on how to explain incarceration to children.** These are only a few of the many resources available. **For more information, visit the CFCN website at www.cfcn-rcafd.org, or call the toll free telephone number 1-888-371-2326, or email at national@cfcn-rcafd.org, or send regular mail to PO BOX 35040, Kingston, ON K7L 5S5.**

Fundraising for Communitas: Retrospective and Prospective

Certain constants emerge as we look back on our 20-plus years of community-making and hospitality in support of the personal recovery and social reintegration of those who have spent time in prison:

- 1) We have always required some funding;
- 2) The funds needed have always turned up, having arrived by grace or been found through generosity;
- 3) We have never had in-house, nor developed, fund-raising know-how or ability.

Within each of these constants there is complexity and history some of which must be appreciated in order to manage our prospects responsibly.

1. Requirements:

I think of our financial requirements in terms of Space, Personnel and Incidentals.

- (a) I give Space top priority in coming to terms with our need for funding, because in the beginning we operated without space of our own, learning very quickly how impossible it is to be effective in our work without private, secure space on which we can depend, in a location that is accessible, convenient and strategic, especially for public transportation, and for the particular requirements of Correctional Services of Canada and the Parole Board of Canada. Even now, we depend very much on a mix of spaces: rented space which houses all of our offices, records and activities - i.e. meetings including CoSA and Table Talk, trainings and other activities; along with donated larger space for weekly Open Door meetings and larger gatherings, both for our community members and public occasions. At present, the cost of rented space is approximately \$17,000 per annum. If we had to pay for the currently donated space for Open Door at Fulford Hall we might expect to pay at least another \$10,000 per annum. I mention this because it aligns the importance for us of space with its monetary value.

- (b) From the beginning, volunteer personnel have always been the element helping us the most to deliver accompaniment and create community. However, while volunteers may add much in the way of design and execution of activities, of recruiting and training other volunteers, and in administration and reporting, there are certain requirements which may not be ignored. Our important relationship with CSC and the PBC depends on proper attention to issues of credibility and accountability when finding, recruiting and serving our members. And the appropriate qualifications and experience, responsibility, dependability, and performance can only be provided by a properly supervised employee, indeed one working with the framework of a suitably constituted and incorporated organization.

We are blessed to have at last both a full time Coordinator (which we have known is necessary from our earliest years) and an incorporated structure. Minimally, these cost respectively approximately \$60,000 per annum and \$8,000 per annum (for accounting, auditing, insurance).

- (c) Incidentals I have in mind include office supplies, required computer and telephone facilities, and the cost of activities

(Open Door, Table talk, and Restorative Justice), all of which runs approximately \$14,000 per annum. (CoSA costs are included largely in the personnel and financial costs above).

2. Sources of Funding

While we have received \$80,000 per annum for our work in CoSA for a number of years, we expect that for the remainder of the current CoSA Canada project (2 more years) we will only receive \$57,000 per annum, beyond which there is no expectation.

Every year since 2000 we have received financial support from Community Chaplaincy. For the last several years the amount has been stable at about \$15,000 per annum. However, the present Community Chaplaincy contract, to which we are party with other organizations, expires in another year and it is unclear what will follow, as CSC seems intent on limiting funded community chaplaincy work to meeting more narrowly-defined religious needs of ex-offenders. We do not know which, if any of the services we provide will qualify for any funding from this source.

Every year we have received private donations along with support from some churches. The yearly total of these donations has been increasing over some years with the greatest amount being in the year just ended when our Appeal added approximately \$18,600 to another \$1,000 or so received during the year.

In these ways we have managed to keep up with an annual operation of approximately \$115,000 per annum.

3. Fundraising Prospects

Sadly, we anticipate reductions in what funding may be available to us from CoSA Canada and CSC, already reduced this amount this year to about \$72,000, and likely to drop significantly more in 2021-22 if current indications come true. Perhaps this funding may dry up completely after the next one or two years.

What can we do, if anything, to ensure continuity in these elements, including assisting the visioning and prospective fundraising efforts by our Community Chaplaincy partners, even CoSA Canada? And if not, what can we do to ensure their replacement by other program-related funding? These are not simple questions and need to be engaged by our Board of Directors and other committed, experienced members.

Furthermore, what can we do to continue and grow our efforts in fundraising through donations? Results to date have demonstrated that our community of shared concern is willing to contribute to our work and to support Communitas. This requires careful, sensitive and dedicated effort beginning considerably well in advance of target dates.

I think that these are the two most important questions in deciding how to move forward with fundraising and to build on the experience and goodwill we have. Developing our fundraising ability further, considering such things as an Annual Fundraising Dinner, public promotions, events, campaigns or crowd-funding, needs to develop confidently from clarity about programs and support from our base community of shared concern and experience.

Peter Huish



‘Disturbing and entrenched imbalances’: Indigenous people make up 30 per cent of prison population

National News | January 21, 2020 by Mark Blackburn

Canada’s Correctional Investigator says Indigenous people now represent 30 per cent of those locked up in federal prisons despite making up just five per cent of the general population.

“Four years ago, my Office reported that persons of Indigenous ancestry had reached 25% of the total inmate population,” said Ivan Zinger, Canada’s correctional investigator said in a statement released Tuesday. “At that time, my Office indicated that efforts to curb over-representation were not working.

“Today, sadly, I am reporting that the proportion of Indigenous people behind bars has now surpassed 30%.” For more than a decade, Zinger’s office has been tracking the increase of custody rates.

According to the correctional investigator, “custody rates for Indigenous people have accelerated, despite an overall decline in the inmate population.”

Each year Zinger’s office issues a report, with a warning, that Canada must do something to curb the over incarceration of Indigenous offenders – both men and women.

In his last report, Zinger said that prison outcomes for all prisoners were improving except for Indigenous and black inmates.

“Since April 2010, the Indigenous inmate population has increased by 43.4% (or 1,265), whereas the non-Indigenous incarcerated population has declined over the same period by 13.7% (or 1,549),” said Zinger in the statement. “The rising numbers of Indigenous people behind bars offsets declines in other groups, giving the impression that the system is operating at a normal or steady state.

“Nothing could be farther from the truth.”

Zinger said that the rising number of Indigenous prisoners and surpassing the 30 per cent mark “indicates a deepening Indigenization of Canada’s correctional system,” and he referred to these trends as “disturbing and entrenched imbalances.”

Zinger called on the Correctional Service of Canada to do more.

“For too long, CSC has recused itself from any responsibility for Indigenous over-representation, preferring instead to simply reiterate that Corrections, being situated at the back (or receiving) end of the criminal justice system, exerts no control or jurisdiction over “upstream” factors that decide who is sent to prison, for what reasons or for how long,” he said.

Zinger noted that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and two parliamentary committees have called for changes to the justice system including the need to appoint a deputy commissioner for Indigenous Corrections, increase access and availability of culturally relevant correctional programming, clarify and enhance the role of Indigenous Elders, improve engagement with Indigenous communities and enhance their capacity to provide reintegration services, enhance access to screening, diagnosis and treatment of Indigenous offenders affected by Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, and develop assessment and classification tools responsive to the needs and realities of Indigenous people caught up in the criminal justice system.

And now cartoons from the Far Side...



“A cat killer? Is that the face of a cat killer?
Cat chaser maybe. But hey—who isn’t?”



“Notice all the computations, theoretical scribbles, and lab equipment. Norm...
Yes, curiosity killed these cats.”

HO! HO! HO!

As most of you know, the Annual Christmas Party at the Open Door is an event not to be missed. This past December 17th was no exception. As a supporter of the Open Door and a regular visitor to the Cowansville Prison, I decided to join in the celebrations and made my way from the Eastern Townships by bus to the event. I had two large lasagnes to contribute to the fabulous Christmas spread. The evening coincided with a spectacular snow storm, shutting down much of the world, with the exception of the brightly lit Fulford Hall, packed to the hilt with the best in food and friendship. What could make it a more perfect evening? Being tapped by the boss to be the designated Santa for the evening. What began as a gentle compliment about my black winter boots, quickly escalated into me squiggling into the Santa Suit in the cloak-room and making a spectacular appearance as the Old Man himself. One doesn't think twice about such a "call to duty". I just said yes, and with my dusty old theatre background I emerged to do the rounds of gift giving and happy banter, as only Santa can do. How does one channel Santa? By looking around that blessed space and seeing all the remarkable people who make the Open Door the most remarkable place in Montreal every Tuesday night. The fellowship created by the Open Door is the greatest gift we give each other every week. Even Santa wants in on the action. One more thing, I believe "the red wool ceiling" was broken that night. I'll never look at my black winter boots the same againever. Thanks for the memory.

Pam Dillon.



Feeding the homeless

By Kevin

On Sunday, December 29, I helped serving food at a lunch for 80 homeless persons at Christ Church Cathedral, along with others from Communitas. I was a runner, bringing the food to the tables. It was a really great experience. I noticed that the volunteers who had been doing this for a while were really efficient and knew what to do.

I reflected that bringing the food to the tables was actually meant for me, going from table to table all over the room making sure everyone had more to eat and no one was left hungry. At each table, the smiles in everyone's eyes were just so big and bright, both with the homeless and the other volunteers, enjoying each others' company at a great holiday meal of baked ham. They were all wonderful people and I was just so glad to be there serving everyone. It was a rich and rewarding experience and one that I will gladly do again anytime.

I will never forget it.



INTRODUCING DOMENIC BARTER



Dominic Barter is an international leader in the practice of restorative justice through the lens of dialogue and partnership, focusing primarily on the fields of education, justice, culture and social change.

In the mid-90s, he collaborated in the development of **Restorative Circles**, a community-based and owned practice for dynamic engagement with conflict that grew from conversations with residents in gang-controlled shantytown favelas in Rio de Janeiro.

He adapted the practice for the Brazilian Ministry of Justice's award-winning national projects in Restorative Justice and supports its application in a further 25 countries.

In recent years he has supervised the mediation program for the Police Pacification Units in Rio, served as invited professor at the Standing Group for Consensual Methods of Conflict Resolution, at the High Court of Rio, with focus on school mediation and bullying, and on the development of restorative community.

Restorative Circles is a specific restorative practice whose development began with the work of Dominic Barter in Rio de Janeiro in the mid 1990s and continues today with a growing community both in Brazil and internationally.

A **Restorative Circle** is a community process for supporting those in conflict. It brings together the three parties to a conflict – those who have acted, those directly impacted and the wider community – within an intentional systemic context to dialogue as equals. Participants invite each other and attend voluntarily. The dialogue process used is shared openly with all participants, and guided by a community member. The process ends when actions have been found that bring mutual benefit.

Restorative Circles are facilitated in 3 stages designed to identify the key factors in the conflict, reach agreements on next steps, and evaluate the results. As a circle form, they invite shared power, mutual understanding, self-responsibility and effective action.



Community Building Workshop Open to Communitas Members and Friends

You are invited to participate in a two-day Community Building Workshop on March 14th and 15th, 2020, from 9 am to 5:30 pm, at 2145 avenue Charlemagne, near Metro Pie1X (some parking is available).

The purpose of the workshop is to become a healthier Communitas team by learning more about each other and celebrating our inclusivity and differences non-judgmentally.

This activity of Community Building is sponsored by Communitas and is free, but contributions are encouraged (to help with the expenses for meals and rent), according to each participant's means.

Lunches and beverages are supplied and will be enjoyed in community.

The process was designed in the US by Scott Peck in the early 1980s and has been practiced in many countries around the world. Often participants have spoken of the workshop as a Life-Changing Moment.

For enrollment, please see **Margaret at Open Door**, or contact **Monika at 514-244-6147** or by email at coordinator@communitasmontreal.org



CATCH AND RELEASE

Year after year, a portion of those sentenced for serious crimes in our communities are found to be under warrant for previous antisocial acts.

The percentage is extremely low (according to Public Security Canada, over the last five years the annual rate of violent recidivism while on day parole averaged a tenth of one percent, and a half percent for those on full parole), but the fact such cases exist at all breeds doubts about the wisdom of early release programs. And when tragedies sensational in their nature or scope involve somebody already under sentence, the misgivings are magnified, and opposition stiffens.

While such reactions are understandable, the perils of side-lining the critical projects of rehabilitation and social reintegration are on full display in our neighbour to the south, where the prison population had risen to 2.3 million by 2008. In 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court declared the out of control overcrowding unconstitutional, leaving penologists and legislators scrambling to bring down the numbers through a variety of measures, the introduction of early release programs being the most notable. Despite those belated efforts, today these human warehouses remain swelling cauldrons of violence and anger, which engage their residents' worst impulses, and export the chaos back to the streets.

For a hundred years and more the warning has sounded that a correctional strategy built on pitiless and protracted repression not only cruelly damages its residents but subverts public safety. In 1919, British Member of Parliament A. Fenner Brockway lamented that the repressive prison regime of his day "inculcates in those who undergo it a spirit of antagonism to the general community, and that many men and women who enter the prison gates with a sense of shame and repentance go out 'at war with society,' bitter, sullen, dangerous. It is thus that the so-called criminal type is made."

Advisories no less cogent informed the Canadian experience. A series of royal commissions, parliamentary committees, and government working groups made the case that penitentiaries are schools for crime, introducing their dispirited denizens to the people and the attitudes, the skills and the tools which facilitate criminal activity, even as

outside the walls, the families, jobs, social contacts, and financial resources which anchor people in the legitimate world are ebbing away. They also acknowledged the societal advantage in maintaining control over the timing, the degree, and the terms of prisoners' emergence from their unnatural seclusion, a key asset surrendered with no return to the public if offenders are held until the instant the state relinquishes its power. Mindful of these lessons, the legislators and administrators who shaped our system have acted on the premise that the safety of the public and the welfare of offenders are both served best when the system's goals are not to punish and to prolong incarceration; but to furnish those conditions which most assist offenders to do no further harm, particularly through release while they are still subject to supervision by correctional personnel.

How does Canada's correctional system implement these insights? How does it define its duty? The Corrections and Conditional Release Act, which creates and governs Correctional Service Canada (CSC) and the Parole Board, states the purpose of the system is to provide for "the safe and humane custody and supervision of offenders; and to contribute to the maintenance of a just, peaceful and safe society by assisting the rehabilitation of offenders and their reintegration into the community as law-abiding citizens through the provision of programs in penitentiaries and in the community". (s.3) Offenders are expected to "actively participate in programs designed to promote their rehabilitation and reintegration" (s.4), while CSC "shall be responsible for, inter alia, the provision of programs that contribute to the rehabilitation of offenders and to their successful reintegration into the community, and the preparation of inmates for release". (s.5)

The assignment, then, is not merely to detain, but to identify problems and seek to correct them, and where progress toward correctional objectives permits, move prisoners in a gradual, orderly manner toward the ultimate goal of a period of early supervised release with conditions, subject always to the overarching legal obligation to give public safety priority whenever decisions have security implications.

The work starts as soon as offenders remitted by the courts have landed on CSC's doorstep. Now the social scientists step in. A CSC parole officer trained and certified in criminology summons and reads police reports and prosecutors' statements and the comments of the sentencing judge, and interviews the offender. Thus prepared, the

parole officer proceeds to analyze and record the criminological factors which underlie the impeached behaviour, and drafts a correctional plan of action to address these issues and to encourage the offender to accept a full measure of responsibility. The appropriate institutional placement is then selected based primarily on the requisite level of control, and secondarily, on the offender's own needs.

Offenders are motivated to pursue their correctional plans and otherwise abide by institutional rules by the prospect of securing additional privileges and more palatable surroundings (i.e. transfer to lower security). Negative means of motivation exist as well: where compliance is absent, CSC nudges prisoners in the desired direction through disciplinary action and the withholding of privileges, the ultimate weapon being the denial of release for as long as the law allows. When this occurs, it signals that a central tenet of CSC's mission has been thwarted, for the system admits that many of those released with no obligation to pursue constructive projects or respect conditions or report to parole supervisors are the more likely for it to act willfully and irresponsibly. And where a life sentence is concerned, an interminable failure to achieve parole represents a deeper, darker danger, for life-long captivity without respite, without hope, without incentive, without purpose, must poison the spirit and breed a climate of resentment and lawlessness primed to migrate outside the walls.

Offenders become eligible at points in the sentence defined by law for different forms of early release, notably, escorted and unescorted passes, day parole, and full parole. Created by the same statute, answerable to the same minister, supported by the same minister's lawyers, CSC and the Parole Board work in lockstep to administer release programs jointly. While certain passes are granted by prison wardens, others, as well as all day and full paroles releases, are granted or denied by Parole Board panels after examining police and CSC reports and recommendations; and consideration of the candidate's own information and explanations, which often are garnered through in-person hearings. Needless to say, the Board's functions have been standardized nationally, its every move guided by its enabling legislation and regulations, and detailed national policies adopted by its executive committee in consultation with Justice Department lawyers.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

CSC's website confirms its wish is "to ensure that volunteers form an integral part of our program delivery in institutions and the community." In doing so, well-meaning unpaid members of the public have an opportunity to help humanize the carceral experience, at the same time softening the impression that convicted persons are not wanted or welcome in our communities. Let's allow CSC to speak for itself:

"Volunteers help to bridge the gap between an isolated prison community and a free society, to which most offenders return. Equally as important, volunteers from the community provide a means of effective communication among institutions, parole offices and local communities, thereby helping CSC to maintain a sensitive and positive presence in the community.

The services of volunteers have become an integral part of many of offenders' lives, whether the offender is in prison or on parole. Volunteers contribute to a variety of institution based programs including

chaplancy, recreation activities, classroom and workshop instruction, social events and cultural activities. In the community, volunteers support families of incarcerated offenders and help released offenders readjust to life in the community. CSC's volunteer program is one way of ensuring that it is not only staff and specialists hired by CSC who are involved in corrections. Volunteers bring the community into the correctional environment and in doing so, offenders are better able and more willing to function effectively in the community.

Volunteers also provide public oversight of an otherwise closed institution, which surely assists it to exercise its all-embracing authority over a vulnerable population in a more lawful and respectful manner.

WHERE DOES COMMUNITAS FIT IN?

In 1999, troubled by the dearth of resources for Anglophone ex-prisoners and prisoners preparing to return to the street, penitentiary chaplain Peter Huish created the Montreal Southwest Community Ministries (MSCM), known since 2015 as *Communitas*. An ecumenical organization, its goal is to equip offenders to reintegrate free society lawfully and successfully, and to accompany them as they make that journey. Member volunteers serve as models of pro-social attitudes and responsible behaviour, and provide guidance and practical support, always offered in an atmosphere of fellowship and compassion. Over the years, *Communitas* has grown and established fruitful relationships with the federal and provincial correctional authorities, other agencies active in the correctional field, the police, faith communities, universities, and other relevant actors.

Currently, *Communitas* operates a number of programs inside and outside the walls (with more to come). Consider the example of one activity which has now run without interruption for the last 17 years. Accredited by CSC as a program which contributes to the rehabilitation of federal offenders, *Open Door* welcomes volunteers, prisoners, and ex-prisoners to its Tuesday night downtown location to benefit from a presentation and discussion of some topic of relevance to life in free society. Those who attend have the opportunity for interaction with pro-social members of the public in a constructive, uplifting atmosphere, and leave the room with one foot firmly planted in the real world. The weekly event takes place under the watchful eye of *Communitas* members who have undergone a CSC-approved training course. Residents of Quebec's minimum security penitentiaries who have been vetted and granted temporary absence programs by their institution's Director are transported to and from the activity by *Communitas* volunteers specially trained by CSC to act as citizen escorts, authorized to replace CSC officers for non-security escort duty. These citizen escorts remain on site throughout the activity to supervise the offenders in their charge, supplemented by the ordinary member volunteers of *Communitas*.

Regular participants find these sessions nourishing spiritually and socially as they rapidly cohere into a caring, constructive, optimistic community. Through involvement in this activity, and the other programs offered by *Communitas*, emerging prisoners are assisted in integrating and practicing the norms of behaviour which the larger community expects of responsible citizens.

Steve



Interview with Eddie Lopez

Eddie: I try to stay as busy as possible, mostly with work. But yesterday my girlfriend's family had a christening. I was one of the musicians at the reception afterward, I played my guitar and sang a song to her. It was my favourite song, a Spanish song that you wouldn't know. When it comes to music I always believed, as Pope Jean-Paul said, that of all the languages of the world, music best relays the language of love.

SW: What kind of work do you do?

Eddie: I work as a chef at a reception hall. We do mostly corporate events, weddings, etc. I work 45 - 60 hours a week. I have worked very hard to get to this stage in my profession but it has certainly been worth the efforts and sacrifices I have made; however, I feel that we as professionals in this trade are often underpaid, as is the case with me right now. I hope that changes in the near future.

SW: Do you like your work?

Eddie: In some ways, I love everything about my work. I love that for four days we prepare for four events: 4 halls, 4 events at the same time. 750-1000 people.

And there's always something: This Saturday for example, we had a catastrophe at work. Somebody dropped 100 cannelloni and this was about 2 hours before we served. We

didn't concentrate on the problem. We had to concentrate on the solution. We had to make them and have them ready for service within 2 hours. It was insane. We had no time to ask questions and lay blame, we just start doing. In less than two hours we salvaged the day. Talk about pressure and stress! The good thing is, once you have a rhythm, it's not pressure, it's just hustle and do. You just do. That's what I like about being part of a good team.

One of the realizations that I've made over the last while doing this job is I understand why a lot of chefs or people in this profession end up with some form of substance abuse. When I get home from these events at one-thirty or two in the morning and have been through an adrenaline rush, ten hours of go, go, go, with not even time to grab a bite, now what? Go to sleep? It doesn't happen, you're all wired up. Mostly they say, "What are you doing after work?" People I've known start with a couple of drinks to help get to sleep. Sleeping pills and pot, now that it's legal. I've never had problems with substance abuse. I like to come home and have a smoke and watch tv to unwind, or simply talk to my girlfriend when she waits up for me.

SW: What do you do during your time off?

Eddie: Not sleep. Sunday and Monday are usually my days off. Sunday I do something with my girlfriend, it's the only day we have off together. Monday is all about relaxing, riding my bike, catching up on chores in the house, doing the laundry. I don't do anything special, just sit in my pyjamas and eat a cinnamon roll. I like cake for breakfast.

SW: Do you get to take home cakes and stuff from work?

Eddie: We do, but we try not to, to set an example. I like to have my girlfriend taste whatever's left over for us, but we leave it for the dishwashers or waitresses. The chefs eat well during the week. The chef makes lunch for everybody, and I love cooking at home, too.

SW: You're in the right profession, then.

Eddie: The problem with work as a chef is that it's not full-time. You're on call, and it's difficult for those trying to make ends meet. I love the job but you have to develop the courage to speak on your own behalf. Chefs in Quebec are underpaid.

SW: You also do a lot of work in Restorative Justice.

Eddie: I started in 1998 or 1999, I was in Ontario and there was a workshop offered on Restorative Justice, one of the first. I attended it with Ruth Morris, one of the founders of Restorative Justice, and Mark Warren. It was a powerful workshop. It was over six weeks and it was beautiful, once a week and one whole weekend. I'm a strong believer in Restorative Justice and I also practice native spirituality. It's about healing.

SW: Are you First Nation?

Eddie: I was born in Guatemala and my parents were indigenous. When I was maybe 12 years old we went to the States. In Canada I became involved with the Mohawks and started practicing with them.

I've been a member of Alternatives to Violence Project Canada for 20-plus years. It's about community building and dealing with stress. It allows guys from Friday to Sunday to have meals together, sit down and chat. We have some kid games to break the somber moods. But mostly it's serious topics and helps people to look at themselves from a realistic point of view. You can choose not to speak all weekend. Some people pass, pass, pass the first day, and by the third day, you can't stop them from talking.

This is not like MEC, it's very structured. The agenda tells you what's going to happen. As a facilitator, I try to stick to the timeline. But many times, we have to throw the agenda aside because the exercise opened up another whole new can of worms. We have to be flexible because it's about healing. Whatever's being revealed is being healed. It's our responsibility to continue with that. If somebody breaks down crying, as big or as small as it might be, we go with that.

SW: Do you have family nearby?

Eddie: My parents passed away a few years ago. I had 6 brothers and 6 sisters, we were a soccer team! One sister passed away in Guatemala. I have four brothers in Canada and everybody else is in the States. I can't go to see them but they come up often. Eight of us had a family reunion about five years ago. We're planning a family reunion in Mexico.

SW: What do people not know about you?

Eddie: I paint with oils and acrylics. My paintings are all stuck away but I'm going to start putting them up in my apartment. I don't go with any style, cubism or impressionism, I just say artistic. I painted a tulip and you know it's a tulip but it's my way. I was fascinated with Van Gogh, his landscapes, the mixture of his colours. Somebody sent me a postcard with one of his prints on the front. I tried to do my own rendition, the blues, the purples, and

the reds. I do landscapes, portraits, and photo realism. A friend noticed that I had talent and she bought me Jansen's *History of Art*.

SW: And what are you working on in yourself?

Eddie: One of the driving forces for me when I went through what I went through was not to waste time. I've always been good with time management, but one of my inabilities is to say no. My inability to say no has gotten me into trouble, to the point of thinking, "What am

I doing this for?" You start resenting it all. Here's a perfect example: I have a concert to get ready for. I have to work 45-60 hours a week. I have a girlfriend, responsibilities at home. I want to connect with a musical group or a soccer team or a baseball team, but am busy with moving, changing address—it gets tiring! You're doing good things but you must be able to allow yourself to take care of yourself.

Steven

Feeling no pain
Left arm is gone
Everyone cares
Everyone prays
He is much stronger than I
His fight is over
Phantom arm he cannot escape
He is now free
His destiny has been written
Together we are one
My mind aches for him
But his mind is set
Life is strong within him
My feelings are strong
Waiting for him to tell me what to do
We are on the same side
Seeing him every weekend
Watching him fight
My soul and heart are much more clear
Moving in is the thing to do
We are free to be

Alan

If – Tomorrow Were Today

If you can keep your hope when all around you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on others;

If you can trust yourself when all others doubt you,
But leave room for your doubts too;

If you can wait and not be worn in the waiting,
Or be gossiped about, but don't deal in gossip;

If you can dream but are not afraid to plan,
If you can think, but are not afraid to do;

If you can meet with failure and triumphs,
And enjoy the victories while not collapsing to the defeats;

If you can bear to hear the truth that is not spoken,
Twisted by those who make their coin with posts;

Or watch the things you have given your life to, broken,
And stoop to build them anew, with weathered tools;

If you can make a reckoning of all your shorts,
And risk your spirit on making it right;

And fail, and start again at a restoration,
And never fret about your loss;

If you can force your spirit, and mind, and fortitude,
To serve not what was but what should have been;

And so hold on when there is no profit for you,
Except the attitude which says to them: "carry on;"

If you can talk with crowds and remain a member,
Or walk with barons and not lose the sight of the 99%;

If neither foes nor friends can hurt you,
If all can count on you, but none too much to sway the path;

If you can restore a balance to the free,
With a spirit that shares the losses and bends but is not spent;

Ours will be the future and all humanity with us;
And thus can we restore a caring Communitas.

~ Mat's Version (with thanks and apologies to Rudyard Kipling)

Please support Communitas!

Communitas is a non-profit, volunteer-driven organization which welcomes (ex-)offenders back to the community by supporting them in their social, spiritual, emotional and practical needs.

We rely heavily on support from individual donors like you. The stigma associated with work in this area brings unique financial and other challenges with it and so your contributions are essential in sustaining our important work.

I support Communitas and their programs and am enclosing a donation of:

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"Tax receipts will be issued for donations of \$20 or more. Please include the following information for that purpose:"

Full name Including middle initial: _____

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Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) at Communitas: Is it for you?

Communitas is proud to have introduced Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) to Quebec in 2000 and have provided more than 50 circles since. COSA matches individuals with a history of sexual offending with a group of everyday community members who are committed to helping you navigate the challenges of life in the community and achieve a successful, crime-free life.

If you are interested in hearing more about the possibility of having your own circle, contact:

Monika Barbe 514-244-6147

coordinator@communitasmontreal.org

Send Your letters to The Editor at :

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*The Sou'Wester name is a reference
to Montreal's Southwest, where
Communitas began its work in 1999
and is still based today.*

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