

We would love to hear from you!

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the Sou' Wester

A grassroots newsletter on criminal justice & prisoner reintegration

Winter 2024 Edition

The Sou'Wester name is a reference to Montreal's Southwest, where Communitas began its work in 1999

Open Door Halloween Party

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Wab Kinew's Victory Speech

Wab Kinew was elected Premier of Manitoba on October 3rd, 2023, becoming the first Anishinaabe premier of that province.

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Communitas Christmas Party : "A view from the kitchen"

Tuesday, December 12th, was Communitas' annual holiday party. More than 60 people attended, smiling, eating, talking, and having a great time. The view from the kitchen was a little different. Don't get me wrong. People were laughing, smiling, and talking. But there was some sweating, poking, and rushing about too.

However, kitchens have a way of helping people gather together. Kitchen parties can

be the best. And the kitchen at Fulford Hall was hopping. People generously offered plenty of food – 5 lasagnas, rice and pasta, Congolese chickens, roast pork, roti, vegan chili and vegan shepherd's pie, focaccias, focaccias with vegetables, Italian cold cuts on the side, samosa with sauce, Shanghai egg-rolls, and much, much, more...

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Ganymède at Open Door

Open Door kicked off the Christmas season on November 28 by hosting Ganymède, the chorale that practices next door to Open Door every Tuesday. About two dozen men dressed in classic black gave a short but immensely enjoyable performance in four-part harmony. Just a look around the room showed how our members from the penitentiaries and from the community were bathing in the voices accompanied by piano.

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Wab Kinew's Victory Speech

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His victory speech on the night of the election was a message about agency and people taking control over their own lives, a message of hope aimed at young people:

"I was given a second chance in life, and I would like to think that I've made good on that opportunity. And you can do the same — here's how.

"My life became immeasurably better when I stopped making excuses and I started looking for a reason. And I found that reason in our family. I found that reason in our community. And I found that reason in our province and country.

"So to young people out there who want to change your life for the better, you can do it. But here's the thing: you have to want it.

"If you want to leave the party lifestyle behind, it has to be you that makes the decision. If you want to join the workforce, get a new career, it has to be you that takes the first step. And if you are dealing with some kind of illness, and want to find healing, it has to be you to decide to move forward. I can't do that for you. A government can't do that for you. You have to be the person that decides to take the first step."

Ancestral mathematics

In order to be born, you needed:

- 2 parents
- 4 grandparents
- 8 great-grandparents
- 16 second great-grandparents
- 32 third great-grandparents
- 64 fourth great-grandparents
- 128 fifth great-grandparents
- 256 sixth great-grandparents

512 seventh great-grandparents

1,024 eighth great-grandparents

2,048 ninth great-grandparents

For you to be born today from 12 previous generations, you needed a total sum of 4,094 ancestors over the last 400 years.

Think for a moment — How many struggles? How many battles? How many difficulties? How much sadness? How much happiness? How many love stories? How many expressions of hope for the future? — did your ancestors have to undergo for you to exist in this present moment...

Communitas and National Truth and Reconciliation Week

Adapted from the City of Montreal Land Acknowledgement.

We are on unceded Indigenous lands of the traditional territory of both the Kanien'kehá:ka, "Mohawk," and the Anishinabeg, "Algonquin," peoples.

We are grateful for the opportunity to live here, and we thank the many generations

who have taken care of this land and these waters. Tiohtiá:ke, Montreal, is historically known as a gathering place for diverse First Nations; thus, we recognize and deeply appreciate the historic and ongoing Indigenous connections to and presence on these lands and waters.

Let us continue to support community efforts to sustain a relationship with Indigenous peoples based on respect, dignity, trust, and cooperation in the process of advancing truth, reconciliation and justice.

Ganymède at Open Door

Continued from page 1

For the grand finale, the chorale members circulated among us, and together, we all sang "Joy to the World". What a joyous way to start the holiday season! Thank you to Open Door presenter John for suggesting the evening and to musical director Yvan, who worked out all the details. Can we reserve Ganymède for another performance next year?

Jeri



For the latest news and activities at Communitas, between editions of the Sou'Wester, visit our Facebook page at:

<https://www.facebook.com/communitasmontreal/>

Join the conversation and like us.



What can you use to fight ‘Plotting, scheming, and getting high?’ Passion, or more likely passions, may be the answer.

Recently at Open Door we were treated to a presentation by Marta. Like most volunteers at Communitas, she is a special person. She is a professor at McGill, and a great story teller. And what a story. You see, her parents are what we would call Math Wizards, or mathematicians.

Marta shared a powerful tale of strengthening human connections. A prisoner interested in mathematics reached out to Marta, who, in turn, asked her mother for help. Marta’s specialty is chemistry, not high-level math. The mother eventually asked her husband, Marta’s father, to assist, as the area which the ‘prisoner’ wanted to specialize in corresponded to his field of research.

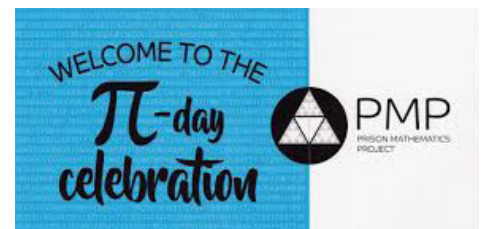
The father gave the prisoner a problem to

solve – and the inmate did it. By hand. No access to computers with sophisticated software to assist in doing it. A new bond was formed. The faceless prisoner became a person. Christopher moved from a community where people are judged by their past, to a community where people are judged on their math. Quite a difference.

The Prison Mathematics Project (PMP) was first conceptualized in early 2012 when Christopher, who is serving a 25-year sentence for murder, began studying mathematics during a year spent in solitary confinement. His first experiences of mentorship by members of the math community led him to a deep understanding of the power of connecting with others.

Power of connections to change lives.

The PMP is the manifestation of Christopher’s vision to share the benefits of math



mentorship by connecting prisoners who are dedicated to change with mentors who support and encourage their interest in mathematics. This helps to provide the necessary community framework for their lives both during and after their incarceration.

Education, as opposed to warehousing, is a powerful tool for preparing inmates to make positive contributions to their own lives and to society. The education and passion might be for math or something else. However, passion and purpose seem to be a key to a better tomorrow. Math was the catalyst in this instance. And it is a clear winner over ‘plotting, scheming, and getting high,’ which clearly is no route to a life of purpose.

Thank you, Marta, for sharing this fascinating story of hope with us.

Lino

Heartless, and to What End?

In the Summer 2022 Sou’Wester, Mostly Legal highlighted the case of Jaskirat Singh Sidhu, the hapless individual who, through a malign conjunction of insufficient company training, near total lack of experience, hazardous conditions, and a flapping tarpaulin, propelled a tractor-trailer and pup trailer into a bus carrying the Humboldt Broncos hockey team. Wracked with guilt, Mr. Sidhu waived trial; seized, more than accepted responsibility; invited any punishment the court found just; and was blind-sided by the longest sentence ever imposed in Canada without the presence of drugs, alcohol, or a pattern of reckless driving. Tormented by what the Federal Court described as “an extraordinary level of remorse for the consequences of his actions,” he waived off the Parole Board at his eligibility date, although he might justifiably have invoked the honest and productive life he had built in Canada with his wife, Tamir; but later agreed to parole for her sake.

The summer of 2022 found Mr. Sidhu referred

for deportation by the Canadian Border Service Agency and the Immigration Minister’s delegate, decisions which would necessitate an inadmissibility hearing by the Immigration and Refugee Board, and the inevitable issuance of an order for removal to India.

As we reported previously, Mr. Sidhu sought to forestall that outcome by asking the Federal Court to quash the referrals and to order the decision-makers to re-examine the file, this time with appropriate consideration directed to various factors opposing deportation. Sadly, we must now report that on December 14, 2023, having reviewed the two decisions, the Court ruled they were arrived at in conformity with procedural fairness, nor are they unreasonable in substance, which is to say, they “fall within a range of possible, acceptable outcomes which are defensible in respect of the facts and the law.” (Sidhu v. Canada 2023 FC 1681). It should be understood that the bureaucrats having set the stage, the Court had to act. Chief Justice Crampton discerned no legal error, and thus enjoyed no latitude to grant relief, regardless of the outcome he might himself have preferred. indeed, one may be forgiven for guessing he wishes it were otherwise: “The

circumstances leading to these proceedings are heartbreaking. I cannot recall any case more truly tragic for everyone involved. (...) Unfortunately, the healing required to return to some form of a better life may become more difficult for some people who wish for a different outcome than the one I reach.”

The inadmissibility hearing is therefore slated to take place, and there remains but one recourse before deportation should become a cruel reality: per s.25 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, permanent residence status may be granted to an inadmissible person “if the Minister is of the opinion that it is justified by humanitarian and compassionate considerations relating to the foreign national.” While we assume such an application will be made by Mr. Sidhu, we cannot forget that the success rate for these requests is vanishingly small. As we did previously, we are moved again to ask why, in the case of an honourable man destroyed by an implacable fate, the authorities seem bent on applying the letter of the law to achieve maximum damage.

Steve

Communitas Christmas Party : “A view from the kitchen”

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And did we mention deserts? Chocolates, cookies, cakes – oh, boy – chocolates, cookies and cakes...oh, boy.

There was more food than we could consume that night. Thanks to all the people who contributed to the potluck. It was much, much appreciated.

And the extra food? Some were wrapped and taken home by guests – always appreciated. But lots were stored and used at that week's Table Talk.

Lino

PS: Thanks to everyone who helped set up, clean up, wash up, decorate, served the 60-plus folks that attended. See you next year – but there will be plenty of Table Talks, Open Doors, and other events between now and then.



Over 1000 Cards for those inside written by Communitas

Statistics Canada reports that there were over 4000 people in custodial settings in Quebec in 2022. That is a lot of hardship. That is a lot of loneliness. That is a lot of isolation, especially at this time of the year. Whether you celebrate Christmas or not, society does not allow us to ignore it. Decorations, advertisements, declarations, and music on the airwaves. It surrounds us.

This year, once again, Communitas members worked with Relais Famille to help write over 1000 cards in English for distribution in Quebec pens this Christmas. It may seem to some a small thing, but receiving a card, so rare these days, can still bring a smile and some happiness in a concrete jungle.

Merry Christmas, and whatever you do celebrate, be sure to share some kindness.

Lino

PS: The picture is of Communitas' Jeri delivering to Christine from Relais Famille over 1000

cards written by Communitas in English for distribution in Quebec pens this Christmas.

Relais Famille is a social support service offered to families with a loved one in the criminal justice system.





Open Door Hallowe'en Party

October 31 fell on a Tuesday, and Open Door didn't miss the chance to throw a Hallowe'en party. It was an evening of lofty artistic ambition and high-flown intellectual concepts spurred on by Alan's Pink Floyd CDs.

Jeri divided us into teams to carve the pumpkins which had been lugged to Fulford Hall by Carl, who then donned a limousine driver's hat. Jeri also distributed individual small pumpkins to decorate (ok, so they were clementines).

It was a boisterous crowd, but Franco-Steve was protected from the traffic by his city worker's reflective jacket and yellow hard hat, while Anglo-Steve became the Fairy Princess Aurora. Alana was in a lace mask with a flower tiara, and Alan wore antlers. A tiny sombrero was perched on Collin's head, a larger one on Sammy's. Bill wore a casino croupier's visor and his special shirt. Michele was fetching under a giant mop of hair, and Tim, not to be outdone, sported a green fright wig and googly eyes.

Decked out in a large curly fright wig, Dave looked like Shirley Temple on steroids, while Kevin was the scary clown every Hallowe'en party needs. Garth was gorgeous in long, blond tresses. Nick came to us in a monk's robe, tattered as befits a mendicant monk, with strings of empty potato chip bags attached to it. The room was puzzled, but Colin needed but a second to recognize Nick was a ChipMonk.

Jeri did not allow the loss of her broom to prevent her from bringing Cinderella to life, and she told us about an earlier Hallowe'en when she dressed entirely in pink with a shoe on her head. Nick quickly guessed she was the gum under your shoe. Unfortunately, Peter was unable to attend, dashing hopes he would turn up as the crocodile whisperer.

Carl won the 'how many mints in the bowl' contest with his guess of 76. There were 76! (Merwin guessed 75.)

Merwin took the prize (a bag of chips) for best decorated individual pumpkin, with a very special mention going to the entry of Fred, who, like Richard, was on zoom.

Alan, our impartial judge, awarded best team jack o'lantern to the vision of his friend Alana (hmm) and teammate Nick. Meanwhile, giving vent to their mischievous and rebellious spirits, Dave and Kevin gave birth to a truly monstrous jack o'lantern with an open maw spewing forth pumpkin innards all over the table. It was titled The Morning After. Boys will be boys.

As shared by Anglo-Steve. In case you were wondering, the next Halloween that is on a Tuesday, Open Door night, is Halloween 2028. Book it on your calendar, as it seems all had a fun time.

Steve and Lino



Lametti's Legacy Legislation

Why would a government cut ties with one of its brightest ornaments, a popular, trilingual, hockey-playing law professor widely hailed as principled and able, an expert in his field?

Readers of Mostly Legal will recall that “all hell broke loose” in the wake of Paul Bernardo’s May 29, 2023 transfer to medium security, prompting us to wonder, “Will a cabinet minister’s head appear atop a pike above the Peace Tower?” In hindsight, what was at stake was a pair of heads on a pair of pikes. On July 20, CSC’s hastily struck review board announced no fault, no foul, but neither Public Security Minister Mendicino nor Justice Minister Lametti would last out the week. For Lametti, with no hand in the Bernardo debacle, save perhaps in the public imagination, it was a sucker punch. Having stick-handled 13 bills to fruition, and free of scandal during his four and a half years as Attorney General and Justice Minister, he did not hide his surprise, but assured the voters of LaSalle-Émard-Verdun he would remain their Liberal M.P. and seek re-election. Asked why the high-functioning cabinet member was now banished to the backbenches in favour of a rookie, the Prime Minister would reply only that his reconstituted cabinet brings “fresh energy and a range of skills.”

Looking back over his term, Mr. Lametti has emphasized the importance of “reaching out to communities who feel alienated from our justice system: Indigenous people, black and racialized communities.” The Congress of Aboriginal Peoples, amongst others, expressed its concern over the Minister’s departure, but his influence lives on in the process the government created to implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. Yet, above all others, it was a different, if related cause which energized this minister and mobilized him to pursue lastingly

important legislative change—the cause of the unjustly convicted, also described as miscarriages of justice, or wrongful convictions.

Our obligation to rescue the numberless victims of wrongful convictions is profound. Most Canadians can name a handful of egregious cases of established error, such as Steven Truscott, Donald Marshall, Norman Fox, Guy-Paul Morin, David Milgaard, Thomas Sophonow, Roméo Phillion. In 2022, Quebecers read about Yves Plamondon, freed 28 years late; and already in 2024, a New Brunswick court has recognized the innocence of Robert Mailman and Walter Gillespie, convicted

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of murder 40 years earlier. There are many more, plus untold numbers still incarcerated and waiting for justice. In the U.S., the Midwest Innocence Project—that one group alone—has helped free or exonerate more than 240 individuals. In the United Kingdom, a new trial or release was ordered in 538 cases in the last 26 years. Yet in the last 20 years, Canada has acknowledged but 20 errors; and over the entire history of Canada’s review mechanism, of those 132 files submitted without assistance of counsel, not one had a positive result. Clearly, the lack of resources has a dire effect.

Even where successful, the path to vindication and freedom is achingly slow. In February, 2023, Metis artist Robert Sanderson, convicted of murder 25 years ago, learned he will have a new hearing before the Manitoba Court of Appeal; his application for review was made in 2017. Frank Ostrowski, convicted of a 1987 murder, was finally released on bail in

2009, but denied absolution for another nine years. Réjean Hinse, charged with armed robbery in 1961, was convicted in 1964. In 1994 the conviction was quashed on appeal, and the charges stayed. In 1997, the Supreme Court of Canada agreed to his demand for an outright acquittal, and he won his lawsuit for compensation in 2011, ending a battle which consumed him for 50 years!

The first thing to know about our current mechanism for dealing with these lamentable situations is what the remedy is not, for it has often been confused with executive clemency, that expression of the Royal Prerogative of Mercy exercised for the King by our Governor General in Council, as laid out by sections 748 and 748.1 of the Criminal Code. In practice, the Governor in Council acts where recommended by the federal cabinet on the advice of a minister, usually the Minister of Public Safety. Clemency is available only where no other legal remedy exists to mitigate or compensate for the unduly harsh impact of a criminal penalty imposed

for a federal offence. Relief may take various forms: remission of fines, penalties, or forfeitures to the Crown; cancellation of a sentence’s execution in whole or in part; or granting of free or conditional pardons. In the 1980s, for example, an elderly woman serving a life term in Quebec City’s Gomin Prison proved incapable of handling the rigours of further captivity: a rare grant of clemency overrode the mandatory penalty of the criminal law and saved her life. In 1987, when the Mulroney Conservatives freed lifer Maisie Clark five years before parole eligibility, the mercy accorded this despondent upper class woman, who stalked her ex-husband and dispatched his new wife with a knife, so offended the public that no government will be tempted to replicate that gesture without cover of the most compelling facts—although the Harper government did excuse Western grain farmers who defied the controversial monopoly of the Canadian Wheat Board. Note that

all this differs from wrongful conviction cases, where the issue is not hardship or suffering, and the aggrieved party is not seeking the whimsical generosity of a merciful monarch, but justice withheld.

Canada's Criminal Conviction Review is not itself a new appeal, but an extraordinary miscarriage remedy available after judicial appeals have been exhausted. The key player in this scheme is the gatekeeper, the Minister of Justice, empowered to direct the courts to revisit a closed case, as described in sections 696.1 to 696.6 of the Criminal Code, and Regulations. Thus, where a convict is freed or exonerated, this necessarily was the verdict of a successful court proceeding born of a fruitful miscarriage application to the Minister.

When a convicted individual, often assisted extensively by legal counsel, or one of the Innocence Projects (legal counsel again), has assembled material purporting to demonstrate that the courts erred, or that newly acquired evidence would have led to a different result, the three mandatory Criminal Conviction Review Forms may be submitted, causing the Minister's Criminal Conviction Review Group to conduct a preliminary screening. The CCRG assures itself that the information presented with the application is reliable and relevant, and that the application is "supported by new matters of significance" not previously considered by the courts or the Minister. If the CCRG finds that there "may be a reasonable basis to conclude a miscarriage of justice likely occurred," the application moves on to the investigation stage. Note the word 'likely.' If the CCRG does not reach that finding, the challenge is over.

At the investigation stage, the CCRG more closely examines the relevant legal and factual issues, and takes appropriate actions, such as interviewing witnesses; performing scientific tests; obtaining expert reports; consulting police, prosecutors, and defence counsel; obtaining a CSC file. The resulting investigation report goes to

the applicant for comment, then to the prosecuting provincial attorney general for submissions, and then, accompanied by the legal advice of CCRG counsel, to the Minister for a decision. If the Minister "is satisfied that there is a reasonable basis to conclude that a miscarriage of justice likely occurred," the Minister must either order a new trial, or refer the case to the court of appeal; if the Minister is not satisfied, the application is dismissed. The Minister's decision is final and not subject to appeal. (s.696.4)

It is universally acknowledged that our Criminal Record Review mechanism, despite noble aspirations, falls well short of the mark. Deeply troubled by the plight of the unjustly convicted, Minister

It is universally acknowledged that our Criminal Record Review mechanism, despite noble aspirations, falls well short of the mark.

Lametti ensured that reform was included in the Prime Minister's mandate letter. On March 31, 2021, he accordingly announced public consultations presided over by former Ontario Court of Appeal justice Harry LaForme, Canada's first Indigenous member of an appellate court; and Juanita Westmoreland-Traoré, a distinguished jurist and champion of rights, and Quebec's first Black judge. Their mission was to discover the form a more accessible, faster, and fairer remedy should take, one necessarily wielded no longer by the Minister, but by an independent commission at arm's length from government. Representatives from the functioning commissions of England, Scotland, Norway, North Carolina, and New Zealand were heard, as were a large host of Canadian stakeholders, including 17 exonerees who had suffered miscarriages of justice. The resulting report, with its 51 recommendations, issued on February 3, 2022. (<https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/ccr-rc/mjc-cej/index.html>)

On February 16, 2023, Minister Lametti

tabled Bill C-40, the Miscarriage of Justice Review Commission Act (a.k.a. David and Joyce Milgaard Law). It completed 2nd reading June 21, 2023, and is now in hearings before the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, which has met with witnesses, notably including James Lockyer, longtime distinguished counsel to the Innocence Project. The nascent Miscarriage of Justice Commission will be vested with many new, important functions. It will be authorized to examine a broader array of cases than the existing law allows (eg. in certain circumstances, where the right of appeal was never exhausted). The Commission will be required to refer a case for further disposition by the courts where it

finds "reasonable grounds to conclude that a miscarriage of justice may have occurred and considers that it is in the interests of justice to do so." Crucially, this will open the door to some cases incapable of establishing a miscarriage under the old stricter test of 'likely.' The Commission

will conduct outreach, and provide financial and legal support to prospective applicants in need. It will publish decisions on its website (while protecting confidential information), and will report annually to the Minister on numbers of applications, court referrals, refusals; length of treatment; demographic information; etc. There will be a statutory requirement to act expeditiously at all stages. All in all, Bill C-40 projects a willingness and desire to unearth such miscarriages as exist, and it is clear that, whatever imperfections might linger after Parliament's final emendations, the result will be an immense leap forward, a fitting legacy flowing from Minister Lametti's too-brief tenure in cabinet.

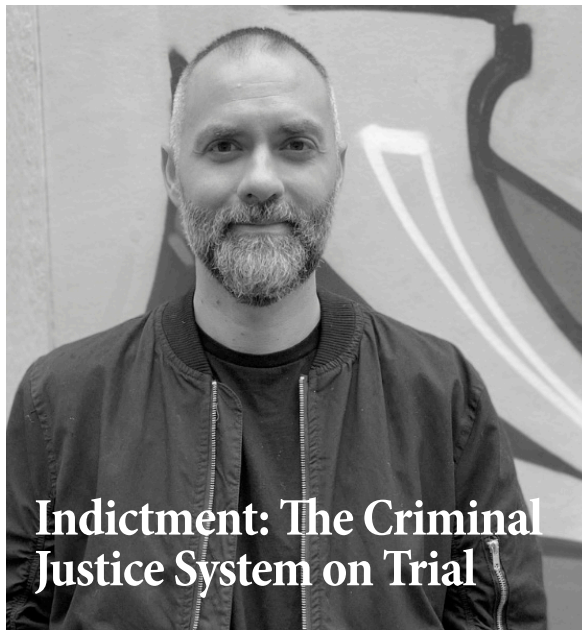
Steve



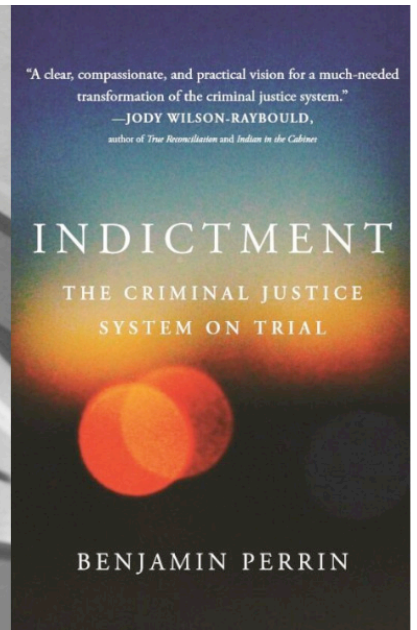
Communitas is extremely pleased to be awarded a sum of \$1000 by Christ Church Cathedral in Montreal for our work in the community in 2023.

The work of Communitas - restorative justice in action through the reintegration of prisoners in the community, was recognized by the Church as one of three missions that were acknowledged and appreciated by the congregation – the other two being work with the homeless, both young and old.

Communitas wishes to express its deep gratitude to Christ Church Cathedral for their support and hospitality.



Indictment: The Criminal Justice System on Trial



On Monday, November 13th, in Montreal, a packed classroom at McGill University's Faculty of Law came to hear what UBC law professor Benjamin Perrin had to share about his latest book. It was not another reading. Nor was it about his trials and tribulations in authoring the book. Rather, it dealt with the substance of the book. The book, "Indictment: The Criminal Justice System on Trial," as the author explained, is divided into two parts. First, the fact-based reasoning on why change is necessary, and second, what some of that change could look like.

On top of the economic and societal loss, the legal system – police, punishment, prisons –

continues to stigmatize the survivors and the offenders and does not deal with societal issues such as poverty, health issues including of the brain, addiction, homelessness, and, while not called this at the talk, racism.

A more inclusive approach briefly advocating for a Transformative Approach that echoed some of the principles of Restorative Justice was introduced. Unfortunately, time got in the way of further discussion on this crucial topic.

Lino

In memory of Martha Shufelt

It is with sadness that we mark the passing on January 8 of Martha Shufelt of Cowansville at the age of 82.

Martha was a pioneer in bringing a valued literacy program to the men of the Cowansville Institution, beginning her life-changing work there in 2000. Martha was still participating actively until December 2023. There are many men who have been touched by Martha's involvement and leadership in this literacy work. She was instrumental in facil-

itating the building of skill and responsibility in certain of the inmates by giving additional leadership and expansion of tutoring among other inmates. She was always a delight for the men to talk to, a help in learning English, and someone who was down to earth and loved and appreciated by all who came into contact with her. She came to Cowansville as a member of the Yamaska Literacy Council, in which she actively participated until her death.

The Cowansville community has lost a great friend.



"A real friend is one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out."

Walt Winchell

Here's an Artificial Intelligence poem about
Communitas Montreal.

Communitas Montreal, a place of hope,

*Where people come together to help those who
can't cope.*

*They bridge the gap between prison and the
community,*

By bringing people together for supportive unity.

*Their initiatives include support, mentorship,
and empowerment,*

*And they offer weekly meetings for accountabil-
ity and fulfillment.*

*Open Door meetings, Table Talk meetings, and
Circle meetings too,*

All to help those who need it most, to start anew.

In 2022-2023, they contributed to safe reintegration,

*With virtual and in-person meetings for com-
munity participation.*

*They also distributed newsletters in the com-
munity and within prisons,*

*To spread the word about their work and their
missions.*

Communitas Montreal is a beacon of light,

For those who need help to get through the night.

*They offer hope, support, and a sense of belong-
ing,*

*To those who need it most, with love and under-
standing.*

So if you're looking for a way to give back,

*Consider volunteering or making a small
impact.*

*Communitas Montreal is always looking for
support,*

*To help those in need, with love as their main
resort.*

If you want to learn more about Communitas
Montreal's work or how you can contribute by
volunteering, donating or telling others about
their work, please visit their website at [com-
munitasmontreal.org].



Tools and Fools

Blue is true yet only for you.
Sure we are we'll set the bar.
Life is a struggle yet only for muggles.
If your blood is Majick it's not so tragic.
Stick to the script you may avoid the crypt.
Blessed are those who avoid all foes.
Count your fingers, count your toes.
Ten you have, times two is twenty.
These tools you have is more than plenty.
This is my message, please hear it well.
You are one, you are plenty.
Spend time well, spend time wisely.
Life is a Mcgyver of tools and fools.
Be true to you, being nice is cool.
Only you know which way to grow.
Life is an orchard to nourish, feed, to water.
Through all of the struggle, dig deep and huddle.
The fruits of your labor will be supple and sweet.
And when we meet it could be simply abrupt, not meant to disrupt.
The moment we share will show how one may really care.
For the admission of fare,
Just a smile or two, that's all, will do.
To share a universal moment everlasting as a monument of the mind, of the
heart.
Forever apart,
Forever together,
To travel the nether.
For Life is Forever Eternal.

By EKG, Cowansville

Warrior

Time stands still,
A seasoned warrior,
Mental grace,
Music soothes the Soul.
Why did they eat the fruit of life?

Everything is going in the same direction.
Cancer around the corner,
2 Days, 2 weeks, 2 months, 2 years.
So they Say.
Riding the edge.
Who knows what's right or wrong?

Summer is over,
Sky grows darker,
I see him clothed in black.
My heart beats faster and faster,
My life is a bunch of worries,
Wish I can have everything far behind.
My Lord, please help me.

Pushed into a corner,
The river of blood flows.
Time passes by.
Get up!
Same shit!

Alan

Sou'Wester interview



The Sou'Wester interviews Donald

SW: How long have you been with Communitas?

Donald: I've been involved with Communitas, oh, must be... over ten years. Big involvement – where I was coming out to meet in the prisons – that was 6 and a half years of that stuff... at least another three where I was coming to Open Door meetings on the Tuesday nights. Now I'm really hooked, they put me on their Board!

SW: They must like you.

Donald: Oh, I don't know about that! They just asked me, and I like to be involved. During all the time I was in prison, I kept active, you know, in a few groups. I always said to myself, "when I get out, I want to be more involved," so here I am. I go to the meetings, I try to go to the Friday Table Talk if I can, I try to get to the meetings on the Tuesday nights. Sometimes I join online... (because) life gets so busy! That's an observation I had gotten in prison, you know, life just goes on and it's monotonous, and it doesn't really change. But out here, it's just busy, busy, busy.

SW: You've been volunteering by going back inside?

Donald: I went in twice, they won't let me go in anymore. It was a limited-time thing. They say you can't go in and be a volunteer if you're under CSC management. I'm a lifer, so I'm always going to be under it. But... you know, it's a side issue I'm going to fight (for). I'm doing something about that. I went in for Recon meetings, which I was involved with even longer than Open Door.

I've been involved with Recon for fifteen years. It's a lifer's group with FTC.

SW: Is it kind of like a support group?

Donald: Yeah, definitely, for lifers and long-term offenders, yup. I was involved with that all the time I was in, in the two institutions here in Quebec. I got to go in as a volunteer with them as a two-time thing. The purpose of me going in was to tell the guys some of the truths. When you're inside you're very isolated, you know, you get information, but the information you get is from guys that come back... so they're always told "Oh, I had a bad parole officer, they didn't cut me no breaks, I couldn't do this, I couldn't do that," and that's not the experience of most people. That's only the experience of the ones that are sent back. I have a whole bunch of lifers that I'm in contact with across the country... I asked them "hey, what should I tell these guys? What should I concentrate my time on here?" and they told me a few things that they wished they would have known when they were in that we know now. Like, one was staying involved with groups while you're inside. Stay active. It's very important, because it helps you when you get out. Sometimes it helps you to make contacts, the other thing is it helps to keep you socialized. So when you go to a job interview, you're not (struggling). When you're inside you don't think there's very much, but there's a certificate course for forklifts. You know, there's a construction certificate. There's the certificate for those people who flag on the construction sites, you know, those are all jobs that are in demand. CORCAN teaches those courses inside. I was telling the guys, "Take it! Take the signaler's course! Take the construction certificate! Take the First Aid!" If you have all three of them, if you have the signaler's course, it's a job, you got a job. But if you have the construction certificate that you can (work) on construction sites, and you have First Aid along with it, that ups your pay... Significantly, it ups your pay.

SW: Are there any other courses?

Donald: There are some computer ones, but I wouldn't recommend them, because they're not pertinent to anything out here. I work with computers out here and I had to learn it after I got out. The courses they teach you there, like Word Perfect, you know, they don't teach the ones that are used. They don't teach google sheets. They don't teach excel, they hardly even touch Excel. All those programs, they don't teach. They don't teach anything to do with mobile devices. Like, you know, until I got out... when I was doing my volunteer work placement downtown, some of the guys were showing me their cellphones. But you know, legally I wasn't even allowed to touch

them. That's one of the things that prisoners lack education in... and that's a big hurdle now. That's a big thing. They don't teach you anything about how not to get scammed. Guys spend all these years in prison, they come out and open a bank account... I got scammed, I know other guys that got scammed since they got out. Corrections is not teaching anything that protects against that. That's why Recon group's got to get somebody to go in every once in a while, and talk about that stuff. I'm learning how not to get scammed, but not enough to teach it to anybody.

I spent forty four years in prison... so going into that prison, and it's a prison that I had been in for five and a half years, was a different experience going in and walking through the front door. You don't walk through the front door, normally, going into a prison. If you do, you're in handcuffs and shackles, you know. Here I am, I walk in the first time, it was just "sign this, go in," and that was a different experience. Everybody was saying (before), you know, "are you nervous going in?" and I wasn't. The second time I was more nervous going in than the first time. I got in there, it was a seven o' clock to nine o' clock meeting, and the time went just... it was gone before I even knew it. I talked quite a bit, but they had lots of questions, too. They were prepared, they knew I was coming. When I'm leaving that night, normally when I left the meeting when I was an inmate, you go down this roadway, a little bit, and you take a turn, one path goes to your right, one path goes to your left. Left is going out the door, right is going back to your cellblock. I never took the left turn, so that was a different experience!

SW: How did that left turn feel?

Donald: That felt good! That felt good, you know, and it was nice to go in and get out. During the meeting, what struck me was the times... 'cause I was in that same meeting before as an inmate and it's the same. Time stood still. It's a different group of guys than when I was in there. They all had the same problems as I had when I was there, or similar problems. All that kind of stuff. I bet you if I go back in 20 years from now, it will still be the same. I'm listening to the guys talking, I'm saying, "well that was me! I can identify with that, I felt that way, too!" and it's because you're close to your environment, everything feeds off of everything else. You're caught up with the temporary view of what you're fighting for, all that. You fail to see the whole picture. Guys coming back tell you that the parole officers are mean and out to get you... and all that. They're not. I haven't met one that's out to get anybody yet. Some are stricter than others, yes, but to purposely go out to try to get you... is more work for them. Why would they do more work if they

didn't have to? The experience of all the people I've been in contact with is if you do what you need to do, you don't have any problems. Now that I've been out a couple of years, I only meet my parole officer once a month now. And it's for ten minutes. When you first get out, it's every week. They were amazed at that. They were amazed that I had been sitting where they were for forty years, and when I came to visit, I drove my own car up. Car, apartment, girlfriend, good job... I've been very fortunate that way. I probably got out at the best time for me. You know, I wish I had gotten out a long time before that, but I got out at the start of COVID, in 2020. The week I got out they did the lockdown in Montreal. So, I got out of prison, you know, and I can't go nowhere! I found a job during the lockdown, same place I'm working now, and landed a good job through it, and I wouldn't have gotten that job if it had not been for COVID. My qualifications, I couldn't compete with the people who would have applied, had I not been an emergency hire. So I told them all that stuff... but the main point I wanted them to understand: take advantage of every possible situation that you're in. Make connections. Talk to people when they come in. Ask them for opinions on stuff. Read the newspapers every day if you can... watch the news... so you have an idea about what's going on. Don't be afraid. There's nothing to be afraid of. Some are afraid of... you know, getting on a metro with a crowd of people... You'll do it. Everybody can do it. The first time, you know, you take your time, you go with somebody, and you'll get used to it quickly. I prepared myself, and I told myself, "no matter what, going through the process of getting out, I was going to take advantage of every opportunity that I could. I want to succeed."

It was a long transition for me. I did Escorted Temporary Absences (ETAs) for three years, I did Work Release for a year and a half, I did Unescorted (UTAs) for a year. Most people do Escorted for maybe a year, Unescorted for 6 months and then they're at the Halfway House. I had to do two Work Releases and three years of Escorted stuff first before they would even think about letting me go... I was determined.

SW: What are the benefits of someone like you going in and doing that kind of work as opposed to someone who has not been inside?

Donald: I have the credibility that a normal volunteer won't have, because I've walked in their shoes. That gives a different perspective for sure. I got a personal benefit from it too... when I left, for weeks after, I really cherished... it made me cherish what I have. I think it would be a good idea for lots of guys to go in, just once or twice, it just brings them back to that perspective, "hey, I was there, I'm here now." When I think about

that, that feeling comes back to me very strongly. It gave me a perspective of how privileged I am, and how lucky I've been, too. Hearing from someone who's walked in the same shoes, and I can tell them in a language that they talk. I think that's the main benefit... and, just the visual of it... When we were in the meeting, I said "I was in that chair, I sat in this chair before, as an inmate." The optics of that hopefully gave some encouragement. Especially with long-term offenders, sometimes they can start to give up hope and feel that there's no end to it... If I can do it, I'm no smarter than any of them, they can do it. And, I got to bring in messages from other guys that they knew, saying "hey, keep working on getting out, we're waiting out here. You're not alone."

For years, I've known other lifers that had come in, and I had contact with them. They used to come in and volunteer, I always thought that was valuable because it gave me perspective. They used to have a program called Lifeline which was run by lifers that used to come into prison all the time. They could do all kinds of stuff. They could even take guys out on escorted passes and everything. It was really valuable, but the Harper government cancelled it. But lifers used to go in a lot for that stuff, they were paid to do it, actually! I knew some of them when they were in, before they were in Lifeline. I benefited a lot from that.

SW: You've been elected to the Board of Directors, what do you hope to accomplish in this position?

Donald: I don't know, 'cause I've only been to one Board meeting, and I don't know how their Board works. I'm just hoping to be able to contribute. When you're a prisoner taking part in Open Door, it's all "take, take, take." I took the same as anybody else, you know, I took advantage of and wanted to come out for things. I think it's a chance for me to give back. I don't know what my role on the Board will be. I'll figure it out. I just want to strengthen the organization with my experiences. At least in the management of Communitas, there's going to be the voice of the inmates, because I can do that. I'm qualified to be their voice. I think it will be a fun experience.

SW: Do you have a bit of advice or encouragement to the guys inside who are wanting to get out?

Donald: Never give up hope. I'm a good example. 40 years, that's a long time. A thing I had to learn was to control the bitterness. When you're incarcerated, it's the correctional services, you... the system and you. When things don't go quite the speed you want, there's a tendency for bitterness to build up. You have to manage that. That bitterness can sour all your experiences going

forward. You have to find a way to deal with your frustration and not lose focus on what is important – getting out and rejoining society. There's a place for everybody, every inmate, everybody can change. If you can keep something of a positive attitude, Correctional Services will let you out. They put up so many roadblocks, but the system is set toward letting you out eventually. Don't fear parole boards. The Parole Board's mandate is to find reasons to let you out. You have to convince your parole officer that you're a manageable risk for them to recommend you. Even if they don't recommend you, still take your parole hearings. The parole board is looking for ways to let you out, if you can show them that you can be supervised in the community setting, that fulfills that. Parole officers inside don't always see that. Just because a parole officer says "you're not ready" ... Go for the boards. Take your hearings when they're available. Even if you don't get it when you're at the board that time, now you know how the board works, how a hearing's run. Work on your responses to what they asked you about or how you presented your case. Parole officers present your case then it's up to you to sell the board. No matter what the parole officer said... you get a chance in front of that board to say, "no, I won't be a high risk to re-offend... I've done this, this, this and this and I have this perspective, and I can be... supervised."

Start to prepare yourself. When you're in prison, your choices are very limited. Once you reach the halfway house, your choices and opportunities just snowball. You're not limited to those few items... let's talk food and junk food, you're not limited to what's in their small canteen. One or two types of candy, two... three different flavours of chips. You go in the grocery store, you got 10 different brands of chips with multiple choices of flavours. Everything's like that. What you couldn't have then, you could have out here. Opportunities and choices. Life's about choices. You may think you have no choices, but you still got choices... internally, how you're going to react, what messages you're gonna say to yourself. Because prison's such a negative place, I learned a long time ago that it was important - the messages I told myself. I told myself I wasn't a bad person, I made mistakes and I could change, this is temporary... that's hard to do over long periods of time. But it's important. If you tell yourself you're going to fail, you're probably going to fail. If you tell yourself "I'm going to be successful," you'll probably have more chance at success. Everyone's different. There's gonna be challenges. You need to earn a living, and you do need to put back into society. You do that by working, paying taxes, and being a good citizen as well.

Interview by Leigh

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

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