

Bridge Presentation for the CAEH Conference

My name is Mark Stephen and I am the Community Worker for The Bridge Prison Ministry in Brampton Ontario

The Bridge Prison ministry was established more than 40 years ago by the chaplain of the Ontario Correctional Institute, Daisy Dunlop. She had been a nursing sister working in India. After a time she became ill and was sent home to Canada, needing to recover. When the time came for her to return to India, she was not permitted because of her diminished health.

Looking for a new place to serve, she became the chaplain of the Ontario Correctional Institute, a treatment centre opened in Brampton, to provide men suffering from addictions an opportunity to receive help breaking their dependency. It was a place where they could find help dealing with both physical, and emotional addiction.

This was a wonderful step forward. Providing these men with the tools they needed to overcome their dependency on drugs and alcohol; and give men suffering with destructive sexual behaviors, coping mechanisms.

After a while though, Daisy realised, that while Ontario Corrections was helping these men to deal with their addictions, it wasn't dealing with the brokenness that prevented them from starting over.

In her words, "it didn't help them to heal their souls."

It didn't help them to deal with their:

- Hopelessness
- Abuses they had experienced
- The absence of community
- Fears
- shame
- The lack of relationship with their family and children.
- The selfishness that is built on fear and rejection.

So she started a weekly program that helped these broken men heal, and this program is still running today.

It began with a weekly meeting that dealt with such topics as hope, fear, forgiveness, boundaries, community, starting over, and the effect of our behavior on the people who love us

Each meeting begins with a presentation, made by one of the volunteers. Once this 10 minute presentation is completed, the men are given 2 questions that they are to discuss in their established breakout group.

These smaller groups discuss the questions, under the supervision of 1 or 2 volunteers. The volunteers are there to keep the discussion moving, and to be active listeners; this part of the evening takes about 1 hour. After it is completed the 5 breakout groups return to the main meeting room and the evening session is completed. Each cycle of topics takes 16 weeks and is completed with a celebration.

This program was extremely successful, and the men began to see how their lives could be changed. Soon however, they began to ask, “how can we take this new understanding of ourselves with us when we leave? How do I live this new life in **The Real World?**”

So we started to look at other ways The Bridge could help. We developed:

- Programs to support men leaving – providing clothes and hygiene kits
- We started a Support groups in the community – first Brampton and then Toronto.
- And then we started our re-location project.

What do I mean by the re-location project? For many men leaving incarceration, the re-entry into the community is more frightening than their arrest and conviction were. Why is that?

Men who have been incarcerated have learnt to be dependent on a system to make their decisions. How they are going to return to the community and survive, is a great unknown. They will tell you, “I don’t know what I am going to be facing.” For many, coming out of prison, simply means going back to their old life. Going back to their old community,

- The old street.
- The old friends.
- The old habits.

And all of these, are triggers that will launch them back into their old behaviors. For a person intending to change their life (and this is assumed with men who choose to go to treatment) going back is too dangerous.

- In order to change they must find new friends
- New neighbourhoods.
- New things to fill their time

And this means they have to deal with one of their biggest fears. HOMELESSNESS.

So how does our Re-Location Project work? People who live on the margins, have learnt through long experience not to trust anyone; especially someone who says they want to help. So the first thing we must do is become part of their life.

How do we do this? We begin by having the Community Worker become a volunteer facilitator with the Thursday Night Program in OCI (Ontario Correctional Institute). I become a known presence; the group knows me. I then encourage men who are thinking of coming to the Region of Peel (population 1.5 million) to join our Street Support group. About a month before their release I do a Bridge Intake with them; we make plans and begin our preparations for Discharge. We:

- Begin a search for housing
- Make Ontario Works appointments
- Draw up a To Do lists. (medical appointments, probation meetings, renewal of ID ...)

For most of the men I deal with, housing is their #1 concern. it is an immediate need; very little can be accomplished without an address. How have we dealt with the housing problem?

- Developed strategies for finding housing
- We have developed a team of landlords who will reserve rooms for me associated with the Bridge.
- We developed a plan for dealing with the shelter
- We provide cell phones.
- We have developed a network of volunteers able to help.

The number one cause of relapse and reoffending, for the people we deal with, is stress.

The stress caused by fear

- Fear of the unknown.
- Fear of being alone.
- Fear of ending up living on the street
- Fear of relapse.

How do I deal with their fear; by walking with them:

- I Meet them at reception
- By providing housing
- Going with them to Probation
- Providing a system for dealing with Ontario Worker (OW).
- Providing a system of communication – a phone / people they know.
- Connecting them to the Medical System
- Provide transportation

Why does all this matter? It gives them a fighting chance (and usually this is all they are asking for).

Every person who returns to their criminal life affects us all. There is a great gap between incarceration and the community. We seek to bridge that gap, so that our clients aren't expected to make such a difficult leap. When they are forced to leap; the likelihood of failure is vastly increased. So they will often simply turn around and go back to their old life.

When someone walks with them, the future looks brighter, and far more attainable. A person who does not re-offend; a person who becomes a contributing member of society; is a gift to all of us.