

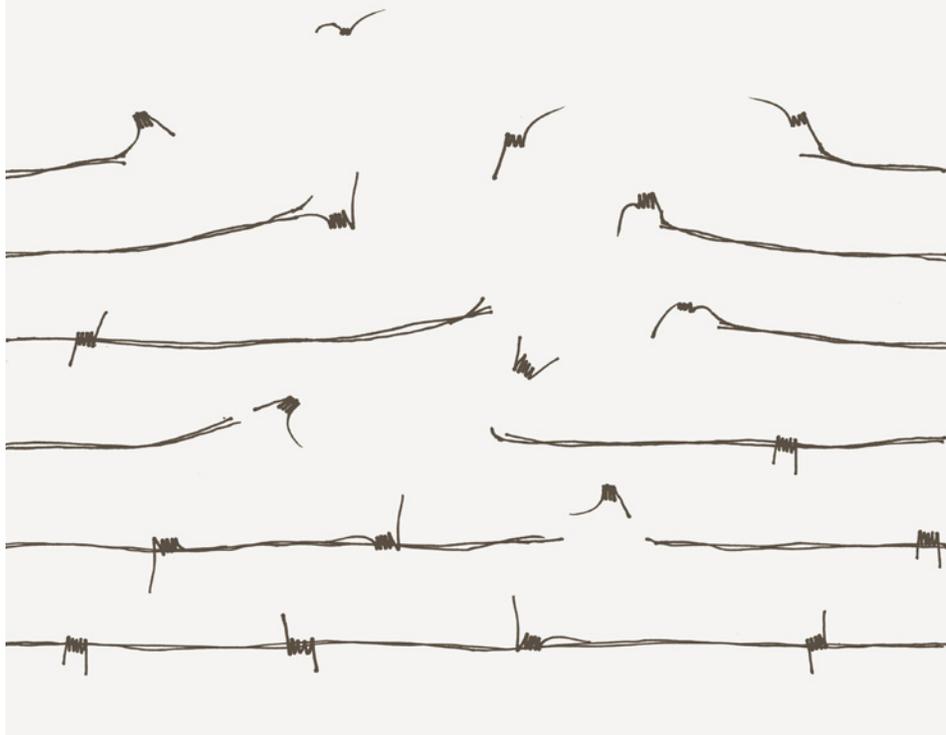
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M2/W2 ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER • SPRING 2021



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'New at the World': Finding a Way After 31 Years

The voice on the phone sputtered with tears. It was Neil.* He said he would be leaving prison in one week. After three decades he would be free. On the other end, Pascal began to weep. Neil asked Pascal if he would pick him up.

Pascal said, "No problem."

"It's gonna feel weird getting into a vehicle without handcuffs on," Neil said.

"I can bring some if you want," Pascal replied, grinning into the receiver.

Pascal Adam is a volunteer coordinator with M2/W2 Association, and he has

*Not his real name.

been working with people in prison for over 28 years. He met Neil almost eight years ago at Kent Institution.

Not all prison experiences are alike, yet they are usually life altering and filled with trauma and pain. Neil's years inside were underpinned by anger, isolation, and deep uncertainty: He often wondered if he would ever leave. He was denied parole again and again— as recently as last year.

Then, this past January, he learned he would be released. The Crown had overturned an application that would've kept Neil behind bars for an additional two years. Instead, his warrant would

expire and he would be free, albeit without much time to prepare.

"Corrections kept saying, 'This is the way you'll always be. You'll never change,'" Neil said. "I had the best reports and they still wouldn't move me on. I said, 'I've done 30 years. Let me adjust.' I was plopped on the street."

Plastic Money and Other Surprises

Over coffee, six weeks after Neil's release, Pascal described greeting Neil outside Mission Institution on a Friday afternoon. "He was holding the cash he withdrew from his prison account, and he said, 'This is not money. What is this?'"

After 31 years of incarceration, synthetic polymer bank notes weren't the only surprise awaiting Neil.

"I had to learn everything," Neil said, gesturing toward his smartphone. "This phone drives me crazy. There's so much going on. Everything is online. You gotta remember all these codes and passwords."

The first time he used his debit card, he was apprehensive. "The clerk gave me a look that said, Where have you been?"

Pascal helped Neil arrange housing, get a phone, open a bank account, and apply for PharmaCare, among other things. "If it wasn't for Pascal, this would've taken me ten times as long," Neil said.



He explained how some people in the community—a bank teller, the phone store guy, his nurse—went out of their way to help him. “It gives me encouragement that people are seeing that I’ve changed. I’ve been told for so long that I’m nobody.”

“Most people don’t understand the mental setbacks people experience when they leave prison,” Pascal said. “But it gives me hope when you see people who are willing to help.”

Neil is receiving treatment for a number of health concerns. He suffers from arthritis in his hands, and requires surgery to repair his shoulders. “Sometimes it’s hard to put a shirt on. It’s hard to walk with groceries in a bag. I ache all night and day after that.”

While he was at Mission, he contracted COVID-19. “I was very sick. I lost 34 pounds. I still haven’t recovered. My memory is gone. I get fatigued quickly. It’s frustrating because I am new at the world and it’s hard enough, but when you have a learning disability and this virus, it makes it twice as hard.”

To help people transition from prison, Neil sees a need for a better support system. “There should be a team set up when you come out: a social worker, health care worker, food, housing. One group sitting at a table saying, ‘This guy is coming out. You know what you need to do to help him. Let’s get it done.’”

Freedom and Fears

As he prepared for his release, Neil had a lot on his mind. He worried about being homeless in the middle of winter, finding a doctor or nurse, dealing with money, and living in a new city. “I thought, I’m scared to death. I want to make it so bad and I’ve got all these roadblocks. I’m gonna have to take them one at a time. The first thing I need is housing. Where do I go?”

Pascal said, “I told Neil the first day he was out, ‘I’ve dedicated this day to you.’ We didn’t finish doing all his

business until seven o’clock.”

“We went to Hidden Treasures,” Neil said, “and they gave me clothing to get me going, a watch. Pascal brought some sheets. It means a lot.”

“If Herta and I hadn’t brought the sheets, he would’ve slept on a bare mattress,” said Pascal.

“I was just happy to be out,” Neil said.

Pascal chuckled. “I keep telling him, ‘If you really feel out of place, I’ll come and lock you in your room for a bit.’”

‘Trust and Patience and Prayer’

When Neil first heard about M2/W2, he wasn’t interested. Over time, he realized that meeting regularly with a volunteer might ease his loneliness. “I started to feel like I needed someone to talk to, but I thought I didn’t deserve anybody so I felt guilty for applying to M2/W2. The first couple of times, I thought, Nah, I can’t do this. I don’t feel comfortable. I don’t deserve it. Then I was talking to someone and they said, ‘Let them make the decision to come and see you or not.’ And I thought, Okay.”

Neil figures it took him at least five years before he opened up to his volunteer mentors, Connie and Gerrit DeJong.

“Anywhere I seemed to go, Connie and Gerrit showed up. It was pretty nice to have that.”

“We learned that trust is something to be earned,” Gerrit said, via email, “trust and patience and prayer.”

Since Neil’s release, Gerrit and Connie have stayed in touch with Neil over the phone and write letters every month. “He has friends he can count on.” Gerrit said. “We hope and pray this pandemic will soon end and we can visit with him regularly.”

‘A Lifesaver’

These days, Neil finds joy in everyday things. “I go for a walk and I’m just amazed. I take my time and I take it in. I go to a cafe and look at people. I can

FINANCIAL UPDATE

God has been faithful throughout an uncertain year, and our donors’ generosity has led to a significant increase in donations. Whether you are a new donor or have been giving for years, thank you!

Hidden Treasures also had a great year, despite being closed for two months. Sales at both stores were consistently strong, and in 10 months we almost matched a full year’s sales. Thank you to everyone who makes the stores successful: our customers, volunteers, and staff.

Furthermore, we finished the year with expenses 10 percent below budget. All of this has prepared us for the conclusion of our government funding. We start our new fiscal year with a surplus that will afford a few months of transition time with the new NOLA program. To continue the program long term, however, we will need approximately \$35,000 per month in new funding.

BENEFITS OF MONTHLY GIVING

If you want to support M2/W2, please consider giving on a monthly basis. By giving regularly, you partner with us in providing mentorship and support to people affected by incarceration. We benefit because monthly donations allow us to plan more effectively. Regular giving also makes budgeting and financial planning easier for you. When backed by a group of committed regular donors, NOLA will be able to reach its potential and walk with people as they successfully reintegrate into local communities.

To learn more about setting up monthly giving, click the donate button at the top right of our website or contact our office.

buy a coffee when I want. I've got my music, I've got my guitar. I've got a few good friends—what more do you need?"

Neil currently resides in a rooming house, but the situation isn't ideal. "I still don't feel like I've got my own identity living like that."

He is quick to recognize that finding affordable housing is difficult, a task that requires patience and planning.

"I've got a chance because I've got my own mind and I don't give up. I'm gonna make it and I will ask for help. I will phone everybody until I get that help."

It's certain that "everybody" includes Gerrit and Connie, as well as Pascal, whom Neil called "a lifesaver."

Pascal continues to work with Neil as he takes practical steps toward building a successful life in the community. In addition to being an advocate, Pascal offers his encouragement and friendship. He reminds Neil how far he's come. "To me he's like gold," Pascal said.

As Neil becomes more accustomed to life outside—to smartphones, plastic money, and endless passwords—he keeps looking ahead. In the coming months, he will have surgery on his shoulders, and, once the pandemic ends, he hopes to connect with others in the community. He's prepared to walk a narrow path. "I won't compromise for anyone," he said.

When he needs someone to talk to, Neil knows he can turn to Pascal: "He always reminds me that the world revolves around me," Neil smiled. "We have some good laughs." 

NOLA: From Research Project to Pilot Program



After three years, the No One Leaves Alone (NOLA) Community Reintegration Project ended on March 31, 2021. While the research project has concluded, we are excited to begin a new NOLA program this April.

Our Board of Directors approved NOLA as an 18-month pilot program, and, like the research project, it will provide practical support, mentorship, and encouragement to people returning to the community after incarceration. The five key areas of support—housing, health, education, employment, and relationships—will carry over, as will the circle model, which connects each participant with two or three volunteers and a Case Manager. Together, the circle stays in touch, meets regularly, and progresses toward goals they've set related to the five key areas.

of their fellow professionals. For example, one parole officer said he hopes he can continue working with NOLA in the future, and expressed his appreciation for Allyson Johnson, a NOLA Case Manager, saying, "Allyson's relationships with clients are characterized by stability, trust, compassion, and appropriate flexibility... She challenges our mutual clients to be more self-reliant."

Who Is Eligible?

The NOLA program is designed for people who are recently released from prison and have a moderate to high risk to reoffend. This risk can be due to a range of factors including a lack of positive relationships and community support; a history of mental health and addiction; past trauma; and limited access to housing, education, and employment opportunities.

Collaborative Approach

In addition to circle-based support, NOLA case managers work with other non-profit organizations and corrections staff to help NOLA participants access government services, health care, counselling, addiction treatment, and more.

In this collaboration, our case managers have earned the respect

What Happens to Existing NOLA Members?

Of the NOLA project dynamic members, as of March 29, four will continue on and participate in the NOLA program. The rest will graduate—and move forward with the skills, relationships, and insights they gained through the NOLA project.

UPCOMING EVENTS

APRIL 18 - 24, 2021
Volunteer Appreciation Week

APRIL 20, 2021
Next Level Volunteer Training

JUNE 24, 2021
Annual General Meeting

OCTOBER 2, 2021
Annual Gala - Online



GOING PLACES

In March, Asia, one of our NOLA participants, moved from a room in shared accommodation to her own basement suite. Congratulations, Asia!

Asia said it feels like a new beginning for her. She is excited to get to know her new neighbourhood and wants to adopt a small dog to keep her company. Once she settles in, she plans to find a part-time job to supplement her disability income and possibly do some volunteer work as well.

On behalf of Asia and her NOLA Case Manager, Allyson Johnson, we want to say thank you to the Lookout Society for identifying a suitable place; to Steve and Giuseppe for the heavy lifting; and to Elaine at Hidden Treasures for lending out Puff, the store's truck. Plus a special thank you to Asia's NOLA volunteers. We can't do what we do without you!

ABOUT US

At M2/W2 Association, we mentor and support people who are committed to change yet face the emotional, spiritual, and physical obstacles that often result from incarceration.

► [LEARN MORE AT M2W2.COM](https://m2w2.com)

One NOLA member has expressed the desire to volunteer in the program, saying, "I want to give back to the community the way others gave to me to support a healthy reintegration."

How Long Will NOLA Run?

The Board has approved NOLA as a pilot program, and will evaluate it after 18 months. During this time, we will work hard to secure the funding we need to ensure the longevity of the program.

How Can I Participate?

NOLA is built around volunteers—everyday people who are willing to share their skills, life experience, and time to see people return from prison to live positive, crime-free lives in the community. We provide an introductory volunteer course and regularly offer Next Level Training sessions to further equip our team. To learn more about volunteering with NOLA, email steve@m2w2.com.

What Does NOLA Cost?

Three years ago, we launched NOLA with a federal grant. That funding,

however, has run its course. Now we need additional funds to cover NOLA's operating costs. The previous fiscal year left us with a budget surplus, and these funds will get the program off the ground. Going forward, we need an additional \$35,000 every month. To make this happen, we need financial partners. God has blessed us in the past and we are grateful for everyone who supports this initiative. To partner with us, visit our website or call our office. There is a great need to support people after incarceration—we believe NOLA has the experience and backing to help meet this need.

Those who have participated in the NOLA project attest to the value of the practical support they received: "You try to rebuild your life in community and you can't do it by yourself," said one participant. "NOLA cares and that's why it works. It makes a total difference."

We are excited to continue this work. Backed by the ongoing generosity of you, our donors, we know that change and success are possible.

