

IMPACT

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FINDING THE BIG PICTURE:

HOW VOLUNTEERS HELPED TONI PUT THE PAST IN THE REARVIEW

"Encouragement has made me realize a lot of things in my life," said Toni (not her real name) during a recent phone interview. Now living and working in the community, Toni described the support she received from M2W2 volunteers and how they accepted her for who she is. "It's not what people see, but what God sees," she said.

When Toni left prison last summer, though, encouragement wasn't easy to come by. The transition was difficult. The lasting effects of her conviction and sentence were taking an emotional and spiritual toll.

Understanding Toni's need for post-prison support, her parole officer referred her to our No One Leaves Alone (NOLA) community reintegration program.

Through Allyson Johnson, an M2W2 Program Leader, Toni met Debbie and Laara, volunteers who offered her the encouragement she needed.

"I saw myself as a bad person," Toni said. "They didn't. They encouraged me without being judgmental. They guided me, made sure I was doing well mentally, emotionally, and spiritually."

Toni described her volunteers as compassionate, kind, and understanding. "They go above and beyond," she

said. "They have the biggest hearts."

"At the beginning, I could see that she felt a lot of guilt," Laara said. "There was a heaviness on her spirit."

Debbie said she noticed that Toni seemed discouraged by the system. "We encouraged her to listen to what they were asking and do the work she needed to do. We wanted to lift her up so she could walk on her own two feet again, both spiritually and practically."

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The three spent time together regularly. They chatted on the phone and met over Zoom or in person. "We were able to be a listening ear," Laara said. "We would encourage Toni and share scriptures with her."

Debbie said, "I told her, 'You need to go forward and see that the past isn't your whole life. It's in the rearview mirror and that's smaller than the windshield ahead of you. The big picture

is out front of your car.' We were helping Toni choose what that picture will look like."

A FOUNDATION FOR BEING HUMAN

Toni is thankful to have people in her life to talk to and pray with. She said that Debbie and Laara guided her and helped her to grow to become a part of the community again in a positive way. "The most important thing is to have that emotional support," she said. "That's a foundation for being human."

"We let her know that there are people who care and want to see her have a successful life," Debbie said. "But also that she has to participate. It's teamwork. It's relationships."

"When we meet with her now, it's like a huge weight has been lifted off her. We can see there's hope," Laara said. "It's been faith-building to see how God answers prayers and witness what he has done in her life."

While NOLA helps people find work, housing, other basic needs, it also offers a safe place to emotionally process the journey from prison to the community. Toni said she was grateful for this, saying, "Fortunately, I didn't need financial support, but the amount of emotional and spiritual support I received money can't buy."



A DAY AT THE ZOO

RECREATION CAN HELP FOLKS ADJUST AFTER PRISON

Whether they are helping people look for housing, apply for jobs, meet their educational goals, or take care of their health, our No One Leaves Alone (NOLA) team works incredibly hard to provide practical support for folks reintegrating into the community.

Sometimes, post-prison support is about more than meeting practical needs. Sometimes it's about spending time together, helping someone find joy in everyday things.

Leo (not his real name) joined NOLA this past spring, and he's been living at a transition house. Christian, a Program Leader at M2W2, has been working with Leo since his release, taking him to medical appointments, helping him complete administrative paperwork, and offering encouragement and a listening ear.

During one of their meetings, Leo mentioned that he'd like to visit the zoo. Christian thought it would make an excellent recreational outing, one that would give Leo a chance to spend time around people without having to go to an appointment or fill out paperwork. Christian made a few arrangements and told Leo the good news. They were going to the zoo.

"I was so excited when Christian told me," Leo said.

Christian picked him up and they spent the day at the Greater Vancouver Zoo in Aldergrove.

"It felt good," Leo said. "I have been wanting to go for a while and I never got to go as a kid."

Leo said that he enjoyed how it felt like a family event. The best part of the day was the train ride through the zoo and also seeing the animals, especially the tiger, his favourite.

Why is a visit to the zoo important? It's a connection to the community. An opportunity to feel normal.

And that was Leo's reaction. He said that the visit made him feel normal. "It can be a hard adjustment coming from prison," he said. Going to the zoo was a chance to "get used to being around people."

Recreation is an important yet often overlooked part of community reintegration. Because of Leo's health and



Leo (not his real name) photographs a zebra at the Greater Vancouver Zoo. He said it felt good to see the animals and spend time in the community. (Photo: M2W2)

transportation limitations, he wouldn't have been able to visit the zoo on his own. Leo said he was grateful to Christian for arranging the visit.

Leo hopes he can visit other local spots: Stanley Park, Vancouver Aquarium, the PNE, and others. Places he's never had a chance to see. He also asked Christian if he could attend church.

During 2023, 21 people have accessed post-prison mentoring and practical support through NOLA. We are on track to serve 40 people in this fiscal year.

Thanks to the financial support of individual donors, our NOLA team can be there to meet with folks like Leo, who are rebuilding their lives after prison. They can get to know them, help them identify challenges, and walk with them as they overcome those challenges. Thank you for making a difference. 



LET'S END IMPRISONMENT, ONE PERSON AT A TIME

At M2W2 our vision is to end imprisonment, one person at a time. We pursue this vision by providing prison mentorship, community reintegration support, and opportunities for work experience.

Learn more at m2w2.com

WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE FOR PEOPLE LIKE TONI AND LEO?

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