

A HEARING

BY Colleen Rickard



In 2014 I joined an 'after prison' support group for John (not his real name). The group is a CoSA (a.k.a. *Circle of Support and Accountability*).

John was released from prison in 2012 and will be on parole for the rest of his life. Our CoSA tries to get together with him weekly.

Last winter, John invited me to attend a spring parole hearing which would examine the possibility of him moving from day-parole to full-parole. He had told our CoSA about the upcoming hearing, but his invitation to be part of it came as a surprise.

John was living in a half-way house, since his release. His life on day-parole was rigidly structured with an array of restrictions, rules, curfews and monitoring. He couldn't travel outside of the city without permission and when he did go, it was for very limited time-frames with detailed itineraries in place.

Full-parole, if granted, meant more freedoms, including living in his own home, travelling outside city limits whenever he wanted to, no curfews, less reporting and so on. There would still be stipulations and monitoring. But full-parole was a big deal, for all involved, and any slip on John's part (no matter how small), would set him back, possibly leading to re-incarceration.

Attending a parole hearing was out of my ken. Like many, I only had impressions, shaped mostly by television. I was curious about the process. But honestly, I expected a somewhat

uncomfortable session. I wondered....How would these government people behave? And the big question of course: would they find reason to grant full-parole?

All of us in our CoSA knew that John had been living as a responsible citizen for a long time. He followed the rules dictated by his parole, he participated in a variety of self-evaluation classes, he took book-keeping classes, he joined in with Christian men's groups, he did volunteer work at church and with the Salvation Army, he secured a good and steady job, he was committed to his personal spiritual growth through regular church services, bible classes and personal reading. And he attended weekly meetings with our CoSA.

The group that arrived to support John was the largest the government had ever



encountered at a parole hearing. There were nine of us including our CoSA, Micah's CoSA Coordinator, John's parole

officer and John's support worker from the half-way house.

The examining team from Correctional Service Canada (CSC) numbered three. They were focussed and intensely serious. One took the lead;

the others took notes and provided intermittent support. We watched and listened as the lead examiner outlined

The examining team was intensely serious

John's crime; the story was dark and the examiner didn't mince words. John's parole officer was invited to give a report on John's activities and challenges since his release from prison. This was followed by our senior CoSA member sharing information about John's activities, as witnessed over time by the CoSA team.

Then it was John's turn. The lead examiner questioned John in acute detail, pointing to and asking about the past, the present and the future. There were many questions – hard questions - that drilled into the heart of the issues of John's life and the hazards of living with full-parole. When John got side-tracked in his answers, the examiner brought him back into focus, insisting on direct replies to specific questions. It was a long interrogation.

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The hearing was an eye-opening experience for me in many ways. Perhaps the biggest surprise was the manner of the examiners. They were strict, respectful, courteous and professional. The topic at hand was hard. The issues, serious. The decision, difficult. And throughout it all, they unfailingly preserved the dignity of the man they were questioning.

Eventually, we broke for recess while the examiners discussed things.

It was hard to know which way things would go. A lot of issues had been raised and John had not had an 'easy go' of it. But, in the end he was granted full-parole. Lots of big smiles and hand-shaking ensued.

Post-script:

Our CoSA continues to meet regularly. John is doing well.

A while back, we met on a beautiful farm near Waldheim for a fire-pit and barbeque with great food and conversation! At one point, I found myself mentally retreating to survey our small group. I couldn't help but marvel at the simple reality that our little CoSA is immersed in something BIG. We call it friendship. And it makes this world a better place. Moreover, being part of our CoSA helps me, not just John.

