

Going to Prison

By Courtney Ballantyne

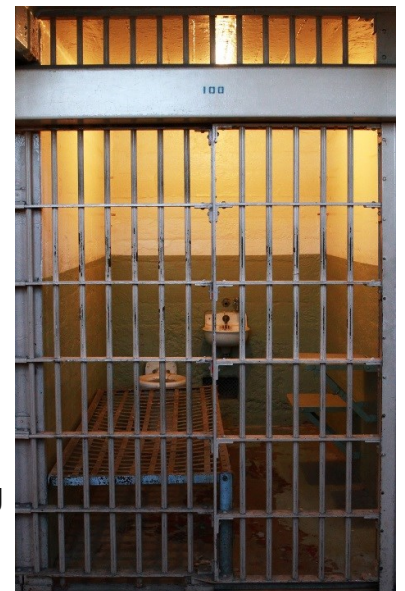
Every second week I go to prison. Each time I enter the facility, I am free to walk back out of the gates, drive home, and continue on with my daily life in society. As I leave, I always think of the man that I visit, as he has not had this opportunity in almost two decades. This seemingly mindless act of walking back to my car never fails to make me think of how much we take for granted each day. The smallest actions, such as going for a walk or eating ice cream for dessert, do not typically tend to arise when we think of the word freedom. Even tasks that we may not enjoy, such as buying groceries or cutting the grass are freedoms and privileges that we possess without being aware of them.



For the past few months, I've had the privilege of volunteering with the Person2Person (P2P) program at the Regional Psychiatric Centre (RPC) in Saskatoon. I participate in one-on-one visits with a man who is a patient at the RPC. Its been a wonderful experience and I've learned quite a bit in my short time so far.

I've received many questions from people in my life who know about my visits, so I've decided to briefly address a few of the most common questions and share with you some knowledge and experiences that P2P has given me.

"What do you talk about?" I too had this question before I began my visits. Its hard to imagine how a conversation would flow when personal and identifying information can only be shared by one of the two in the conversation. Luckily, the man that I visit is fairly easy to make conversation with and is not shy of talking. He often discusses his hometown, his family, and recently has began sharing with me his personal struggles with mental illness. He likes music and movies, so we converse about the latest songs we've heard on the radio or favourite films we've watched. When there's not as much to talk about we play cards or colour together.



Recently, I've learned that some visits are easier than others. During one visit, he was in a particularly bad headspace, and shared very openly about his personal struggles with mental illness. Although I had felt as if I was gaining a sense of this man and how to navigate our conversations, I realized that I had no idea about the severity of his illness. This visit changed the course of our subsequent visits, which now are guided by how he is currently feeling. I feel grateful that he feels comfortable enough to share this with me, and although I can rarely do more than be a non-judgemental and listening ear, I always remind myself of the value that simple catharsis can bring.

“Do you know what they did?” No, not unless they decide to reveal this information. Personally, I prefer not to know. This is not because anything they said would make me fearful, but because it makes it easier to be non-judgemental and eliminate any extra biases. I openly welcome any conversation about the past, and am happy to talk about it if the conversation steers that way, but at the same time I do not have a secret burning desire to know.

“Isn’t it dangerous/scary?” Not once have I ever felt unsafe in my time at the RPC. Sometimes going through the security at the front gate can feel more intimidating than sitting in a room with inmates! I tend to think of it in the same way I think of situations such as driving. One should be cautious, but not scared.

“Why do you do it?” Regardless of an individual’s past or present behaviour, we are all human beings. Every person needs attention, compassion, and a friend. I truly believe that you can find good in any soul if you look deep enough, and for many, you don’t have to dig very deep.

In short, I also struggle with certain ways that our correctional system currently operates. Individuals who require the most attention, programming, compassion, and care are instead faced with isolation, stigmatization, and marginalization. We have been programmed to fear the inmate. Not help the inmate. I believe that in many cases, it is not the offender who has failed their community, but the community who has failed the offender.

An experience I had that helped solidify the benefits of the P2P program, was volunteer appreciation night. On this night, patients had worked to set up the gym and provide us with delicious food and snacks. On every table sat boxes of hand-made beaded jewelry, and later in the evening, raffle prizes of beautiful paintings done by patients were



given away. Some patients wrote letters of appreciation to their P2P visitors, which were read aloud at the event. One patient spoke of a time that he felt suicidal, but that thinking of his P2P visitor encouraged him to bravely carry on. When volunteers were given a chance to speak, I learned of individuals and couples that had been visiting for decades. To me, this is inspiring. Some had even mentioned that their patients had since been moved to another facility, but they still drove out to the new location to visit every once and a while. I felt overwhelmed by the huge amounts of appreciation expressed to volunteers by the staff and inmates. It just goes to show how much a seemingly small act can make such a huge difference in the lives of others, and even in our own lives.