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Transitioning from behind bars to the outside world

After getting out of Collins Bay Institution for the second time, Thomas Campbell decided to make a run for it. He stole a bike in Kingston and rode it all the way to Toronto. In Toronto, Campbell was in a cycling crash and ended up getting picked up by the police again.

"I went up in front of a Native judge, and she said to me, 'If you come up in front of me again, the sentence won't be whatever it is, it's going to be 15 or 20 years,'" Campbell explained in an interview with the Whig-standard.

While he was serving his sentence, a few friends approached Campbell.

"I had a couple lifer buddies — these guys are never getting out, they're going to die in there. They took the time to talk to me and they said, 'Hey, you did enough time.' "They actually took the time to worry about me. I took that as a, 'Hey, they care about you, man. You should start caring about yourself,'" Campbell said.

When he was released again in 2019, Campbell was committed to turning his life around. He went directly to Ryandale Transitional Housing and received the support and resources to re-establish his life after a decade in prison.

Ryandale is a transition house in Kingston that provides supportive living to those who are experiencing homelessness or transitioning from rehabilitation or the correctional system. Campbell credits much of his success to the time he spent at Ryandale.

"This house is a good house because it helps you. It's not like a halfway house. It's more geared to helping guys find their way because they've got lots of freedom here. Whenever I had a problem, I go to Dave (Mcqueen) and talk to him about it, or my parole officer, or my Native elder. I always had someone that I could go to," Campbell said.

While Campbell had a lot of support, he explained that transitioning from life in prison to being on the outside is an overwhelming process.

"When you do a lot of years inside, you get institutionalized, and when you come out, everything hits you at once and you don't know how to deal with that stuff so you have to sit back and go, 'Whoa,'" he explained. "I didn't know how to use a cellphone when I got out. I didn't know I had to go get an ID. I couldn't handle trying to talk to people and ask them for stuff. It was hard for me to understand what they are saying to me a lot of times. Like, I remember I went to get ID and they said, 'You need a birth certificate,' and I showed them my prisoner ID, and now I understand that wasn't enough, but I got upset about that. It's just those little, small things.

"It is really hard when you come out. You've got to get used to everything."

Dave Mcqueen, the manager of Ryandale, said the institutionalization that people experience in prison has a profound impact on them after they are released.

"With institutionalization you are basically starting from scratch. Sometimes you're dealing with a guy who all they know is life on the inside. So, having the freedom that they have, it's quite a whirlwind," Mcqueen said in an interview.

Mcqueen remembers one specific instance when Campbell first arrived at Ryandale in 2019.

"He said he was going for a walk — and I knew what to expect, I was already prepared for it. I heard Tom go out the front door and I stuck my head out my office door and it was like 30 seconds later he was back in the door and back into his room. I knew it was going to happen because for some, being able to walk out the door, knowing there's no curfew, no sign-in, it can be quite overwhelming," he said.

For Campbell, the understanding and encouragement from the staff at Ryandale was essential for his recovery. While there was an acknowledgement that it would be a difficult process, he knew he had a support system in place.

"When I came here, this house, Dave told me, 'It's going to be hard, but we're here for you.' I think it's having people to sit down and talk to and explain what's going on, and trying to help you along. It's easier for me to sit down and talk to people who've been through what I've been through because it's easier for them to understand. I always felt safe here; it's a safe environment," Campbell said.

Campbell also began a Native program at the halfway house and reconnected with his past.

"When I first got out, I took a Native program at the halfway house and I had an elder and we talked about everything that happened in my life, the stuff I got into, how I hurt people, how I hurt my family and myself," he said. "All those things, dealt with. I did a lot of stuff. I hurt a lot of people. I didn't just break into one (jewelry) store once, I broke into a store five or six times, the same store. You have to take ownership of that."

With support from Mcqueen and his Native elder, Campbell was able to address his past and take ownership of his mistakes without letting them dictate his future. Now, he is able to enjoy and appreciate his freedom.

"You need people in your life that are going to help you through no matter what. I know I've done the work, I know that. I'm very proud of myself, that I took the time and processed everything. I promised myself that I'd enjoy my freedom now, and I'll do it until the day I die, because this is great. I could never do this on the inside. Enjoy the birds. The first day I got out, there used to be a tree right over there, and these two squirrels ran up beside me and I just started crying. You don't experience that inside," he said.

In addition to helping Campbell understand his mistakes, Mcqueen encouraged him to fill his life with fulfilling and positive experiences. He reconnected with his heritage and began to paint seriously again.

"With Tom, he started showing me his early artwork, and I was blown away. It was all freehand and by memory. I encouraged him to pursue that and to reconnect with his heritage. I've encouraged him to continue with (his art). I'm proud of what Tom's done," Mcqueen said.

Now, Campbell is drawing on what he learns from his Native elder and incorporating those teachings into his own artwork.

"I'm Mi'kmaw from the Wolf Clan. The wolf is my native spiritual sign. I'm an artist, a self-taught artist. I paint wildlife, a lot of native work," Campbell said.

Today, Campbell is living independently and working as an artist. He has stayed connected with Mcqueen and regularly drops into Ryandale to both receive and offer support to the people staying there.

"It's a whole different world when you come out here and you can actually look yourself in the mirror and say, 'I like you.' And you can look people in the eye and they know you're being honest with them. I'm just a human being on this earth who made a lot of mistakes, and I paid for them," he said.

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