

Margaret Drewlo and Natalie DeFreitas have 15 years experience between them, working in provincial or federal institutions and with the justice system.

Due to the segregated nature of prisons, the experiences of working inside a prison are unique and largely unknown to the general public. Margaret and Natalie discovered their shared history during rare quiet moments while working in a university-counselling centre. What follows is their conversation about their most important acquired wisdom from working in the secret world of prisons.

Margaret: When I saw the theme for this issue, I immediately thought of your recent TEDxVancouver talk on restorative justice and our coffee room talks about our experiences working in the justice system.

Natalie: *I also appreciate that in our work environment we connect with colleagues from different areas of expertise and the TEDx talk was an opportunity for me to share my experience with a broader audience outside of the mental health or justice networks.*

Choosing the work

Margaret: I was completely naïve coming to work in the jail system for the first time. I was working in retail at the time — feeling stuck and under employed. The opportunity came up to facilitate substance abuse education groups for youth in the provincial jail system and I jumped at the chance. I gradually expanded my

work to include working in adult jails. I thought I would last a few months. I stayed for seven years.

Natalie: *While completing my undergraduate degree at Queen's University, I volunteered with a non-profit literacy organization in 5 federal, adult penitentiaries in Kingston, Ontario. Subsequently, I worked with a restorative justice non-profit in Toronto, Ontario with youth both in and out of prisons. Through these experiences, I gained an intricate understanding of the contributing factors to criminal behaviours — namely the role of mental health concerns, poverty, trauma/abuse and illiteracy/educational influencers. This understanding shaped my decision to pursue a career in mental health.*

What others should know when considering work in the prison system

Margaret: When working in the prison system, it helps to be open-minded and it is imperative to have good personal boundaries. Open-mindedness is beneficial when coming to terms with the reality of the lives of much of the incarcerated population. They have lived in poverty, they have mental health conditions, and often they come to their first incarceration with a history of abuse and trauma. Boundaries are vital to maintain your own physical and psychological safety and ensure the safety of other staff and inmates. Because prisons are largely sealed off from the outside, interpersonal dynamics are intense. How one interacts with staff and clients in such a setting can have a surprisingly large impact — for the good, or not.

Lessons from the Inside: Counselling Perspectives from Behind Bars

MARGARET DREWLO, MA.

Margaret Drewlo has an M.A. in psychology. She is a clinical psychology doctoral student at Antioch University in Seattle—a school with a strong social justice focus. Margaret is currently competing her pre-doctoral internship at the University of British Columbia.

NATALIE DEFREITAS, MA.

Natalie DeFreitas has an M.A. in psychology from the Adler School of Professional Psychology. Natalie currently works as a Registered Clinical Counsellor at the University of British Columbia and as a justice consultant within her private practice.

Natalie: *There is an opportunity for huge positive impact, but not without acknowledging one's position in the environment. Extra attention to honing self-awareness, practicing complex empathy, and challenging biases is imperative. Consideration*

must be given to how the systemic structure of the environment will affect you and your client personally and professionally. I learned quickly to confront aspects of my own identity as an educated, privileged, woman, coming into an environment where the vast majority of my clients would not share this same demographic. It helps to be cognizant of the uniquely damaging stigmas that incarcerated clients experience in order to avoid perpetuating them.

The importance of self-care

Margaret: Self-care helps maintain a balanced life in the face of the tremendous stress of forensic work that partners, family and friends may not understand. Vicarious trauma is something that everyone working inside a prison will encounter. A person who has lost his or her freedom is experiencing a trauma, regardless of how that person has acted out in society. Most people in prison have experienced a lifetime of trauma even before they are sentenced and incarcerated. Then there are those incarcerated individuals who have brought tremendous trauma to their victims and the families of their victims. One certainty about working in a prison setting — you need to be ready to confront trauma and look after your self in the process.

Natalie: *It was difficult for me to witness the injustices that came with the territory, either through my clients' personal lived trauma, the trauma inflicted as a result of my clients' actions or traumas inflicted by the "system" itself. I learned that I needed to do my small part to break the cycle. In order to create rich and meaningful*

encounters for my clients, I needed to ensure I did the same in my personal life. Additionally, I really learned to appreciate humour and opportunities to laugh with my support network. As simple as it sounds, it helps balance tough work experiences.

A client who changed us or informed our future practice

Margaret: I had many life changing experiences while working in the jail system including hearing details of violent assaults and murders and seeing young and adult men trying to make a positive change in their lives. The memory that is the most sustaining is one that still makes me laugh. I was working in a secure custody wilderness camp for adolescent boys. The setting was quite beautiful, the childhoods of most of the boys and young men quite tragic. One day before a discussion group started, the boys seemed unusually excited. After a few moments, I discovered that they put a small garter snake in my art supply case and hoped for a big reaction. Luckily for me, I was not afraid of snakes. In seeing those mirthful faces in front of me I encountered the healing miracle of laughter.

Natalie: *I feel privileged for my time working within the correctional system. I am so grateful to my clients for allowing me to be part of their journey. I remember working with a group of male youth at a remand facility. Initially they tested me, and refused to participate during group sessions. One session, much to everyone's surprise, we bonded over our shared appreciation of hip-hop music. After witnessing many of the kids parallel their own*

experiences with lyrics in rap songs, we collaboratively decided to incorporate music writing into our group work as a way of processing difficult emotions. At the end of our work together, a client shared that for the first time in his life he felt he "had a voice." I consistently reflect on my time working in prisons, how it has contributed to my growth, and find myself humbled and inspired by the experiences I've had.

Our varied experiences in the prison system shaped us, ultimately for the better. We bring the insight from those years into our current work with clients and find that our lessons from "behind bars" ultimately have made us more skilled practitioners. ■