

Partners *in* Action

An innovative local program is helping paroled inmates rejoin the community.

The program, called Partners in Action, is seeking members of the UNB community to participate in its efforts.

Partners in Action was started 5 years ago by the John Howard Society of Fredericton.

Jacob Tremblay, who coordinates the program, describes it as part of the Society's ongoing efforts to help adult offenders.

Tremblay explains that the John Howard Society is a "non-profit organization. It deals primarily with disadvantaged people...who have been or are at risk of being offenders. We develop programs to meet the needs of these people."

Partners in Action developed to fill the needs of paroled inmates in the Fredericton area. The program is the only one of its kind in Canada.

Once an inmate has been approved for parole, and has been accepted into the program, Partners in Action provides the "client" with a support network of community-based organizations. These can be crucial in helping paroled inmates make a successful transition to life outside of prison.

The support services offered by Partners in Action include access to educational upgrading programs, job search counselling, and

others kinds of psychological or behavioural counselling.

What makes the Partners in Action program unique is its emphasis on placing clients in a stable home environment in the community. This is particularly important for clients integrating into the Fredericton community, since the city lacks a conventional halfway house for paroled inmates.

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Homeowners in Fredericton provide a private room as sleeping quarters for the client, as well as providing the client with meals. In exchange, a fee of \$19 per day is provided for the homeowner. Correctional Services of Canada has been developing and running the program in conjunction with the John Howard Society and funds it.

The responsibilities of the client include attending educational or job-related programs and abiding by the conditions of their

parole such as curfews.

Clients for the program come from across Canada. They include paroled inmates from both minimum and maximum security correctional facilities, but excluded from the program are such violent offenders as those convicted of murder or sex offenses.

Growing pains are being felt in the program in the form of a shortage of spaces to meet the demand by potential clients. According to Tremblay, Fredericton has "roughly about 9 beds. About 15 clients per year are helped through the program."

Two of the main goals Tremblay would like to see Partners in Action accomplish include establishing more homes for clients by pairing them with interested members of the UNB community, and providing faculty, staff and students with the opportunity to gain experience in the social welfare field.

Tremblay welcomes mature students, faculty or staff who can provide "an extra room arrangement" in a stable, non-renting home environment. He points out that for individuals who would like to be involved on a part-time basis only, participation as a homeowner may be temporary or on a trial period basis.

Volunteers are also being sought after for the program. Tremblay encourages non-ma-

ture students, as well as other interested individuals, to participate in the program in this capacity. Students with a background in psychology or social work are particularly desired, but Tremblay stresses that Volunteer positions are available for students from all departments and faculties. The type of volunteer work involved depends upon what the individual has to offer the program.

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Tremblay gives liaison work as an example of the type of volunteer position needed by the program. "For instance, an individual new to the Fredericton area—show them the area, help them get their way around, which is what I do on a daily basis." Other types of work could be developed to suit the interests and background of the volunteer, according to Tremblay.

Additional information on Partners in Action can be obtained by contacting the Program Coordinator directly at 450-2750.

-- M.C.

An outside chance

By Brenda Bouw

Spencer Chaisson stands comfortably on the porch of the John Howard Society house gripping a half-empty 7Up can as he takes verbal shots from a group of smokers standing beside him. "Spencer as spokesperson for the John Howard?" one calls. The others laugh.

"For the PIA," he answers, placidly.

Chaisson, 28, is not embarrassed by the team of hecklers. He's proud to tell his story of how the society's Partners in Action program (PIA) has helped steer him away from a life of crime and intermittent jail terms.

"Chances are if I keep going the way I am I'll probably never see the inside again," he says in an interview Tuesday, looking frequently across the room at Jacob Tremblay, the PIA coordinator.

"I've seen a tremendous change in you since you came," says Tremblay, in a counselling tone of voice. "You can stay on the outside if it's what you want."

The "inside"—jail—is where Chaisson spent the past 13 years of his life, until last November when he became eligible for parole. He was then told about the PIA program by his Saint John parole officer, but says it took him a month to decide whether he was ready for "the outside."

"I was terrified at first. I found it a little odd not being in a cage anymore," says Chaisson, speaking at ease with a hint of a Newfoundland accent. "I wasn't used to the fact that people were being nice to me. In jail there is so much hatred. You get caught up in it. You start thinking that's how things should be."

After a week of correctional checks on the former prisoner and security checks on his new landlords, Chaisson was accepted to the program and was found a place to live in the city.

Now that he's out, Chaisson says he remembers what it's like to have a family. He also says he can't remember why he began committing the crimes, such as property damage, selling drugs and theft, that put him in jail.

"I knew what I was doing was wrong, but I didn't think there was hope for me. When you're feeling like a criminal you act like one. You stop caring about where your family is or how they're doing. I missed out on those years."

"There were times, while I was in jail, that I wanted to end it. But now I want to meet a nice woman, have kids, and do what I should have been doing all of this time I was away."

Chaisson has also found himself some part-time work in maintenance at the local YW-YMCA.

He says his goal is to regain the respect of the community.

"I don't want people thinking I'm some kind of animal. I've made my mistakes, but I did the time. I know better now."

Tremblay reminds Chaisson, who now holds an all-consuming feeling of optimism about his life, that not all people will accept him. But for Chaisson, the chance to prove to the ones who matter, would be his reward.

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