

Women In2 Healing - filling the gaps for women who leave prison with nothing

Amber Christie is a Cree woman living in Mission who has experienced not only the Inside, but the revolving door between life on the street and the jail cell. Today she is a mother and partner, sober and drug free, and she is using her previous life experiences to empower women to live the lives they really want.

In 2005, shortly after her last moment behind bars, she co-founded Women In2 Healing with the rest of the women from the group. She now is also conducting a research project, Aboriginal Healing Outside The Gates. Going into year five of the Women In2 Healing project, she took the time to share her story and her hopes in conversation with Kerry Coast.

Amber: I've been to prison probably thirty times. The last time was for assault with a weapon, times two. That was in 2005. All the times before that were drug related, possession and trafficking. I was living in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver and I was heavily addicted to heroine. I lost count of how many times I went to jail and on what charges.

Normally when you get charged in the East End, and you're a drug addict just trying to get by, they try to get you in and out of jail quickly because the jails are so full. On my last charges, they were asking for a two year sentence. I did six months on remand, that's when you are in prison without a court date because you breached the conditions of your bail, so your bail is revoked. That was in Alouette Correctional Center.

Kerry: What was it like in Alouette?

Amber: When I was there it was different than it is now. Everyone had paying jobs, we were all able to work, and we kept busy. Some that were not on

remand could get passes to go out, like to the local thrift store to work.

All that has been pulled. There are only a few jobs now, like in the kitchen. I was there recently, for my work, and I couldn't believe it. Before, we were integrating and helped to learn from our mistakes. We had the mother baby program. It actually changed my life.

Everything was different - everything that helped us to do something differently, to want to be something else, those privileges have now been taken away.

We had a warden who believed in us, and I guess someone in government didn't think that we deserved to be believed in.

Kerry: You say when you were there, something helped you to break out of your destructive lifestyle?
Amber: When I got there I was really drug sick. Immediately I was sent to the doctor, she was amazing, and she helped me to be different; she made me feel better about myself and see that I could be all the things and do all the things in my life that I wanted.

I got jobs in jail and got interested in life again. I reconnected with my family and started visiting them.

Then we started a research project. That was right after I was released, although I had heard about it before. This project changed so many women's lives. The women I work with on our project now were all in prison at the same time - we started to research ourselves and got passionate about what we wanted. Now we encourage women to want to do better things.

They shut the research forums down in 2007, and then we started it back up on the outside. We have with us one of the doctors and a recreational therapist from the prison.



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We have got a lot going on now. We all research our passions in hopes to create change in our communities.

When you get out of jail, there are not enough resources.

Now when you are in remand custody, you don't get to do schooling, you don't get to access programs, you don't get to do anything. When you are let out of remand, you're just let out onto the street. We're doing research to try to change that, so there are resources both inside of prison and when you get out.

Kerry: With the research project, are you eventually going to be making recommendations to Corrections Canada, or to develop programs?

Amber: We gather data. We're learning all the time how we can transfer this knowledge to the communities. Eventually we want to be able to use the data to show Corrections Canada what's not working. Now are they going to listen to

that? Probably not. They haven't yet. We used to have a some sort of connection with Corrections, but it's no longer happening.

Kerry: Why the change?
Amber: The Warden changed. Things were changing by 2005, women were getting better, their voices were being heard, and part of the government doesn't like that: they don't want women to get better. They want them to go back out there and keep that ongoing cycle. Things took an abrupt change at that time, and we hear the same thing from women all over BC about that time.

Corrections Canada is stating that women are getting adequate housing referrals when they leave prison, they are getting support, but they're not. They get a welfare cheque and a bus ticket.

One thing that's really hard for women is finding housing when they get out. Most recovery homes won't accept them until thirty days have

passed since they have been out of prison. So what are they supposed to do in that time?

There are so many resources they say they are giving women that women are not actually getting. Like drug and alcohol counseling. When I was in there I was trying to get help. I had a really big drug problem so I went to the drug and alcohol counselor but it was useless. She couldn't refer me to any programs because I was in remand. These programs help women, it doesn't mean they will all change, but there's a better chance that they will if they have access to them.

Kerry: What's the most significant information that you're getting from the women you interview?

Amber: They need resources and health care and stable safe housing. The aboriginal healing project is just in the beginning phases - we knew these things before, we knew women were not