

Today, I'm a mother, a contributing member of society, and that means something to me.

**I'm not the person down on Hastings Street doing drugs.
We hope to make the project bigger and make it national."**

accessing proper health care and community resources. These are supposed to be referred to them, but that is not happening. We want to know why women are not accessing health care resources. They are ending up with diseases like HIV and hepatitis and back on the streets.

Kerry: So why aren't they accessing health care?

Amber: We have found so far that there are a lot of aboriginal women that instead of accessing western health care, they are accessing traditional health care like sweats, and that's not adequate in cases like HIV.

Eight out of ten women right now walk out of prison with nothing, and walk right back out on to the streets. They are not getting what they were asking for, what they need.

I was released, after six months, into the Downtown Eastside, with nothing - not even a welfare cheque; no clothes, just "get out!" Almost 50% of the women in Alouette now are in remand, like I was, from what we know.

Kerry: What did you do when you were let out on the street with nothing?

Amber: I was lucky - I called my family. A lot of women don't have any family left, or any family that wants to talk to them since they have been in prison. My family came to my court dates, all the way from Mission. They knew I was going to be released, so they came that day too. After the hearing they told the guards and the court, 'please don't release her until we get back, we are just going to the wash-room.' They let me out the door as soon as my family left. They didn't tell me my family was there and coming back in a minute, so for two days I was on the street.

That's what happens

to most women. They get out and they are given a bus ticket right back to where they were picked up.

I was let out on Hastings Street, so the first thing I did was I went out and used, and then I went home. I went back to live with my mom. I used again after that, but a few weeks later I stopped cold turkey. That was a few weeks after I got out and I met some other women from Alouette on Facebook, and we started a group online. That's how we all got connected, and it turned into Women In2 Healing.

Kerry: Was it their support that helped you to quit?

Amber: Absolutely. And that support helped me to continue pursuing what I wanted in my life. I had already decided I wanted to quit. And our group went back to what we had been doing in prison, doing our research.

Many of us now have jobs working on this issue. Some are still involved with us but do other kinds of jobs. Many of our group work for the "Doing Time" project with UBC. We all help write our own grants and ethics submissions - if you've ever done that, you know how complicated it is!

We just got funding for two women from our project, who we picked up when they were released, to go to an aboriginal confer-

ence in Prince George with Network Environments for Aboriginal Research BC for the Mission project. That kind of involvement means a lot to women. It changes people's lives, the things we are doing today.

With Women In2 Healing, we're trying to change things. We're researching the flaws in the

system and opening up those flaws. Today we're armed with knowledge and we want to use it.

Kerry: Is there a difference of experience inside between native and non-native women?

Amber: Oh yes. One of the best things we had when I was there was our Elder. We had sweats there; our culture was respected at one time. We hear it isn't so much anymore.

We know that at least 30% of the prison population in women's facilities is aboriginal. We had a conference with workers from the various institutions, probation officers, wardens and others, and they are telling us it's more like 50%. That's even higher than we think. That's crazy. There should be resources specific to aboriginal women.

Kerry: What kinds of specific resources?

Amber: A high percentage of women who get out near here are from Mission, there are a lot of Reserves near here, but there are no community resources. They can't identify with their community. There hardly is a community anymore.

We do know women want to go to sweats when they get out, but they don't know where to go. So many have been away from their community for so long

- in prison or in the drug lifestyle, that they don't know where to go or what to do.

Kerry: Why are there so many aboriginal women in prison?

Amber: I wish I knew. I know that if you take a look at the population of the Downtown Eastside, a

lot of them are aboriginal. A lot of people are lost. There has been no research done on aboriginal women in prison; none that we've found. You would think there would be, considering what a high percentage of the prison population we make up.

But it's also that aboriginal people in general are afraid of research. So it's trying to approach this in a way that people can feel comfortable. So we took our project to the communities and had meetings with them. We called people from any resource that could be accessed from Mission - people from Abbotsford, from the Reserves, the Mission Friendship Center, drug and alcohol counselors, probation and parole officers - we wanted to be sure we were not missing anything.

We as aboriginal people are researched, and now we are the people doing the researching. I wish we had more community meetings. There are so many questions everybody has about these things. If everyone could just sit around a table, some of these things could be worked out.

Like, is the woman pregnant when she gets out? Does she need clothes? Now we have all those resources to give women in Mission. We hope to make the project bigger and make it national,

but it's just in the beginning phases. We just got a small grant for this project, Aboriginal Healing Outside The Gates.

We are inviting women to help us in the research process. We want to be able to hear what they have to say and we want to teach them what we have been taught.

We have weekly meetings, we interview aboriginal women who have been in prison, and we are sending women out to conferences to learn more about research and how to present research. We want the women who work with us to help with analysis, we want to know what themes they are seeing in these interviews as well.

We want to interview any aboriginal woman who has been in prison, federal or provincial.

Any aboriginal people in Mission are invited to come to our meeting at the Union Gospel Mission, Tuesdays at 6pm. We are going into year five.

We have a doctor and a recreational therapist as well as academic researchers working with us.

We are finding that women like to be heard, and that their voices - what they're saying, is being listened to.

Everything we're doing is empowering.

We have gotten women in to healing, period.

www.womenin2healing.com