

## To Whom It May Concern

*Pierre Parent*

---

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Pierre Parent* is Indigenous and French. At the time of writing, the author was incarcerated for the first time in Ontario and was serving an 11-year sentence, which was a direct result of a 25-year battle with drug use.

### ARTICLE

I am a part of a small group of incarcerated people who try to improve their lives despite all the challenges that surround us. I never expected a free ride, nor did I wait for things to happen. I dramatically altered many aspects of my past behaviours. I changed my anti-social attitudes and negative peer associations, as well as increased my self-management skills.

Throughout the years of my incarceration, I have had the opportunity to benefit from Indigenous specific initiatives, as well as other therapeutic rehabilitative endeavours above and beyond my correctional plan. By turning to Aboriginal Elders for counselling, spiritual teachings, and guidance, as well as voluntarily working in intensive and ongoing therapy with institutional psychology and other mental-health resources, I was able to gain skills that provided me with an ability to begin to understand the underlying issues behind my thoughts, emotions, and behaviours.

Education has proven to be another strategy to my recovery. I committed myself to the pursuit of post-secondary studies by correspondence in the academic fields of Sociology, Native Studies and Theology. Education beyond the secondary level while incarcerated is very challenging to attain. The reality remains that the Correctional Service Canada (CSC) holds absolutely no accountability, nor do they encourage the education of any incarcerated persons after the high school level. They do not offer bursaries toward tuition and has little infrastructure, resources or anything else available to most people imprisoned in their penitentiaries.

There is little chance of receiving support from the CSC for those of us who are motivated to advance and, if anything, we are often treated as an inconvenience. This is unfortunate this could mean the difference between a man becoming another statistic of recidivism or a pro-social, educated member of society. As a result, I reached out on my own initiative to do whatever I could to get ahead. The courses I successfully completed were paid for by my own limited savings or through the generosity of

community and Indigenous support. My academic studies proved to be informative and practical. I gained skills and knowledge that were directly related to my growth and recovery. I was not taking a specific “program” in my correspondence studies while incarcerated, rather individual courses of interest with limited availability. I hope to eventually combine my accumulated credits towards full-time university studies in the fields of Addictions Recovery and Indigenous Studies.

I have also successfully completed one year at Wasekun Aboriginal Healing Lodge in Quebec under a section 81 of the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act*, where Indigenous and no-Indigenous people can serve their sentence under community supervision. I benefited by dealing with the underlying issues behind my lifetime of substance abuse and ultimately gaining my identity, purpose, and direction.

In the summer of 2017, when granted my first attempt at day parole, I knew little or nothing about the parallel universe I was about to enter. I still had unresolved issues from my past, effects from the years of incarceration, as well as post-conviction barriers to re-entry. Even with the gains I made inside, there could be no denying the devastating impact on my psychological and physical well-being after having struggled with such severe addictions for most of my life, followed by serving nine years inside penitentiaries firmly centered in a culture of oppression and secure confinement. The fears and uncertainties of returning to the community were also far reaching. I was afraid of having to completely start over from nothing. I felt overwhelmed with financial insecurities, possible triggers, temptations and of life in the real world. I do not believe I was adequately prepared for parole and the realities that were waiting for me outside.

As part of my release process, I volunteered to attend the eight-week community re-integration/substance abuse program. It was offered by the Maison Decision, which is a community residential facility in Ottawa that offers a treatment program for men. I knew I still needed all the help I could get, so I reached out. I adapted quickly and, for the most part, felt comfortable. I learned very much and made substantial gains over the eight weeks I spent in the residential treatment program. I also reached out for culturally specific support through the local Indigenous groups where I hoped to develop long lasting working involvement and relationships.

Because of my unresolved issues, I failed my first attempt at day parole. My parole was terminated due to my use of marijuana and dishonesty with

my case management team. I now understand that healing and recovery from addiction is a lifelong process with many challenges and occasional setbacks. I admit that I justified and rationalized the use of marijuana. As a result, I was readmitted to prison after two months out on conditional release. I take full responsibility, but I was also proud of my renewed strength of not returning to cocaine, my drug of choice.

I continue to acknowledge and better understand my mistakes. I underestimated the significance and the consequences of the imposed conditions of day parole. Recidivism as a measure of prison success or correctional effectiveness, however, is an end-stage measurement that does not capture behavioural changes that occur *en route*. It tells little about the mechanics of motivation or personal changes and the process of healing.

Immediately upon my return to a penitentiary, on my own initiative, I once again reached out to available resources and services to seek the help that I needed. I returned to sources of support – including the Mental Health department for individual psychology sessions in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and group sessions in Coping Skills/Distress Tolerance. I also resumed work with Elders and Aboriginal Liaison officer, and was reinstated into the Pathways Aboriginal program offered by CSC as part of their Aboriginal programming initiative.

For my statutory release from prison, I unfortunately no longer fit the criteria for residency in a halfway house and cannot receive voluntary residency. I believe that my acclimatization to the outside world would be better if I were residing at a community residential facility or another structured reintegration facility. Halfway houses are designed to provide an opportunity for paroled individuals to adjust in a supportive environment, while also monitoring behaviours.

I know that I still need and want help. I am entirely ready and willing to go to any length to succeed, however I cannot do it alone. I am quite concerned about being destitute or residing in high-risk conditions. I continue to have more questions than answers. The lack of adequate pre-release services and supports leaves me in potentially vulnerable situations. As I do not have any immediate family support for residency, the National Parole Board has referred me to homeless shelters with an electronic monitoring device. When released I can only hope that I have access to some cultural, spiritual, addictions recovery, and educational programs. These are collectively necessary for any successful reintegration.