

A PAWSitive Connection

Todd Ramsum

To give you a little background on me, I'm a drug addict who's coming up to being six years sober. I'm an ex-convict who has spent 10 years plus in prisons and in jails. I choose to use these words today to describe myself.

I started with petty crimes, and moved up to running drugs and getting involved with gangs. Thinking back, the only thing that was consistent with that lifestyle was being an addict. As soon as my drug use stopped, so did my way of thinking. I got sober in prison and not for just one reason. There were a couple of big ones.

First, I almost died on the floor of the prison, where there were so many overdoses in such a short period of time, they didn't have any Narcan® left to use on me. Luckily, a guard gave me CPR until the ambulance arrived. Afterward, even though I threw up into my lungs, giving me aspirated pneumonia to go along with my freshly broken ribs, I was happy to be alive.

Second, is the reason I'm standing here today. That is, the Dog Therapy program that came to Drumheller, offered by Drs. Colleen Dell and Darlene Chalmers. It wasn't long after my overdose that three dogs, along with the activities we did in the dog therapy program, changed the mind set you get into in a place like prison.

The therapy dog interactions were relaxed, loving and genuine. The closest thing I could relate this to was being with family or friends and getting that necessary support. The unique thing about the support they provided as dogs, compared to humans, was it felt 100 percent unconditional. It didn't matter what I looked like or where I was, like in prison. They didn't know my past and didn't care. They didn't instantly judge me. So, I felt connected to them, connected in a way that helped me feel unconditionally loved and relaxed. No pressure. I could say absolutely anything to them, they didn't care what I said and I felt they cared about me.

The program supported me through my remaining two plus years in prison and ever since with letters and pictures, written by the dogs of course. This was important to my wellness. It made me feel that I still had the dogs in my corner and the therapy dog handlers in my corner too. Sometimes pictures would arrive when I wasn't having the best day or week and it would just remind me of how far I have come. It fueled my spirit by reassuring me that everything that I was working on, whether it was getting sober or whatever, I had support for. The dogs were a constant in my life when I didn't have many constants, except for being locked-up.

It was important to have a program in the prison that was based in the community because the handlers and the dogs didn't have to be there. They chose to be there. This was important because it isn't a required Correctional Service Canada (CSC) program. It isn't a 'cookie cutter program' you take as you're getting 'pushed through the factory system'. Instead, it's a human and animal-based program that is made for you and that has caring at its foundation. I didn't have to be there. It wasn't a CSC mandated program. I didn't think it counted toward my parole or anything like that. I wanted to be there. I stayed sober inside during the rest of my time and have maintained my sobriety since then, which is nearly four years ago.

Since I've gotten out, I've stayed in contact and even began working with Dr. Mela, Dr. Dell and others to do my part – to try to help them help others. Unfortunately, my story is few and far between. Once you have hit prison it's rock bottom or at least it feels like it. That's why there needs to be more of this type of program – providing unconditional support and where you can be who you really are and feel what you really feel.

Having outside programs come into the prison breaks down that barrier of staff versus prisoners, and I believe all people respond better. Staff can have empathy in prison and care about you, and there are staff that are genuinely helpful, but they're there to do a job. Like I said, the therapy dog program didn't have to be there, they didn't have to support me and that makes a difference. Having the dogs support me, alongside their owners, made me feel like somebody else actually cared. Coming to that dangerous environment, and wanting to help us get better and see value in our lives. It was the real thing.

Many of us who find ourselves in prison have had traumatic histories and, too often, not filled with kindness and love. The prison environment does not help with this – it's isolating. It isolates you from your supports, if you have them, and your true self. There are always expectations in prison too. The animals only have one – that you show them kindness and love. It's a safe place to be in, to be with the animals, in a generally unsafe place. This helps with feeling again – feeling like you matter – to yourself and to others.

I also believe one of the main reasons people fail to break the cycle is that many come into prison and have no everyday life skills. Something as simple as finding a family doctor, doing laundry or cooking a proper meal is challenging if they've never been taught. These men and women also need more work skills to succeed. I know it'll be said that there's a metal shop

and textiles, and the like that you can get involved in, but if you count the actual number of people who get to go through those programs you'll see what I mean.

We're never going to stop people from going to prison, I don't think, but once they make it there the first time, they need to be given a real chance instead of going out worse off than when they went in, which is often the case. I feel this way because I've been through it too many times myself. We need to help build them back-up, their self-confidence, not the opposite. For me, it was nice to let my guard down and be around an animal that is honest, accepting, and loves unconditionally. With my guard down, I could focus on healing. I could feel what it feels like to be me – the happiness, the sadness and the pain.

The staff needs to bridge connections, and be more sympathetic and empathetic. Corrections needs to realize that every case is different. This means we can't just be pushed through the cookie cutter programs and expect things to be different on the other end. There needs to be more psychiatrists and psychologists to help 'broken people' stop using drugs and come back. The majority of prisoners are in there for doing something while high or to get high. From experience it could take up to six months to see a doctor in prison.

I know personally from the cycle that I was in, it was because I did not care about myself. I was basically committing social suicide slowly. Sometimes I wondered if it'd be helpful if convicts met victims of similar types of crimes they've been convicted for. If they saw the human damage and how it affected the victims, it might change how they thought.

This leads me to my last topic, making that transition out of prison. People think when you get released you have all these resources, but most of the time you're kicked out with \$100 to your name and nowhere to turn. In many cases you can't go back to your home and family because of the location where you were criminalized and you end-up in a place where you don't have anyone. This is never good.

I think getting released starts inside. People need help reconnecting with families and working on forgiveness, while finding the proper continued community support. These things can happen with help through a parole officer or coordinator inside prison before a person is released.

What really helped me was the support from the therapy dog program, because it didn't end when they left the prison! They still cared long after I

was out and still do to this day. I remember calls and receiving pictures at the halfway house, sharing in the dogs' lives and even their deaths. It was an opportunity to connect and feel. If we could find that support for people we would have more people standing here today, alongside me, outside the prison walls.

Having that support made me want to reconnect with my family who I'd pushed away from the shame I felt. What connecting with the therapy dogs specifically did for me in reconnecting with my family was first, it gave me a little bit of confidence. Then, you want to get that unconditional love from your family that they are supposed to give you. You experienced it a bit with the dogs and you want more. You want it with your family. It was a rolling hill effect. You want to continue that relationship whether it was with the dog or your family. Like I said, you want more.

I love those dogs – they hold a special place in my heart for sure. I learned from them that I was lovable. It goes back to the self-worth you don't feel in prison or while using drugs – you don't care about yourself. Thinking about the dogs as family makes you realize and remember one time you had connections, at least it did for me, and I wanted to experience them again.

Today, I have many human and animal supports in my life. It feels good, and real. Getting sober played a major part in me breaking the cycle. If we give people hope at a life when they get out and better chances they will stay sober, then they won't want to lose what they have. At least that's how it was for me. I now have a job taking care of commercial properties, with employees and a lot of responsibilities. Can you believe they gave me keys to all these stores? Just kidding!

One positive connection was built off of another. Now, I have a network around me that keeps me from falling back. This includes my dog Winnie. We're hoping to become a therapy dog team in our community when she turns one. She's such an angel and so well behaved. Everyone loves her! So many people offer to watch her when I need somebody. If I can help other people with her that would be fantastic. I know she would love it!

I have family members, friends and others who rely on me, and that I rely on to help keep me straight and healthy. Feeling cared for and caring for others is something that should come naturally, it's essential to successful reintegration for prisoners. After being inside for so many years, it's lonely

and as I said isolating. Being a ‘nobody’ just becomes a part of who you are. But you, I, everyone, deserves more.

You need to try safe ways to reconnect with others. Caring for and feeling cared for by the animals helped promote my reintegration. It helped me to feel my emotions, go through them and practice them, in a safe way. And this is going to sound cheesy, but what’s made me want to live free is the love and support I’ve built around me. It’s what has kept me enjoying life and keeps me going. Thank you again Dr. Mela, Dr. Dell, Dr. Chalmers and the therapy dogs, those past and present. You believed in me, so thank you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Todd Ramsum has had a whirlwind of a life. It has been full of trauma and choices, both contributing to a cycle of addiction and federal incarceration. During his last prison term, Todd stopped caring about his life and whether he lived or died, until he overdosed and nearly lost his life. This was the start of his recovery journey. He attended various programs, the most impactful of which was the PAWSitive Support prison program. The program reminded him of his love for dogs, demonstrated to him that he was still capable of love, and the dogs loved him in return. Today, Todd is reunited with his estranged childhood family, lives with two amazing dogs, and has a beautiful family that takes care of him and he them. Todd attributes his healthy lifestyle today to the support of both humans and animals alike.