

# ABBOTSFORD NEIGHBOURHOOD BUGEL®

bugel (byoogl), n.,v. 1. a micro-tab newspaper serving a neighbourhood.  
2. an instrument to sound the alarm or trumpet the truth.

## Art co-op a chance to succeed on the outside

*“The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), as part of the criminal justice system and respecting the rule of law, contributes to the protection of society by actively encouraging and assisting offenders to become law-abiding citizens, while exercising reasonable, safe, secure and humane control.”*

The quote above is a mission statement taken directly from the website for the Correctional Service of Canada. It seems pretty straightforward — take criminals off the street and turn them into law-abiding citizens. Simple, right? Guess again.

There’s nothing simple about turning criminals into good citizens. There’s nothing easy about making the transition from a life of crime to one of productivity, not only for oneself but for the community. And there’s certainly nothing straightforward about doing all of this from within a prison.

Those sentiments might sound like they come from someone with an insider’s knowledge of the Canadian federal prison system, and in fact they do. But they’re not the opinions of the wardens, the guards or the people charged with running programs designed to turn around the lives of convicted felons.

In fact, they’re the opinions of three inmates at Mountain Institution, a medium security prison nestled in the embrace of the Coast Mountains out in Agassiz.

This is the story of three men who are hoping to change their own lives enough that they’ll one day be productive citizens on the straight and narrow; three men who think that what they’re doing today might also be of benefit to other inmates down the road.

Dean Roberts, Mark Jarman and Phil Clément are, as they’re known in the system, “lifers” — prisoners who have committed serious crimes and who are facing a long stretch on the “inside” with little chance for parole.

The trio readily admit the seriousness of their offences. Each is in for murder, amongst other transgressions against society, and each fully understands that society wants to make them pay for what they did. They accept that.

But what they’re looking for, what they want to achieve, is the opportunity to turn their lives around, and to that end they’re participating in a relatively new initiative within the CSC, something called Inmate Organized Business, or IOB for short.



PHOTO SUBMITTED BY CINDY HARRIS  
*Phil Clément (left) and Mark Jarman like nothing better these days than creating glass art in the prison’s glass shop.*

In fact, they’re not only participating, they’re actually helping to define what an IOB is and what it can be in the future. They’re doing so with the cooperation of Stacey Corriveau, program developer for the South Fraser Community Futures Development Corp., who got the ball rolling two and a half years ago after looking at the possibilities the IOB program might afford inmates.

Essentially, an IOB is a small business run by an individual inmate. The owner is responsible for operations, materials, costs, sales and so on. There are certain restrictions, obviously, owing to the reality of prison life, but essentially it’s a business like any other with a few major exceptions — one being that no prisoner can hire another inmate as an employee because the system does not want economic power situations developing between prisoners.

The thinking behind the IOB setup is that prisoners have the opportunity to learn the skills involved in running their own business. It

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# Getting parole is tough and making it work even tougher — These guys want to stack the odds in their favour —

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keeps them busy, requires them to pay 25 per cent of their gross income for their room and board, disqualifies them for prison work so they're no longer paid by the system, requires them to pay federal taxes on their profits, takes a percentage for other prison programs, and helps improve their chances of reintegrating into society if and when they're released from prison.

But it's not easy to establish an IOB. There are a lot of rules, a lot of hurdles to be overcome, and it's slow, slow, slow for those interested in pursuing their own IOB because the prison system does not move swiftly.

Indeed, most people on the outside would never put up with the amount of red tape involved in this process. But then, most people aren't inmates looking at a minimum of 25 years worth of time on their hands with very little to do.

Which brings us back to Roberts, Jarman and Clément. Each of them has his own IOB, but they're trying to bring a new twist to their efforts with the assistance of Corriveau. The three glassworkers, along with three woodworkers, are trying to create an artist co-op called Inside Art in order to market their efforts effectively, thereby giving themselves an even better chance of succeeding.

It's a unique twist on the IOB program, one that hasn't been tried before, and Corriveau says it looks promising, so much so that they expect to have cleared all the hurdles by next spring in order to start seriously marketing their wares.

It really has been a long haul since Corriveau first broached the idea back in 2002. Then, says Clément, the guys thought it was just another hare-brained scheme devised by someone on the outside to "help" guys get rehabilitated. Knowing how the system works, he says he didn't hold out much hope that it could ever succeed.

"My reaction," says Jarman, "was 'Not a hope in hell. It's never going to happen.'"

But persistence paid off and as the guys learned to trust Corriveau, they say they began to see a possible benefit. They decided to turn the passion they felt for their artwork into something even more meaningful and began learning the ropes as far as business and marketing were concerned. Once that started happening, the pieces began to fall into place slowly but surely in spite of the obstacles.

They began working on the project in earnest last spring, putting together the detailed plans that would help convince the authorities that this was a program worth supporting. So far it's moving forward, but the guys are under no illusions; they know it could all be yanked out from underneath them at any moment because that, they say, is just how the system works.

Regardless, each of them is cautiously optimistic that this project will succeed because, they note, the CSC is supposed to be about rehabilitation and helping prisoners successfully transition into law-abiding citizens.

For Jarman, it's a matter of common sense to allow this project to go forward.

"In 10 or 15 years they're going to give me my one shot (at

parole) and when I get mine I want it to work."

As Roberts notes, most lifers will eventually get that one shot (because that's how the system works) "and we want ours to succeed."

"I want to legitimize myself and pay taxes and contribute," says Roberts, who admits that might sound like he's just saying the things people want to hear, but defends it by adding his time in prison has convinced him he just wants to live a normal life like everyone else.

He says the parole system is really a revolving door which sees guys leave (he likely won't have his shot for at least another decade) and then end up back inside because they can't cut it on the outside for any number of reasons.



PHOTO SUBMITTED BY CINDY HARRIS

*Dean Roberts with a piece of glass art he fabricated at Mountain Institution. It's just one of many pieces he hopes to be able to sell some day.*

"In and out, it's a revolving door and we're trying to stop that. If we can make this work it can be used as a template for other inmates. If we succeed, what we're doing is providing a way to be contributing members of society."

Clément, 45, has been in prison since he was 17. He says the co-operative and IOB programs are sorely needed because they're a way to teach guys who usually have few skills how to succeed outside the walls of the prison.

Having entered the system as a teen with little experience of anything in the world except crime, he says this program has given his life some meaning and a chance to learn skills that might help him get out of

prison some day. It's also given him hope in a place where hope is a precious commodity.

"Since I've been involved in this, I feel human again. We're treated differently by the people involved (Corriveau and others she's brought in to help like Sid Gould of Sandstorm Designs and Cindy Harris, a videographer who's been documenting the whole process). It removes us from that atmosphere of fear that everyone else usually has of us."

As far as selling the concept to a less-than-sympathetic public, Jarman, Clément and Roberts are under no illusions. They know some people will be complaining loudly about prisoners getting "special treatment" but in the end they all say they don't really care.

"Usually when we tell them we'll be paying taxes if this works, that's when the 180 degree comes (in their attitude)," says Roberts.

But that's not the point for this trio because, as they say, they're doing this for themselves.

Asked how they think people on the outside will take to the program, Clément is exceedingly candid in his response.

"I don't care is my first reaction; they're going to think what they want to think. I don't want to build an illusion that everything will be perfect just because of this project and the co-operative. This is all about what I build for myself."

Says Roberts, "We already know we're at the bottom of the hill and looking way up. At the end of the day it really doesn't matter what they think because we can only go up."

For his part, Mark says it would be truly amazing if he and his friends could one day be working outside of prison in their own company doing the one thing that has become an all-consuming passion for them . . . their art.