

Shifting
Focus

Snapshots of Resilience

***“The project helped
me realize that there
is more than one
way to tell a story.”***

—Patrick



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Shifting Focus: Snapshots of Resilience.

Author: Collaborating Centre for Prison Health and Education

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Book design by Denise Cymbalist

Publisher Information:

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Printed in Canada

This project has been made possible through funding from:

vancouver
foundation

and Health Canada's Substance Use and Addictions Program.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge all of those who have contributed to *Shifting Focus* and the “Trauma at the Root: Exploring Paths to Healing with Formerly Incarcerated Men” project.

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We would like to thank the UBC Learning Exchange for hosting our meetings and always being welcoming and accommodating. We also want to thank John Howard Society Pacific for supporting our project and providing workshop space. We would also like to acknowledge DUDES Club, a men’s wellness program located in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Many of the project participants are members of DUDES Club and their involvement in the club is a source of pride. In addition to being a project assistant and photographer within this project, Richard Teague is also a facilitator for DUDES Club, which has provided us an important opportunity to connect with men in the community. For more information, please visit: www.dudesclub.ca

“When I ask, ‘May I take a picture of you?’ just that interaction with people makes you feel like a human being again.”

—Giuseppe

About

Collaborating Centre for Prison Health and Education

The Collaborating Centre for Prison Health and Education (CCPHE) is committed to encouraging and facilitating collaborative opportunities for health, education, research, service and advocacy to enhance the social well-being and reintegration of individuals in custody, their families and communities. We are based out of the School of Population and Public Health at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, BC.

The importance of engaging with and taking direction from people who have experienced incarceration underscores all our work. We use community-based participatory research approaches to engage impacted communities in all phases of research, and strengths-based approaches to utilize and grow the skills, knowledge, resilience, and abilities of people with incarceration experience.

Trauma at the Root: Exploring Paths to Healing with Formerly Incarcerated Men

CCPHE, in partnership with the John Howard Society of Canada, has received funding from the Vancouver Foundation and Health Canada's Substance Use and Addictions Program for this five-year project. The overall goal of this project is to foster resilience among men who have been incarcerated and equip them with a greater capacity to understand and manage traumatic stress and its relationship to substance use.

To achieve our goal, we are engaging formerly incarcerated men to develop and pilot test a health literacy resource that will raise awareness of the concepts/processes of trauma and resilience, and how they relate to substance use. We will explore how men want to foster resilience and how men perceive the effects of trauma and resilience on their inter-personal relationships, their incarceration and reintegration experiences, and their help-seeking behaviour.

The following sections highlight the key concepts that inform our project objectives and our approach to engaging formerly incarcerated men in the project.

Background on Trauma and Resilience

Trauma and Incarceration

Research indicates that men who have been incarcerated are more likely to have experienced trauma, particularly in childhood, compared with the general population. The experience of incarceration itself is also emerging as a recognized form of trauma, with well-documented impacts on physical and mental health. Trauma and the coping strategies many men rely on (e.g., substance use) frequently remain unaddressed as men move between correctional institutions and the community. The trauma of incarceration, lack of continuity of care when entering and leaving prison, and difficulty accessing health services in the community can compound the ill-health of men and inhibit community reintegration following prison release.

Stigma

Stigma associated with incarceration and substance use can create additional barriers for men during the process of reintegration. Stigma is a set of negative attitudes or beliefs about a person or group of people that fail to acknowledge their strengths. Stigma is often accompanied by intersecting forms of discrimination that cause further harm by reinforcing stereotypes, which can prevent people from progressing or changing. For men who have been incarcerated, the impacts of stigma can be concrete such as exclusion from family relationships, unemployment, inability to gain custody of children or to access housing. Stigma can also become internalized, leading men to believe the negative attitudes, and feel the weight of the judgements and exclusions. This can lead to feelings of hopelessness and a return to substance use as a coping strategy.

Trauma, Stigma and Gender

Trauma, stigma and gender are tightly interwoven in shaping the way men respond to stress and seek help. Dominant masculinities, or cultural ideas of what it means to be a man, can include being tough, protective, risk-taking, brave, and unemotional. These traits, when absorbed, can lead to aggression, conflict, and diminished help-seeking. Men who have experienced trauma are therefore often unable to ask for help and instead engage in risky coping behaviours. For example, there is more substance-related harm and death among men,

compared to women, as a result of overuse, misuse and overdose. In BC, most non-Indigenous deaths by overdose are among men, who die alone. This indicates the impact of difficulties with help-seeking and risky use.

Stigma associated with trauma, incarceration, and substance use can create barriers for men to disclose and seek support to manage the impacts of trauma. Therefore, to support men in overcoming these barriers to improve help-seeking, it is important to take a gender-specific and trauma-informed approach. This means raising awareness of trauma and its effects; creating safety and trust; creating opportunities for choice, collaboration and connection; and, focusing on strengths-based skill building.

Fostering Resilience

Resilience, or the ability to recover from stress, is an important skill set for men to build as they improve their capacity to seek help. Resilience is not simply about being strong in the face of adversity, but being flexible and adaptable to your environment. As men increase their awareness of trauma and its effects, they can begin to develop skills that can help manage their responses to stress and promote improved self-care. Men who have been incarcerated may benefit from engaging in strengths-based activities that help identify their own interests, powers, and abilities. This can include accessing support from peers who have gone through similar experiences, which creates a greater sense of connection and can further enable men to support other men.

Ultimately, fostering resilience can improve the capacity to manage traumatic stress, which supports men to resist stigma and manage substance use.

***“So the world didn’t
change, the way I
looked at it did.”***

—Jason

Photography Project Summary

Photovoice is a participatory qualitative research method that can amplify the voices of people who are not often heard in policy decisions. Photovoice has been found to be a very effective means of empowering participants to document and share their stories in a public forum. Through this opportunity to amplify their voices and share their stories, men can challenge the stigma associated with trauma, incarceration, and substance use.

Shifting Focus: Snapshots of Resilience is a photovoice project that took place between February and October 2020. Participants for *Shifting Focus*, all formerly incarcerated men, had previously participated in a trauma and resilience awareness workshop as part of our larger project. The workshop, titled “Making Sense of Traumatic Stress and Resilience: A Primer for Formerly Incarcerated Men,” discussed traumatic stress, including how it works and what causes it; drew connections between the different elements of traumatic stress and what it might mean in the context of the participants’ lives; and finally, discussed how men can develop resilience and better manage traumatic stress.

The photovoice project was intended as an opportunity for participants to apply the knowledge they gained in the workshop as they explored their own life stories. Seven men agreed to participate and six completed the project. The participants met as a group once a week for four weeks to learn how to use digital cameras (provided by the project) and photography basics. The sessions were facilitated by professional photographer, Jeff Topham, and project manager, Kate Roth. Each session included lunch, a discussion of each participant’s work from the week prior, and a new photo assignment. The assignments included interpreting photos and creating captions; taking photos with direct prompts such as people, places, humour, colour, shapes, and self-portrait; and taking photos with more abstract prompts, such as frustration, fear, resilience, anger, success, pride, challenge, “The Best,” and, “The Worst.”

After the fourth session, held March 13, 2020, we had to suspend all research activities due to COVID-19. This included additional group sessions and photo assignments. In July 2020, we were able to resume limited activities but did not hold any additional group sessions. Following COVID-safe procedures, participants were encouraged to continue to take photos using the prompts they had already been given. Jeff met with each participant to collect their final photographs and from these collections, we selected 10-12 photos for photo elicitation interviews. These in-depth discussions took place over the course of two meetings with each participant. We selected a final six to eight photos for each participant and drafted photo captions based on the interview transcripts. All of the photos and captions included in the *Shifting Focus* exhibit and book were edited and approved by each participant.

Shifting
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Robert

“Photos help you actually focus on some of the things you have to change around you. You tend to look for things that are positive in the city, in a world that’s pretty well negative.”



This is the docks where they’re building ships to haul out the oil, and they have a refinery there.

Now the lighting looks like musical notes so I titled it “Not Everybody’s Tune.” It sings songs of profit for the oil industry and the shipping industry. It also sings songs of sorrow, for the nations that it knocks out of the way and the wildlife it takes out of the green space and kills off.



This photo was intended to look like prison. Every time I walk by, I say, “You’re only one step from being behind the wire again.” I could be on this side or that side. I think about going back in all the time. If I do something stupid, I’m going back. I mean, that’s just standard. I used to blame everyone about why I went to the pen, but now I take the responsibility for it. I spend a lot of time saying, “Okay, is this worth the time? Is it worth the trip?”



It's not about where I have been, it's about where I want to be.

Volunteering makes me feel like I'm doing something positive. Basically, my dad never saw a damn thing that was good in me and I had so much pent up rage and hate. But he never really knew me. There's a whole different person under there. Volunteering is a chance for my mom to see a side of me she's never seen before. This picture shows that no matter what you go through, you can always rebuild.



This photo represents resilience to me. My friend comes over now and then and advises me. She points me in the direction of a decision that will do the least harm to myself but leaves it up to me to make the decision. To me, she shows resilience because she adapts well. She earned those lines on her face, they're lines of wisdom. You learn from your experience and you can pass it on to someone else.



This is a bulletin board for missing and murdered Indigenous women. I thought it was something that should be shown, because in this area of the country, in this part of the city it's a big issue all the time. We have got to keep in touch with what's happening because people are going missing constantly.



I call this "Affections." She is just a lovely dog. You can tell the dog is loving it, she's eating it up. That picture is one of my favorites because, through all the crap, there's real warmth.



I call this “Unfinished Work.” Even if you only got some of it done, you’ve still accomplished something. My dad always said if you’re going to fall, fall flat on your face because at least you’re moving forward. Nothing is going to go 100% the way you want it to, but you’re at least heading in the right direction. Learn to appreciate the small things.

Patrick

“I think any person using art to whatever degree helps them grow as a person. It’s going to help them become more aware, stepping away from the life they lived. It helped me want to stop the cycle and stay living on the outside.”



This is life in the city, right? It was a rainy day and I saw the remnants of a crow. I like crows. I used to have a crow that would come to my apartment and I'd feed it every day. I don't know if this crow died naturally or if a cat or a coyote got it, but it's just the circle of life and it's going back into the earth.

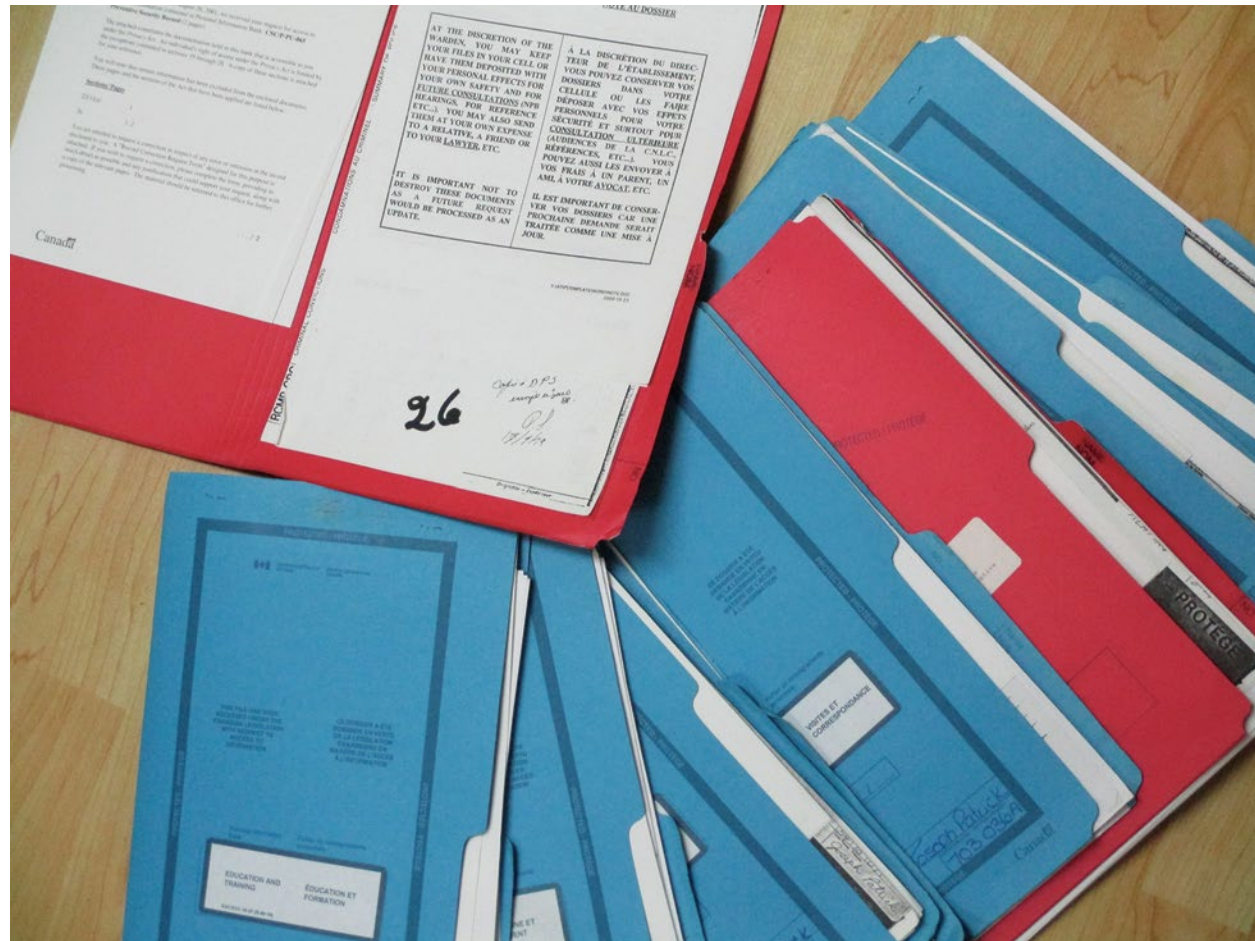


I like collections. I like little things. I guess I got that from my mum, my mum always liked little trinkets. Some of these coffee makers don't work and some of them would probably work if you spent a little time on them. Like myself, they've been through a bit. A couple had a rough life. I relate to them. When I wonder why I went down the path I did, a lot of it was a search for being together. Maybe that's why I like collections. The sense of community, to be needed, to be wanted, to be thought of as useful.





This dress was just blowing in the wind. It just looked so free in one way but also terrifying in another, almost like somebody was jumping out the window. What would make somebody go down the path of suicide? I do a one-man play that is 75 minutes long. I wanted to have a continuous scroll with the names of all who had died in prison. Too many names, 75 minutes wasn't enough time. It's a lot of people, and a lot of those deaths were preventable.



These are all of my penitentiary files I got when I was starting to think about my life inside. I was trying to find out what brought me there. I thought the files would tell me why I went down that path and nobody else in my family did. In a way this is my selfie, but it isn't. It's a false photograph. The files say my name all over them, but I couldn't really find myself in them, you know? The stories that happened to me inside, all my memories, have nothing to do with these files.



The resilience of this tree, it's been through so much but it's still there. You can just see the age on it, like an old face. When you see somebody who has ruggedness to their cheeks or scars, you can tell they lived a life. How many wind storms has this tree been through and how close it came to being knocked down. They even put up a sign to not climb on it, it deserves respect.

Every time I pass by the Rogers Refinery, it always reminds me of all the old penitentiaries, La Vieux Penn, Saint-Vincent-de-Paul. They're just very dungeon-y. I always liked those places, because you knew where you stood. You were on one side; the guards were on the other and you didn't mix. In minimum security, guards try to be your friend and try to get you to open up. Everyone wore outside clothes so I couldn't tell who was a guard or who was an inmate. It put me off balance.





I wanted to encapsulate the worry, the stress, the anxiety that people have from COVID. This was just a lineup of chemicals that we used when we bought groceries, when we went out for a walk, on the bottom of our shoes, all those things that you have to do continuously and religiously. We used them multiple times a day when COVID first came out because nobody knew where it was coming from. Scary. Nobody knew what was going to happen.

Giuseppe

“Art is a wonderful way of sharing with people, it brings joy and happiness to people. This is my way of giving back, by giving my art.”



I thought of pessimism and optimism mixed together. These are my neighbours at Oppenheimer Park, a very sad part of life. But look at the colours even in there. There's a bright side to it. I always think maybe something good can come out of something bad.



It hurts the heart. The longest distance that we ever travel is between the head and the heart. It hits home. I was the guy who drove the Mercedes 500, who had a fleet of 30 vehicles. And now, I ride the bus because of necessity. But I could not have taken the photographs I did if I was driving in a car. Slowing life down is not so bad because I've been running in sixth gear all my life.



My father was the hockey dad of the neighbourhood and he picked the kids up. He had a 1965 baby blue Ford Galaxie 500, the biggest station wagon in the world to a 10-year-old. He took us to a Mac's Milk store where Tim Horton shook my hand and gave me his autograph. I tell that story to all the kids at Tim Hortons, they love it. I'd like to say my dad was a great guy, but he wasn't. He mistreated my mom for 44 years but she persevered. Maybe that's where I get my resilience from.



The green door reminded me of solitary confinement. A place where I was told on initial incarceration I would never ever see and would be sheltered from. I was thrown into solitary confinement many, many times. The longest was 59 days and I was scheduled to die in there. This is where the post-traumatic stress disorder comes in. I witnessed six suicides and one homicide with these eyes in prison, young men that shouldn't have died. Haunts me to this day but I survived it.



That's me locked up, incarcerated. I'm not a thief. It reminded me of incarceration and of the prison, where everything had to be locked down, superfluously. I grew up in a civilization where we never had security guards in a bank. Now, you have locks on everything. That toilet paper reminded me of negativity, of something pessimistic and yet, we need toilet paper, especially in times of COVID.



This is one of those Kodak moments of life that you remember. Lucy is my neighbour's dog. She bit me the first day we met and that hurt. Then I took out the treats and we started getting a relationship. Now, she licks me. She is just 12 inches long, but she's full of life.



I see a broken man trying to manage. When we come out of prison, we try to make up for lost time. It's not instantaneous gratification, in my perspective, but trying to achieve just small things. I'm focusing on focusing, on leaving my shame out there and working on grief. But talk about resilience, I'm not giving up. I'm finding a purpose, I'm trying to give back. I made a mistake, I'm not a mistake.

Jason

“I hope people see the beauty in the photos. I hope they see the positivity in them, and maybe be inspired by them. Change can always come, but it doesn't come easy.”



This both a negative and a positive picture. I went to jail in this courthouse but I also got my children back in this courthouse. I was in a negative mindset when I was breaking the law in my active addiction days and even probably six months into my recovery. But through the program and connecting to services, I was able to look at the world through a different set of eyes. So the world didn't change, the way I looked at it did. And the more positive I am in life, the more positive life becomes.



This is my handsome son. That was the beginning of us getting reconnected and I was just really happy to see him. I remember sitting there in early recovery in the treatment center, just dreaming of the opportunity to have days like this. So I wanted to remember that day and the time I got to spend with my son. Now, of course, we see each other all the time. That was a really fun day.



This picture is a lot of happiness. And not just because it's a beautiful car and I'm a car guy, but my daughter is there and she really loves old vehicles. Both my son and my daughter love old vehicles so that always creates great conversation. Of course, it's at Starbucks. We go there every week. But I'm not a big Starbucks fan because it costs a lot of money!



“Do not enter.” Basically telling me that I’m not allowed to do something. My children and I were laughing about how we were breaking the rules. Living and fixing, right? We see the “living” too, because we’re actually living now. Because I’m an addict, I take that drive that I was using to get drugs and I now use it to better myself. It’s a transferable skill. Everybody has it within them.



My daughter told me once that the two people she loved the most were ripped apart from each other because she made that call to 911. She held the shame and the guilt from that. We weren't allowed to see or talk to each other for 18 months. My son, my daughter, and myself call them the "Ministry of Children and Family Destruction." They offer programs, but they don't direct you to what you need to do. So they were great to have as a resource, but they were a huge barrier. We overcame all of the obstacles that the Ministry of Children put into our life. I am grateful for the connection I have with my children today and I'm grateful for the process to know where I never want to be again.

I love Maple Ridge Community Corrections and all the people in it. I managed to not only get through the shit hole of corrections, I turned it into a huge resource to rebuilding my life. My probation officer is a huge part of my recovery and my support system. She connected me to the John Howard Society, and of course that changed my life. I am very grateful to be on the other side of the fence as a peer support worker. I set precedents, going from being a client to now a colleague with corrections.



The possibilities are endless, the sky is not the limit.

Remembering where I was to where I am now, there's a big difference. I was hiding in a ditch from a police officer, talking to my son on the phone when I wasn't supposed to. I heard the sadness in his voice because Dad's going back to jail, defeated by drugs again. The best help for any addict is talking to a peer because we're connected through pain. When you see somebody that was in hell and has pulled themselves out, you can see that it's possible to get the life that you deserve.

Rickie

“One thing I started liking about taking pictures is that I saw the way I was happy taking them.”



The Sisters [Franciscan Sisters of Atonement] serves breakfast on the first Saturday of the month. I used to go there and see people in the line that I hadn't seen in a long time and talk to them. I'm a very solitary person but lately I've been going out more to connect with the community.



This is Community Connect, a fair that DUDES Club helped with.

Women came in, they got fed, and they could get a haircut and stuff like that, just to make them feel good. And I thought that was great. The DUDES Club information isn't restricted to men. We want women to know that their men can come to us and get help. I enjoyed taking those photos. I felt good about them because it shows that I was helping people out.

This is me at Community Connect and I just wanted somebody to see a picture of me doing it.

Just a remembrance, I guess you'd call it. My younger sister and I were always close, everybody thought we were twins. When she died two years ago, it impacted me hard. That's why I decided to go volunteer for harm reduction and outreach work. I don't know if I'm reaching people or not, but it's making me feel better doing it.



This is Tent City. And that's sad because why the hell are people living out in the streets? The government is saying they're doing something but they're not. The government doesn't help you out to the point where you can adapt yourself. All they want to do is keep you on the poverty line so that you'll never get over the poverty line, so you can't build yourself up. And when they do try to help, whatever help that they want to give you, you have to jump through hoops to get it.



I remember this sign from when I was a kid.

When we first moved to Vancouver, my mom used to take me and my kid sister down to Woodward's and shop. You know, \$1.49 cheesesteak Tuesdays. The fact is, I don't know much about my family history. All I remember is where I grew up. I just know where I was born and stuff like that. The only thing I remember is the happy times and my family.

Richard

“The project has really opened up my eyes to looking at things in a different way.”



Wherever I've lived, I never felt at home. Probably because I was still using. But ever since I cleaned up 11 or 12 years ago, I've lived in this neighbourhood. Zawa, the restaurant, is a sense of community for me. I've gotten to know the owner. I know all the waitresses. So, it feels comfortable and warm. Everybody should have that kind of place, where you feel safe and wanted, and missed if you don't show up. It's nice to be liked and welcomed where ever you go. It shows that you're living a good life.



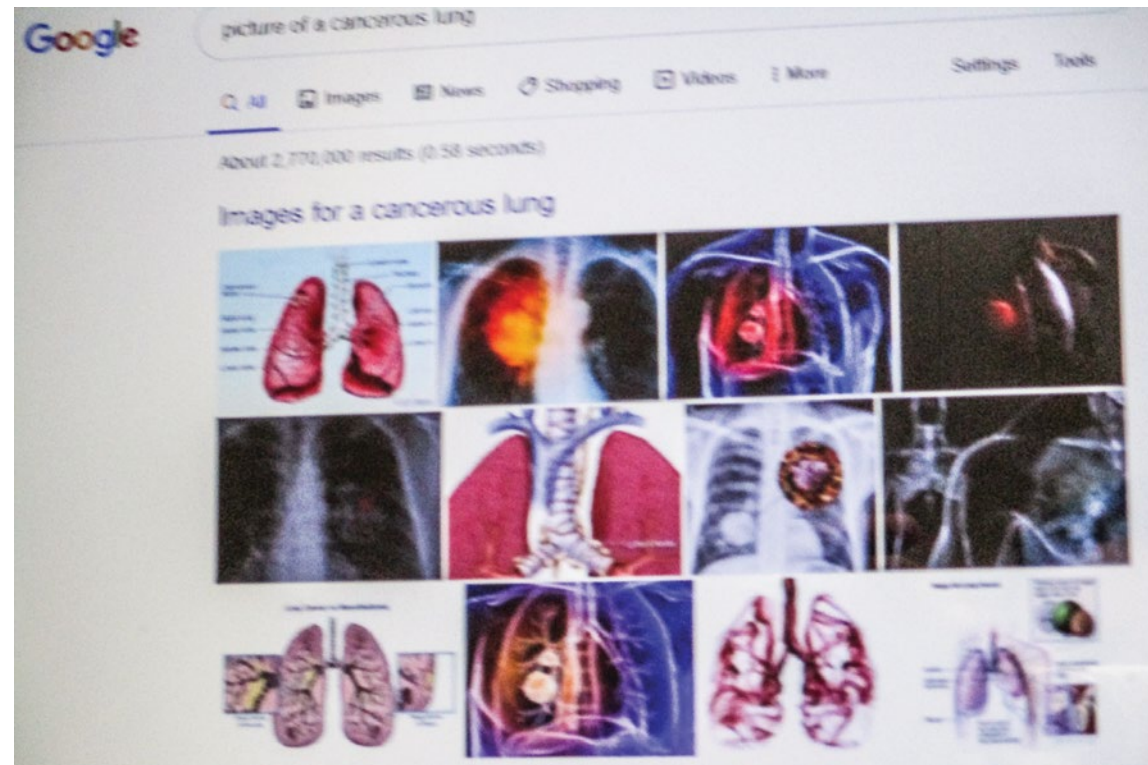
That big smiling chicken brings a smile to everybody's face. Humor is everything. Being an outreach worker is all about making your client feel good. When I see a client in a bad mood, I try to make him laugh. Because I've learned, even when you're having a shitty day, if somebody can make you laugh, you forget about all the tough times you're having. A nice, big belly laugh, you know?



DUDES Club has brought me a lot of purpose and a lot of pride. Sometimes walking down the street, I feel like I'm a ghost. A lot of men in the Downtown Eastside feel that their voices aren't being heard. DUDES Club supports men so they can be noticed in life and know that their voice is important and means something. Look at all these guys, they all got white beards, they've lived their lives and they're resilient.



I was at my worst in this building but it was also the beginning of my recovery journey. I still remember the day I walked out that front door, literally turning in circles. Wanting to get high again but I didn't want to go hustle the money. I never kept my place clean. I never kept myself clean. I was in terrible state. And I finally made that decision, "You got to stop this or you're going to kill yourself." I didn't want to be remembered for that. I want to be remembered for the work I'm doing now.



This is what scares the shit out of me. Cancer. It's something I have no control over. I've been a smoker all my life and I'm still healthy. But every time I pick up a cigarette I think, "Is this going to be the last one?" Before you know it, you got nodules on your lungs and you get full blown cancer. That's the craziest shit ever.



For the last two or three years I was using, I didn't even look in the mirror because I didn't like what was looking back. Now, I can look in the mirror with self-affirmations: "All right Rick, you're getting there. You might not be the most handsome man in the world but you're living a good life." That's been my journey and it's been wonderful. I've learned so much.

“I don’t know if I’m reaching people or not, but it’s making me feel better doing it.”

—Rickie

Reflections

These photos provide a glimpse into the lives of six different formerly incarcerated men. Although their stories are unique, common threads run through these collections. Regardless of how long they have lived in the community, many of the participants experience daily reminders of their time inside prison. Participants felt it was important to showcase positivity within their photos, using beauty, humour and levity to balance the negative surroundings, situations, or reminders of incarceration.

Another key theme that emerged from the participants’ stories was the importance of giving back to the community for their own sense of well-being. This includes volunteering, working as peer or outreach support, participating in community groups, and creating art to share with others. This highlights how important it is for men to feel a sense of purpose in their lives and demonstrates the need to provide opportunities for men to engage in meaningful work after release from prison. The desire to engage with peers also emphasizes the importance of connecting with people who understand and share similar life experiences to create a sense of belonging.

Participants contributed thoughtfully to this project to create collections that express their own resilience through trauma. By sharing their stories, they are challenging the stigma associated with incarceration and substance use. Their hard work demonstrates the importance of engaging men in strengths-based activities that encourage peer connections and ultimately, foster further resilience.

Please visit www.shifting-focus.com to view the online exhibit and a short film about the project.

“These resilient men have lived extraordinary lives, and to be able to help them shape the stories of their past and re-envision their futures has been a rewarding process for all of us. I hope it helps change how people see these men and how these men see themselves.”

— Jeff Topham, Photographer/Filmmaker

The Photographers



Robert McMillan

Robert likes listening to hair metal bands (and even used to play in one) and watching South Park. He is a grandfather to one grandson. Robert is a firm believer in moving forward and keeping your eye on the prize, as he likes to say: “Let the chains that bind me fall behind me.”



Patrick Keating

Patrick is very proud to work with the Transformative Health and Justice Research Cluster, as a part of their Storytelling Workshop and is learning the art of being a facilitator. He has written and performs a show about his life entitled ‘Inside/Out’ and has performed it across the country and into a couple of correctional facilities. His literary tastes range from Bukowski and Bud Osborn to Keats and Joyce. The film he refers to most is ‘Le Party’ by Pierre Falardeau.



Giuseppe (Joe) Centis

Giuseppe prefers classical and opera music, having grown up with it. He has always liked sports but his recent broken leg and collarbone are telling him to slow down. He enjoys many different forms of art including pyrography, which he learned inside, and now photography.



Jason Flack

Jason loves being in nature and also loves mechanics, which he has done for 20 years. Jason views his addiction as a gift that has given him transferrable skills like drive, the ability to handle chaos, and a connection to peers. He loves his job as a Peer Mentor Support Worker.



Rickie Araki

Rickie has lived in Vancouver since ‘69. He enjoys playing pool and bowling. He likes being on his own and describes himself as a self-contained person.



Richard Teague

Richard is interested in history and his favourite documentary series is Ancient Civilizations. He hopes that sharing his story lets people know that anyone can make those changes in their life. It's never too late.

“Ex-cons can be the most creative, thoughtful thinkers. They just made mistakes in their lives. A photovoice project can help change people’s minds about us.”

—Richard

***“Let the chains
that bind me
fall behind me.”***

—Robert



CCPHE
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HEALTH & EDUCATION