

Life after prison

Ellen Osler Home in Canada helps women start anew.

By Giselle Randall –

The women who meet for coffee in the living room of a large, Tudor-style house discuss starting a book club, celebrating birthdays and doing chores—and laugh as they plan a retirement party for the vacuum cleaner. They often gather in the kitchen to make and share meals together, like a family. “I think we’re trying to get back to that, because where we’ve all been takes you away from it,” said Nancy.



The women have different stories, but all of them have spent time in federal prison. They live at The Salvation Army Ellen Osler Home, a community-based residential facility—usually known as a halfway house—in Dundas, a town in Ontario, Canada. Halfway houses provide gradual, supervised reintegration into the community for those who have been released on parole.

“When you go to prison, the world doesn’t stop turning. But you do,” said Chantel Malcolm, program manager. For many women, becoming accustomed to the structure and routine of life in prison can make it difficult to manage life on the outside. Not only that, they may also struggle with addiction and mental health issues. Some have never held a legitimate job or had friends who weren’t criminals. Others have been in unhealthy, abusive relationships all their lives. So when they are released, “it’s almost like being a newborn for some people,” Malcolm said.

A halfway house gives them a place to start over—to receive counseling, attend treatment programs, go to school, work and learn new ways of relating to others by setting boundaries. “A halfway house is important for community safety,” Malcolm said. “Not only by monitoring the women and reporting back to parole officers and the government, but by helping them build those skills and form alternatives, so the chance of them going back to an old lifestyle or pattern of behavior is less. Ultimately, it’s up to them—they’re the ones who have to do the work and make the choices, but people tend to be much more successful if they’ve stayed at a halfway house first.”

For Nancy, Darlene and Aisha, Ellen Osler Home has been a stepping stone to a new life. Here are their stories.

Nancy

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Nancy

Nancy in the garden at Ellen Osler Home

When Nancy was released from a federal penitentiary halfway through a three-year sentence for drug trafficking, she spent as much time as possible sitting outside. She noticed how overgrown the yard around the halfway house had become.

“It was pretty much mud,” she said. “I asked myself, what image do we want to present to our neighbors? I figured we needed to look friendlier and tidier. I thought that an attractive garden would change our image to the community and show that we’re doing good things.”

She had done landscaping in the past, and the staff soon turned over the yard to her. Weeks of digging, cutting and planting transformed the garden. “It looked alive again,” she said. As she worked, neighbors who normally walked by stopped to talk. “They invited me to their homes to see their gardens and have tea,” she said. “We received lots of donations of flowers. It really turned into a community thing.”

Nancy’s skills and strong work ethic came in handy around the house as well. “She came at the perfect time. She needed us, and we needed her,” Malcolm said. “We had always paid people for some jobs, like cutting the grass or shoveling snow, but when we realized just how many skills she had, we created a job for her.”

Nancy painted most of the bedrooms and offices, and did small repairs. “We always have our ‘Nancy list,’” Malcolm said. This arrangement has led to the idea of a formal work program in the future.

For Nancy, staying connected to nature and her Aboriginal roots is an important part of her journey. She participates in ceremonies, makes art and clothing, and sings with a hand drum she received as a gift. The drum is symbolic, given by “somebody who sees you’ve done the work and you’re on the right path,” she said. Nancy is looking forward to going home, spending time with family and friends, and starting a landscaping business.

Darlene

It’s not easy for Darlene to look back on her childhood. She lived in a broken home and was sexually abused by a relative at age 7. She started drinking when she was 11 and doing drugs at 14. She was raped at 18.

She had four kids and lost custody of them for a time as a result of her drinking.

“My drinking was so bad that I went to the liquor store at five o’clock one morning, thinking it was five o’clock in the afternoon,” she said. “I didn’t know what time of day it was, what day it was or what month we were in. I woke up drunk and went to bed drunk.”

After her mother passed away, an old family friend helped arrange the funeral. When Darlene’s daughter came for the funeral, she pointed to the family friend and said, “Keep him away from me.”

Darlene later learned he had sexually abused her daughter as a child.

“I lost it,” she said. “I was abused and raped. I thought, ‘Is [my daughter] going to live her life that way? She’s going to become a drug addict, she’s going to be an alcoholic. She’s not going to have a good life.’”

Darlene confronted the man. She doesn’t remember where she got the gun or how it got loaded. When he laughed at her, “I started having these flashbacks,” she said. “I was laughed at my whole life. I was bullied in school. I was in a lot of abusive relationships. They told me I was no good, that I wouldn’t amount to anything, that nobody would ever want me.”

The gun went off.

She later pled guilty to second-degree murder and received a 10-year sentence. In prison, Darlene met Malcolm, who visits the institution every other week to help women plan their release. “Even though I still had many years to go, I said, ‘Please still meet with me—I need that support, I need somebody,’” Darlene said. “The Salvation Army met with me the whole time I was there.”

Getting sober was another huge step. “I only knew how to live through alcohol,” she said. Living without alcohol, “I found the person I was meant to be.”

After seven years in prison, Darlene was released. She lived at Ellen Osler Home for the final three years of her sentence, and spent two years in a satellite apartment.

“It’s important to have the halfway house,” she said. “You need this kind of support, because when you’re walking out those doors, it would be next to impossible on your own. Where would you go? Who’s going to help you?”

With the help of the staff, she found a job as a cleaner. Leaving the satellite apartment was another big adjustment, but she knows she can call or visit the staff at Ellen Osler Home anytime. “They’ll always be there—they’ve reassured me of that,” she said. “I see this place as hope.”

Aisha

Aisha

Prison gave Aisha time to reflect on her life.

A free trip to Antigua turned out to be a costly mistake for Aisha, who got caught up in the drug trade as a mule. When she returned to Canada, she was arrested and charged at the airport, and released on bail. “I was scared, I was alone. I was out-of-my-mind angry,” she said. “So many different emotions run through you in that moment.”

A few months later, she pled guilty. “People hear ‘prison’ and they think your life’s over. But that’s when my life began,” she said. Prison gave Aisha the time to examine her life, to reflect on why she

had dated the wrong person and followed him down the wrong path.

“The year I spent in prison was a gift and a curse,” she said. “A curse because I wasn’t able to be with my family, but a gift because I learned who I am, my strengths and weaknesses, and what I want to do with my life.”

Aisha took two university courses while in prison and is now enrolled in a small business and entrepreneurship program at Mohawk College. She hopes to open a business one day. She also wants to help other people in similar situations.

“When you go there and see these people and see that they’re just heartbroken, they’re just like everybody else. They just need love,” she said. “Never close that door on somebody just because of their past. Everybody needs a second chance.”

Prison also strengthened her relationship with God as she learned to trust him amid her circumstances. “It happened to Joseph, it happened to Job. If all of these stories in the Bible could happen, and such beauty could come out of those ashes, why not for me, too?” she said. “Most people think of prison as a place where it’s awful, but there’s such beauty there because there are broken people mending. It’s a bunch of broken women fixing their lives.”

From Salvationist