

Students Hear a Cautionary Tale

By Janet Taylor, Acting Parole Officer, Atlantic Institution

This spring, Warden Norm LeBlanc, Atlantic Institution, granted two escorted temporary absences (ETA) to inmate Darren Hersey. Two high schools in the Rothesay, New Brunswick area, Kennebecasis Valley and Quispamsis, had requested the assistance of the Rothesay Regional Police Force in an initiative geared toward steering students away from drugs. The police got in touch with the warden, anticipating that students would benefit from the real-life story of a long-time addict.

Approximately 1400 students had an opportunity to hear Darren's presentation during eight separate sessions. All sessions went well with Darren displaying an open and sincere approach during his presentations and the question and answer periods that followed.

Darren, at the age of 35, is a recovering addict serving his fourth federal sentence. He reports that he has been incarcerated most of his life, beginning at a boy's training school and culminating with his current situation at a maximum-security federal institution. His powerful message to the students focused on the choices one makes and how those choices can lead to a lifestyle of drugs and crime. In great detail he explained that the lifestyle is all pain and loneliness. It drags you down until dying becomes easy; living becomes hard.

When asked by one of the students if he felt that speaking to others had a positive effect on him, Darren stated that his journey to sobriety "began in my head, moved to my heart, then to my soul." He believes that telling his story positively affects him and he has a need to tell others, hoping that it could prevent even one person from abusing drugs. At one session, Darren stated that he was growing from the presentations and because of questions asked, thinking about things that had never occurred to him before.



Darren Hersey addresses the crowd

The feedback from students, teachers and the police leaves no doubt that Darren has made an impact. In a letter addressed to the warden, Principal Robert Munro, Kennebecasis Valley High School, reported that several students referred to Darren and showed an eagerness to address their problems with the school's addictions counselor. Munro felt that "the impact of Darren's visit will produce positive results for a long time."

Based on the comments in the letters Darren received from several students, there is no doubt that he has provided inspiration to some who have already begun their journey into the drug lifestyle and others struggling with peer pressure.

One student, speaking of peer pressure, commented, "...it is becoming more and more hard to say no...I would just like to say that your presentation has given me the strength and courage to say no...thanks again for leading me on the right path." Another student, already engrossed in the drug culture wrote: "Your speech made me think. I thought I could do drugs and get away with it all my life...I say I would probably be where you are in five years. But I'm going to try to change that now, all thanks to you."

The Atlantic Institution staff who accompanied Darren on the ETAs believes that this experience was a positive one for Darren, the students and staff at both high schools. ■