

A Glimmer of Hope

By Bill Rankin, Communications Officer, Communications and Citizen Engagement Sector

Recently, Brandy May agreed to sit down and discuss her professional life as an institutional parole officer dealing exclusively with lifers at Collins Bay Institution (CBI). I'd met Brandy a few years back when she worked in a similar job in 'J' Unit at Millhaven Institution. At the time, I'd been struck by her exceedingly sunny outlook on life. How could she be that way I wondered, given the hard cases she dealt with day after day. How could she be so cheery? But after chatting with her for a few hours, it became apparent that Brandy May was far from being your average person. Behind the self-described "Pollyanna" exterior is a woman with strong convictions, a clear-eyed view of her role in the Service, and an essential trait for success in her chosen field – courage.

As a student back in the late 1970s, Brandy May became involved in the criminal justice system, completing a university practicum in a territorial halfway house that accommodated over 20 offenders. There was really no accounting for her interest in the field; she'd come from what she describes as a very sheltered childhood. Her world had been very different but she was drawn to those who exist on the margins of Canadian society and she wanted to know more about that segment of the population and how to help. The halfway house was a first step, giving her ample opportunity to deal with parolees face-to-face. "Often I was the only staff there at night," she recalls. "I quickly learned about the problems these people face and the value of good interpersonal skills in dicey situations."

A few years later she was delighted when she unexpectedly won a position as probation officer with the Alberta government. Under that big western sky lie vast tracts of farmland, sparsely populated, accessible only by lonely, gravel roads. In winter the weather transforms the landscape into a sub-zero wasteland, often with not a homestead or helping hand in sight. This became Brandy's working territory.



Brandy May at Collins Bay Institution

A Move to Millhaven

Brandy moved on after a number of years and found employment as a classification officer in Manitoba's provincial Headingley Jail. Then a family move occurred to Kingston, Ontario that meshed nicely with Brandy's career plans. She applied to the Correctional Service of Canada and was offered a position as parole officer inside the maximum-security unit of Millhaven Institution.

"Millhaven felt so safe after what I'd been accustomed to," she said, smiling. "Suddenly there were correctional officers and fixed point alarm buttons everywhere. It felt much safer, despite the fact that I was dealing with some pretty volatile men."

The average young woman would be intimidated by the occupants of Millhaven's 'J' Unit but Brandy had always tried to see past the rough exteriors that most inmates present. "When I see anger, I try to look deeper and ask myself, 'What is that anger masking?' Deep inside some of them want to change, they show a glimmer of hope. For instance, someone who's been a criminal for 20 years and sees that it hasn't gotten him anywhere. He may start reflecting on his own mortality. I always try to encourage that type of person.

“Of course there are others that are highly criminally oriented and are willing to take risks to maintain their criminal lifestyles. They may have no anger management or problem-solving deficits, no substance abuse issues. They’ve done a cost/benefit analysis and believe the fruits of their crime outweigh the risks. These guys are much harder to reach because they’ve made a deliberate choice.

“Sometimes the only thing that changes them is time itself. Time has a strong effect on a lifer’s attitude, the fortieth birthday in particular, I’ve noticed. They start thinking: ‘My 20s are gone, my 30s are gone, and I’m in here with guys who could be my kids. The humour of these 18-year olds is not my humour. This is no longer my home, no longer my world. I’m embarrassed to be here.’ When they come to that realization, there’s incentive to change.”

Collins Bay Lifers

After five years at Millhaven, Brandy decided to move on. A three-year secondment in program development at National Headquarters was followed by Brandy accepting her present position at Collins Bay Institution. Some of her old caseload had preceded her or soon followed, moving from maximum to medium security by proving they could handle the responsibility. Many of these inmates treated her in a friendly manner, having already built a rapport during their years together at Millhaven. They were more willing to trust her.

“An inmate who was at one time very wary, when he divulges something personal and insightful to me, I see that as such a gift, especially if there is clearly no ulterior motive for sharing information about himself. Or if he starts using program skills. One guy came to me the other day and said, ‘You know, Brandy, this morning I was in a situation, I had to use my critical reasoning skills.’ [skills taught in the Reasoning and Rehabilitation program] I almost had a heart attack! This was from an inmate who is not intellectually over-endowed, a guy who used to be very aggressive and was cited as the instigator in dozens of incidents at Millhaven. Since coming to CBI, he’s down to one incident over two years. I’m pleased to bits to see that kind of progression.”

Progress may come in tiny increments inside CBI but Brandy finds each small step encouraging. “All glimmers gratefully accepted!” is a pet mantra she often chants to herself. She wishes she could spend more time with inmates.

“Paperwork is important for accountability, no doubt. But it means I have to work harder so that I can have more meaningful time with inmates. That time is necessary in my job with lifers because they, in particular, are so wary of what they say to a parole officer. I use that extra time to try to build trust with them.”

Ensuring public safety is the other compelling reason for a paper trail. As new inmates are added to her caseload, she must thoroughly acquaint herself with their criminal histories (some go back 40 years) and try to understand their behaviour, try to assess their risk.

“You have to read wheelbarrows full of files! And it’s not like reading a book. It doesn’t flow from chapter to chapter. You must integrate all the information and search for patterns. When does danger go up? When does high risk come down? Does he do better when he has a girlfriend? Does he do better when he has a job? You’re not just reading, you’re analyzing, trying to piece together a complete picture. It’s a lot of responsibility, a lot of accountability.”

Outsiders might assume that when it comes time to weigh all the factors in a risk assessment, a seasoned parole officer would rely chiefly on experience and gut instinct to come to a decision. But Brandy laughs at that notion and says it is not the case. She says that CSC has come a long way since those days.

“I take pride and comfort in the fact that our assessments are research based. We use the best research in the world. Our assessment tools work and we work hard to make the public safer.”

Personal Strength

After a long day within the confines of CBI, most employees crave a little relaxation, some horizontal time in front of the television, for instance, but Brandy May is a restless, high-energy type. As darkness falls, she heads out the door of her home, power-walking around a well-trodden 10 kilometre route, rock-and-roll pounding in her Walkman earphones.

“It’s a chance to think through the day, replay things in my mind. It’s my way of unwinding.”

Besides the physical exercise, Brandy credits her adoption of Buddhist philosophy for allowing her to maintain her fast pace and bright exterior, year after year. “Buddhism is about leaving your ego at the door. When I accepted it, ‘What about me?’ changed to ‘What about you?’ That was profoundly centring for me in terms of my focus and goals at work. I try to live by it.”

“Correctional officers ask me why I’m always so happy. One reason is that I can sometimes visualize a shield around me. I just don’t have to absorb any harsh words thrown at me. I have 25 offenders on my caseload so I can’t afford to take any negativity personally. And I can’t afford to waste energy feeling sorry for myself.”

As she goes about her daily tasks, there is one more article of faith that supports Brandy. “I honestly believe in the CSC Mission” she says. “We have very good people and interventions to help inmates. I believe that people can be shown how to change if they really want to.” ■