

Janet-Sue Hamilton

Who Am I

I am proud and honored to offer you some insight into the treatment of aboriginal offenders (female & male) within the Correctional of Service Canada Institutions. However, I noted that I could submit a written brief to the Committee prior to my testimony therefore it is my intention to do so within the next few paragraphs. I think it is important that you have an understanding of who I am, and where I come from as it relates to First Nations.

I graduated from the University of Waterloo in 1975 and began my career by leaving the environment of a large city and embarking on a career of working with Aboriginal people in the Northwest Territories. In fact, I began my career as a child care worker at Akaitcho Hall in Yellowknife, NWT. It was there that I became exposed to the wonderful culture of Canada's First Nations. Indeed, my heart silently wept as the students shared many stories of their own struggles and their parents struggles as they were taken from their families and placed into residential schools. It was during this time, that I can recollect my mother, who resided in Ottawa, decided to take Inuit student's into her home while they attended high school. She only housed 2 girls who were from a small community in Northern Quebec called Whale Cove. My mom relished the love and affection she received from these young Inuit women and she in return gave the same love and affection back to them. Tragically, one of the students could not adjust to the large city and decided to return to her home community. It was there that she took her own life and forever changed my mother's. I can remember to this day, the phone call I got from my mother who was devastated to learn of the fate of this beautiful young person. I tell you this today, as suicide continues to haunt the young aboriginal youths in so many communities.

The next phase of my career, I worked for the Department of Indian Affairs in Northern Alberta, Northern Saskatchewan, and Central Saskatchewan for approximately 15 years. It was here that I became exposed to the culture and teaching of (Status) First Nations and developed an awareness and appreciation for the richness of their past and the struggles that they faced. I saw the devastation of children being placed into foster care where they were not able to practise their language and culture and teachings as they were in many cases removed from their home communities. The cycle of poverty, addiction's, and violence were prevalent in many of the communities I worked in.

In 1995 the second phase of my career started as I found myself working for the Correctional Service of Canada at the Edmonton Institution for Women. I spent approximately 15 years working in the field of Corrections at various sites: Ferndale Institution, Elbow Lake Institution, Mission Institution, Edmonton Institution for Women, and Edmonton Maximum Institution for Men. The longest tenure I had as a Warden was approximately 8 years at the Edmonton Institution for Women in Edmonton, Alberta.

The rate of incarceration for First Nations women offender's from the time the Institution opened until present day is staggering. It is here that the judicial system must take responsibility for the high rate of incarceration of First Nations and find solutions in consultation with First Nations that offer other alternatives rather than incarceration.

Edmonton Institution for Women was founded on the principles of 'Creating Choices' yet in my opinion, this has been watered down to the point that the facility is like any male facility now. I prided myself on the women's facility being different and offering a safe environment for women where they could be nurtured by an environment that celebrated the offender's differences and offered them choices that could get them on their journey to a safe reintegration to society. At one time, I was a part of an international committee that wanted to model their prison after the Edmonton Institution for Women as our model was so unique and had success. Sadly, over time, the environment saw union pressure chip away at the very foundation of 'Creating Choices' and in my opinion no longer represents the original vision of the facility. The institution now struggles with many issues and one of the most significant ones is the treatment of First Nations women offenders within this context. Today, I will provide you with my own personal overview of the facility during my tenure as Warden (the positive and the negative practices that were in place) and if given the opportunity will offer some possible solutions to addressing these issues.

In closing, in the past week I was asked to attend a special event at the Edmonton Institution for Women which was recognizing the 'missing and murdered aboriginal women' and provided an outlet for First Nations women offenders to tell their stories. It was a moving and powerful event that showed the pain that many offenders experienced as they told stories of their family member's being murdered or had gone missing. They also told their stories of the history within their families of residential school atrocities that impacted them to this very day. I have reflected on this day and must admit that it was devastating to hear their stories knowing full well that the system does not address these issues in the various programs that have been developed for First Nation offenders and that this needs to change. Today, I will offer you any insight that I have into the inner workings and treatment of First Nations women offenders. I have now been retired from the Correctional Service of Canada for 7 years but feel I have something to offer on behalf of the aboriginal women currently incarcerated.