

Releasing Hope

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& Lynn Fels



*Imagine a gate opening and
that you are stepping
beyond the gated barriers
into a new life. Who is
waiting for you? What
opportunities are offered?
Whose hand reaches out
to welcome you?*

“I never had anyone waiting for me and never set up any support because I thought it was a waste of my time because I’d only screw it up.”

—Pam



Keys to the Gates

I've been watching women struggle with bridging the gap
Between a life focused on crime, drugs and prison
To a life
where they fit into mainstream society

People need to know
It's not as simple as putting down the drugs
and getting on with your life

The key to the gates of prison represents far more than just turning the lock to open it on the days you are incarcerated or released.

For me the day I was released was the beginning of many unknown challenges that I would have to face as I tried to find my place in mainstream society.

So many barriers to moving forward in one's life after many years of addiction that led to crime to support my habit.

Always on the outskirts of society and not sure where I fit into this big wide world we live in.



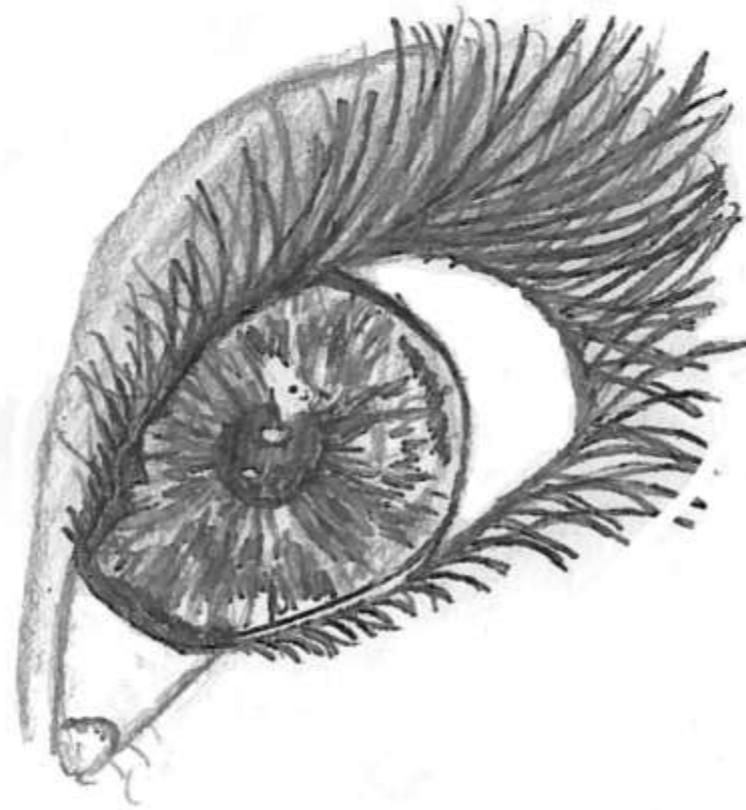
How do we interrupt the revolving door of recidivism?

We are not going to
arrest our way out of
these issues.

—Mo

Several incarcerated women had previously said to me, “When I get released from here, I want to do research work with you,” but I didn’t hear from them...now that Kelly had arrived, I wondered, what will I do with her? I wasn’t really set up at UBC to handle women recently released from prison ...wanting to do research. I wasn’t sure where this would take me.

—Ruth’s Journal



Participatory Health Research
“Who is walking with who?”

Facebook Group

Peer Researchers at UBC

Women in2 Healing Support Group

“Doing Time” Research Project

Preventative Health
Workshops

...we were excited and hopeful—but unsure about where the work would take us. Probably each one of us had a different sense of vision and priority. Lots of ideas emerged from those early days, some of which morphed into projects that endure to this day. Women's PHR became urgent action advocacy initiatives...(as we) moved from inside the prison walls to the outside, released beyond the gates.

—Ruth's Journal

“As we gather around the pretentious boardroom table, I contemplate the anxiety that I consistently encounter, before, during and after these “Doing Time monthly meetings of the co-investigators. It has occurred to me that it might be the setting, the boardroom, and the vast distance around the table. Or could it be the name ‘co-investigators’; just that word makes me want to hire a lawyer. My thoughts are wandering and I am visualizing a different meeting place. The local pub perhaps, or the back of a coffee house; the smell of fresh ground beans and baked goods. What would the atmosphere feel like then? Would there be the obvious distinction between academics, peer researchers, and project staff?” —Kelly

“I would like to ask you some questions about your health, based on the nine topic areas that women in prison told us were important to their health. Some questions will invite you to tell me your story in your own words. Some questions will invite you to reply on a scale of 1-5...”

—Doing Time Interviewer

“I was done. Sick of going in and out of jail and having to start all over again when I got out. I realized that there had to be more to life than the revolving door of prison and addiction.”

—Mo

What brings you to the point in your life where you feel you are done? What leads you to it? Is it a spiritual awakening?

We then decided to add a question about spiritual health in the 'Doing Time' research interview, because we thought that maybe this was the missing piece.

—Ruth's

Journal

Peer Health Mentor Program

What would happen if there was someone waiting for you at the bus stop on the day of your release?



“Pam, I finally have the perfect client for you.”

“Where’s she going?”

“She’s going to Vancouver Island.”

“Do I just bring her to the ferry terminal?”

“I need you to take her all the way to Nanaimo, and then jump back on the ferry and come home.”

I felt instantly overwhelmed. But I told her I would do it.

—Peer Mentor

I wish we'd had the tape recorder today..... Mo shared how a woman with incarceration experience, whom she was mentoring as a project assistant, has disappeared and she fears that she has relapsed into substance use. Mo says that she is trying to not take it personally.

—Ruth's Journal





“I would meet the women at the bus loop. I didn’t have a driver’s license, so I had to get around on the bus. It wasn’t the best way to get around, but I would make it work to help women get to their appointments. It would take me hours sometimes, but all that I could offer was my support. I would take women to get clothes, set up welfare, and help find a safe place for them to go.”

—Mo

“S. has called me many times before her release and after her release. I’ve tried to encourage her to go to recovery, but she’s not interested at this time.”

—Peer Health Mentor

“I took it very personally the first time a woman who I helped at the bus loop died later that day. I questioned what I could have done differently. What could I have done to be more supportive? What could I have said to be more helpful?”

“How do we help someone who feels like she is worthless and unlovable?”

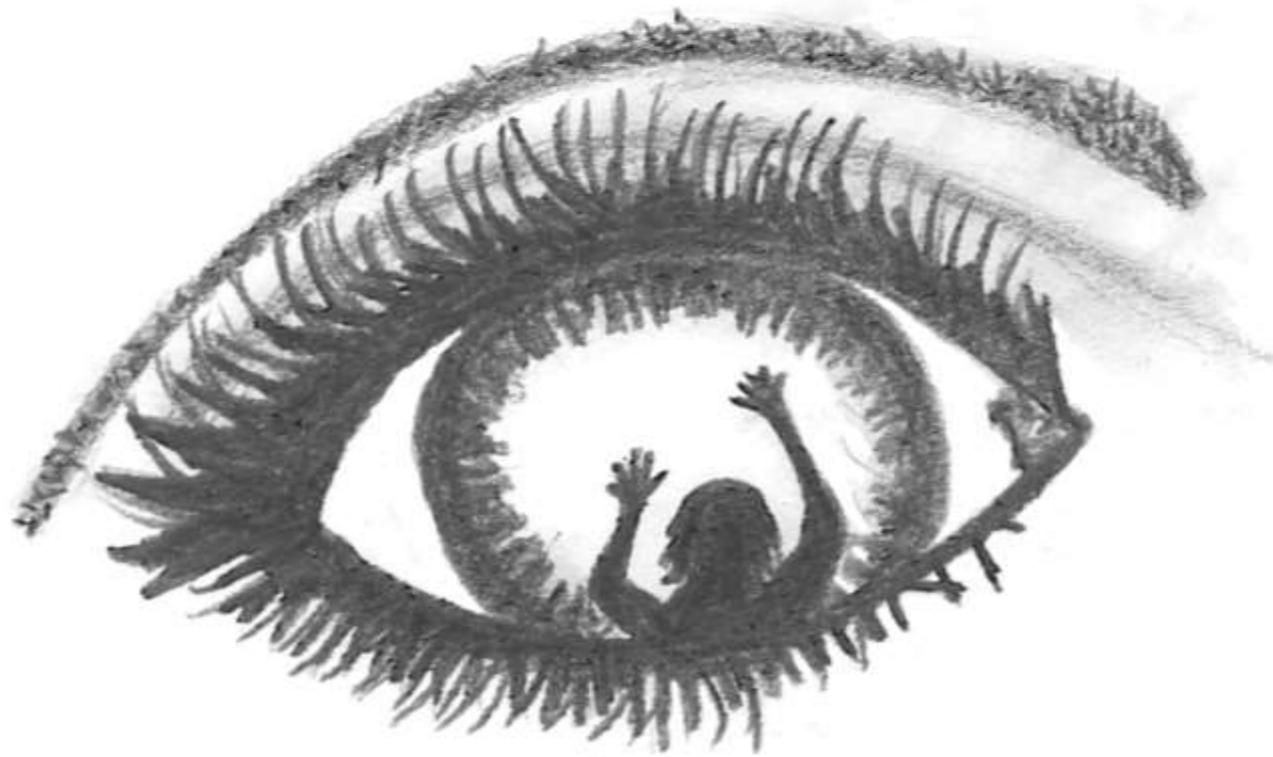
While in addiction I felt that way for many years.”

—Mo

health research, I had no idea what I was getting into. By taking the chance of exploring the unknown with participatory health research, I have opened up my life to new possibilities, new ways of knowing, and new relationships. I was, and I continue to be, transformed through the process.

—Ruth's

Journal



“I have learned over the years that I have to take a step back and not take it to heart that someone that I care about is not ready to change...” —

Mo

“
“My story is about recovering from my broken life, heart, and putting the pieces back together, and I didn't know where to start, I started to run...

...I started to run for my life.”

—Amanda

“I felt empowered that I was clean and sober and about to start my journey helping women. I knew if anything I could share my journey of recovery and success at being clean for three years. I had so much knowledge to offer. This day turned out to be a pivotal day where I would discover my passion for helping women leaving prison.”

—Pam



“It feels like I’m learning a whole new language and entering a whole new world. It is all so confusing and a little scary. But I can learn! I know I have a lot of work to do yet, but it will come. I am starting to accomplish my first goal. I just need to spend time on it and ask for help when I need it.”

—Joy

Joyheart

Releasing Hope touches on the stories of individual women, and the learning from participatory health research that made visible their lives, their hopes, their dreams and fears. Upon release, the challenge is to reimagine lives interrupted.



“It gives me hope that we will continue to reach out to other women and help them help themselves.”

—Amber

““When I wake up every morning, over my morning tea, I look on Facebook and I see ‘RIP’ on women’s page. Five women died of opiate (fentanyl) overdose in Maple Ridge in 24 hours just before Easter 2017. It’s become the norm.”

—Mo

“When we first started the peer health mentor program, we wanted to know how to stop women from relapsing and using. Now we want to know how to stop women from dying.”

—Mo

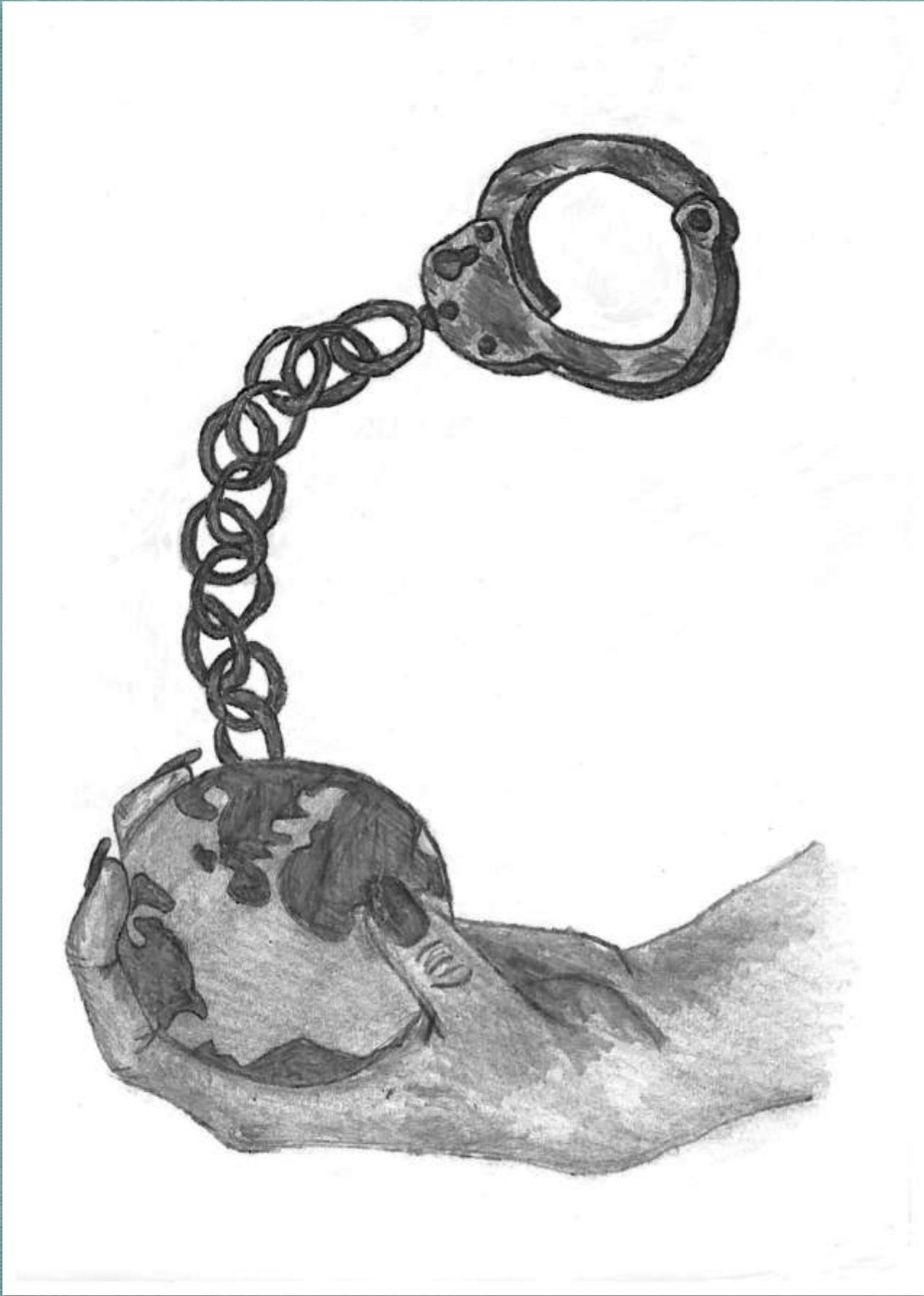


In between arrest and release there is a space...and in that space there is the opportunity to choose. The support needed is simply to help the choosing process because in that choice lies freedom.

—Alison Granger-Brown

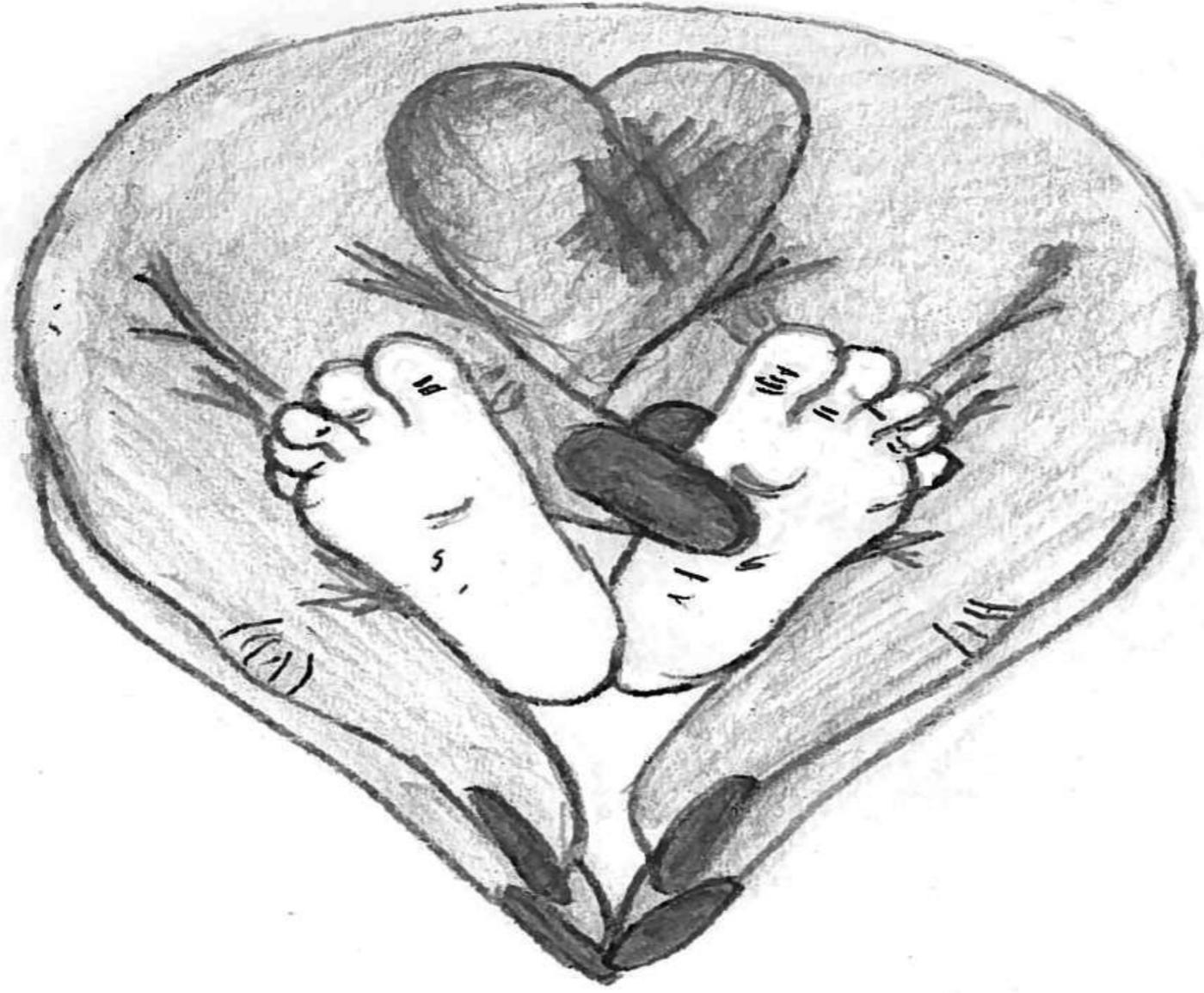
*“That was the day I decided with my
whole heart that I was going to put
everything
I could into life again.”*

—Amber



We have a chance as women with lived experience to help women being released from prison. As peers we understand the emotion and fears that builds upon our release. When the gates open, a person has a choice. To give in to the old way or walk along side a peer who will guide you to a choice of freedom.”

—Mo



*“When you listen carefully,
you can hear a resonant
song of hope... To live
with hope requires
immense courage,
forgiveness, and
patience.”*

–Carl Leggo



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