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# Emma's Acres grows healing

## B.C. farm has inmates and victims working together

BY MATT JONES

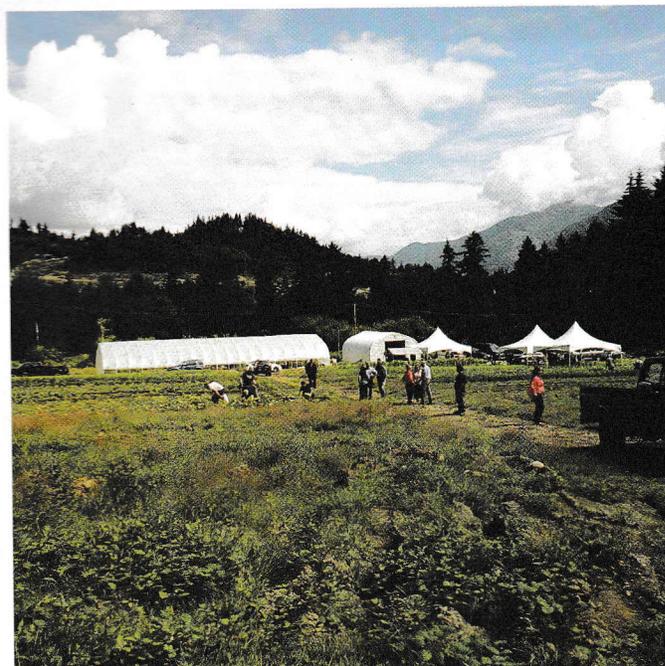
"People talk about how people who are in prison are there because of their choices, and that's true," says Glen Flett. "But one of the reasons they're there is that they don't make good choices. They don't know how to make choices. That's a huge problem for guys in prison, because they have no experience in making choices."

Flett knows all about making choices. After serving a 23-year prison sentence, Flett founded the Long-term Inmates Now in the Community (L.I.N.C.) Society, determined to help inmates grow and heal from their experiences and to give back to the community. In 2012, they established Emma's Acres, a farm in Mission, B.C. where inmates from a nearby correctional facility work alongside victims of crime.

"Here, every day there are choices," says Flett. "They get a choice of what they want to do. There's a huge list of chores that need to be done, from simple watering to building stuff and infrastructure. Everybody has a chance to do what they want to do."

The farm started with a tree-dense lot that the local municipality provided at a low price. With funding from Canadian Action Initiative, the trees were cleared and a greenhouse and a Quonset hut were purchased. The farm has produced watermelon, squash, tomatoes, peppers, radishes and cucumbers. But the most important thing grown at Emma's Acres is the sense of community that has developed between the inmates and the victims of crime who work alongside them.

"Mixing victims and offenders is an unorthodox idea," says Flett. "Nothing has ever been done like this. But we've been doing this for years now and we've made so much progress. We've had maybe 30 guys in total and there hasn't been one



Emma's Acres is a farm in Mission, B.C. where inmates from a nearby correctional facility work alongside victims of crime.

of those guys who's gone back to jail. I realize the project is young, but that's pretty good. It's a lot of labour intensive work, but the guys who are coming know what they're doing and that they're giving back. In prison, people don't get a chance to give back. Once you get out of jail, it's hard to find a way to say, 'I'm sorry.'"

John S. (full name withheld to protect the privacy of the victim's family) works at the farm during the day while serving a life sentence for second-degree murder. John says that a lifetime of feeling like a victim fueled his experiences and shaped his world view. After being arrested for being a passenger in a stolen truck as a child, he was sent to a reform school.

"It turned into a paradise for child molesters," says John. "I ran into that down there and you carry that with you when you get out. I've always been taught, 'Society

is your enemy, community is your enemy.' You get sent somewhere for something you didn't even do and when you get there you get abused by people who were supposed to be looking after you. When you carry that through your life, you don't know how to deal with it other than anger. I wasted 30 years; it was all anger."

John says that those experiences put him on the path that led to a life sentence in 1976 and spending 20 years in special handling units. His tone of voice,



John S. (middle), and Glen Flett (right), along with Flett's son-in-law Zach Thomas, beekeeping at Emma's Acres.



The Blessing Ceremony for Georgina's Medicine Garden at Emma's Acres etc.



A sample of the harvest from Emma's Acres, produced through the combined hard work and cooperation of serving inmates and victims of crime.

however, softens when talking about the farm.

"When I come out here, I can flush all that shit out of my head because all I'm seeing is good things happening. You get on them hate trips and it's a hard thing to get out of you. You have to learn how to love other people or you're just going to be an animal."

Learning to love other people and gaining empathy for others is a big part of the program. John says he's already made some great connections, such as Ray King, who has had a long journey to healing after his son was murdered 30 years ago.

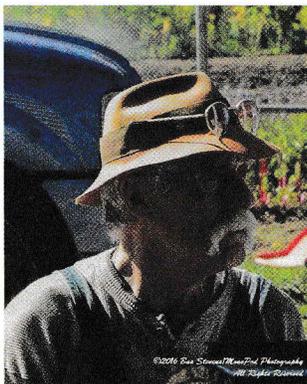
"Ray is one of the guys I get along with best out here," says John. "When you sit down and get talking with these guys, you find out you have so much in common with them — they're somebody's mother, somebody's father. There's so much to relate to. It takes away that 'them and us' sort of thing."

King says that his life was consumed by anger after his son, Ray Jr., was murdered by serial killer Clifford Olson. For decades, it was impossible for him to heal as every so many months Olson would appear in the press or there would be a parole hearing. He was finally able to begin to heal after Olson's death in 2011.

"I spent 30 years thinking that all offenders were Clifford Olson, that they were all the same," says King. "I now have a totally different outlook. I can see these offenders as people. They have good sides and bad sides, like everybody else. The guys that we work with, they've become friends. I can see them as people, where before I didn't really care."

King started watering the gardens in 2013. A year later, he was a fixture at the farm and now escorts the inmates back and forth between prison and the farm.

"It helps," says King. "The offenders that come to work at the farm, they leave with a sense of accomplishment every day."



Glen Flett, founder of the L.I.N.C. Society, which provides services such as helping former inmates find employment and support groups for survivors of crime.

"There's nothing more rewarding," says John. "If they let me put my bed out here, I'd never leave the property."

The offenders also develop a connection to their community. Produce from the farm is either given to victims of violent crime who visit or donated to local non-profits or sold at a local farmer's market. John recalls being shocked his first time visiting the market.

"You couldn't believe how nice everyone was to me," says John. "Everyone knew where I was. But it's the

whole attitude — it changes people's attitudes and perceptions. You get back into the community, but we're educating the community at the same time. We did a Christmas supper and we fed 300 people. We've got a medicine garden going in this year. They're going to be doing sweats up there. We're going to have a smoke house going in."

The local community has been very supportive of the endeavour. Other farmers and experts in the area have been very generous, donating materials or seeds or some of their own labour to help the farm get established. Experts in various fields have also stopped by to share their knowledge and offer training. BC Honey Producers, in particular, offered a course and now John and others have a bee keeping certification which they can take with them.

"We try to do course work that people can take elsewhere," says Sherry Edmunds-Flett, executive director of the L.I.N.C. Society and Glen's wife. "People are here because they want to be here and they want to give back instead of taking. You're helping to feed a community. Anybody who's a victim of violence gets their food for free. We help people who are low income have a source of food. It's a community space. It's all these things."

"It's what I'm going to be doing for the rest of my life," adds John. "This is home."