

"Arts and culture is one of the very few plausible hedges against the volatility of an economy based on resources." - Frank Barry

Doing Hard Time in Hard Times

by Robin McGrath

A standing joke in Labrador is that you have to go to jail to be a professional artist. So few Labrador artists have a dedicated space for their work that they can only carve outdoors, restricting their practice to the summer months. Unless, that is, you are incarcerated in the Labrador Correctional Centre, which has a trade shop and a soapstone carving studio.

A recent article in the quarterly Labrador Life paints a very positive picture of the soapstone carving program, claiming that the 30 year old shop "continues to help inmates express their artistic talents while, at the same time, stay connected to their cultural heritage." The LCC's Assistant Superintendant says that "the program can accommodate six offenders during the day time shops and three offenders during the night." The article goes on to claim that the Trades Shop Coordinator oversees the purchase of soapstone, provides tools for the program and also does a small amount of marketing for the finished product. Dorothy Clark of Dorothy's Crafts is identified as one of the retailers who "often purchases some of the work done by inmates."

It's nice to read a feel-good story related to our prison system, but how accurate a reflection is it of reality? When asked, Dorothy Clark said she has not been approached to purchase LCC carvings for over two years. Herb Brown, who was involved with the carving program in the late 90s before starting the Birches Gallery, was at one time a regular purchaser but became overstocked, at which point the Labrador Craft Marketing Agency (LCMA) stepped in. The LCMA closed down two years ago, at about the same time that the Birches Gallery closed. If the prisoners are producing art, there appears to be nobody selling it for them.

"Decades of Darkness: Moving Towards the Light; A Review of the Prison System in Newfoundland and Labrador," written in 2008, points to a number of problems at the LCC, problems that still exist and that impact the soapstone carving program today. The 32 year old building, designed to accommodate 38 inmates, has been housing 53 inmates for at least the last ten years. The only improvement is that bunk beds have been provided to replace mattresses on the floor. While the inmate population has increased, the staffing levels have dropped.

Then, as now, the Trades Shop Coordinator is a Correctional Officer and as the report notes, "It is difficult to provide programming when the program facilitator is a Correctional Officer as he/she needs to be relieved of his/her Correctional Officer duties in order to deliver offender programming. Staff shortages make this very difficult to accomplish."

Ninety four percent of the LCC inmate population is of Aboriginal heritage. Word on the street is that the unavailability of supervision makes using the carving shop in the LCC almost impossible. If, in fact, nine inmates can be accommodated each day and night, and are accommodated, what happens to the other forty inmates who might like to make art to pass the time, earn a few dollars, and maintain their ties to their heritage? It seems that these days, you can't make art in Labrador no matter how much time you are prepared to serve.



Dorothy's Crafts in Happy Valley-Goose Bay is one of the few retail outlets for artists remaining in Labrador. Photo by Robin McGrath.