

Ottawa

Former drug user to open rehab centre in Lanark County

Manie Daniels Centre will help people out on bail to access treatment

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Spencer Kell stands in a room that will soon become the kitchen of the rehab centre he plans to open for people in remand who want treatment for their addictions. (Francis Ferland/CBC)

When Spencer Kell left jail for the last time, he had a vision for his future.

He wanted to find a job that gave him purpose, reconnect with his family and break free from the cycle of substance use and incarceration that had dominated his life for 20 years.

"It's torment and torture for a person that's stuck in that cycle," Kell said.

Now, five years after being granted bail to attend an addictions treatment program in Ottawa, Kell is proud to have broken that cycle and is working to help others do the same.

He plans to open an addictions treatment centre in Maberly, about 105 kilometres southwest of Ottawa and 80 kilometres north of Kingston in Lanark County.

The facility, which he'll call the Manie Daniels Centre, will house people living with addictions who are in remand — those who have been charged with a criminal offence but are awaiting trial in a provincial jail.



The Manie Daniels Centre will be located on the Fall River, about 20 kilometres west of Perth, Ont. (Francis Ferland/CBC)

"Provincial jail systems offer almost no supports to people living with addictions, or treatment options either," said Cooper Lord, a criminal defence lawyer who represented Kell at the 2018 bail hearing that made it possible for him to access treatment

"They are locked down most of the time, oftentimes there's three inmates to a cell, and they're simply being warehoused as opposed to being given the tools to overcome the cycle."

Kell believes the program he plans to offer is desperately needed to help people overcome their addictions at a moment when they're already removed from their substance supply.

"It's at that point where intervention needs to happen. I don't believe that sitting in a jail cell is going to do anything for a person who is suffering from substance-use disorder," Kell said.

"It's not just going to be a get out of jail free card. It's going to be (for) an individual who's expressed a sincere desire to change and is stuck inside the provincial correction system and doesn't have an alternative."

Building it back up

Last fall, Kell bought an old wooden house tucked in the hills of a small piece of land that borders the Fall River.

With the help of Curtis Hutt, a man he met while working at a Renfrew, Ont., treatment centre, Kell is putting in a new classroom, a shared kitchen and dining space with a long harvest table where tenants will gather for meals.

Four bedrooms upstairs will be able to house eight tenants once the centre is up and running, but for now it's just Kell, Hutt and the more than 100-year-old house they're hoping to give new life to.

"The floor was crooked and the walls were crooked and the door was crooked, so everything felt like it needed the carpenter's touch to straighten things out. Kind of like our lives, right? Let's tear it down to build it back up," Hutt said.



This room, currently used to store tools while the house is being renovated, will become the centre's new classroom. (Francis Ferland/CBC)

While some treatment programs work by isolating participants from the outside world, Kell plans for his program to work differently.

"What we're trying to really capture is a snapshot of what real life is like," he said, explaining that on top of regular addictions recovery treatment, the program will work to connect participants with health services, employment and housing.

Dr. John Weekes, director of knowledge mobilization for the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction and a professor of forensic psychology and substance use health at Carleton University, has worked supporting people in federal prisons who are struggling with substance use.

He said the approach Kell is proposing is critical to any recovery program.

"I fundamentally perceive substance use as a personal health and more broader public health issue," Weekes said.

"Addressing substance use alone without addressing other important need areas isn't addressing the full picture."

'Leave it good for the next guy'

During two separate stays in jail, Kell bunked with a man named Manie Daniels. They grew to be close friends, spending 23 hours a day together in their shared cell.

Daniels was Cree from Peepeekisis First Nation northeast of Regina. He was taken from his community as a young boy and sent to a residential school.

Like Kell, he struggled with addictions for most of his adult life, but Kell remembers something else about him.

"His main thing was, 'Leave it good for the next guy coming through,'" Kell said.



Kell befriended Manie Daniels when they shared a cell in jail. Daniels died from an overdose fewer than 48 hours after he was released in 2018. (Submitted)

When Kell got out on bail in 2018 to attend a treatment program at the Ottawa Booth Centre, he organized for a bed to be available for Daniels, who was keen to do the same.

Kell said Daniels's lawyer thought it would be better for him to finish the last few months of his sentence in jail and begin treatment after his release.

When Daniels got out, he decided to go home to Guelph, Ont., instead of meeting Kell in Ottawa. Fewer than 48 hours after he was released, Daniels died from an overdose.

"His death really cemented all of the reasons why intervention needs to be made available to people who are willing to make a change while they're incarcerated," Kell said.

Lord, Kell's lawyer, has had many clients die under similar circumstances.

"The greatest risk comes when someone with that addiction abstains from use for a long period of time while in custody, and if they use again then they can overdose quite easily," Lord said.

"They don't have the tools to avoid use when they're released, and so they fall back into the same cycle."

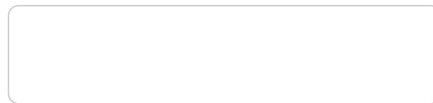
It's this cycle Kell is hoping to break and he plans to do so guided by Daniels's philosophy.

He hopes to open the facility named after his friend in March, but said there are still a number of hurdles to overcome before that will be possible, a big one being funding.

Kell said he plans to hire staff once the money comes through, but until then the program will operate informally, as it is now between Kell and Hutt, with "one addict helping another."

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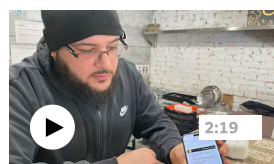
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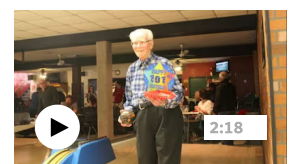
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