

Stories from the Faith Based Unit - Johnny's Story

Johnny was jailed last year for grievous bodily harm. He had beaten up his girlfriend after finding her cheating on him, twice.

He talks about what it was like to come to the Faith Based Unit: "It was pretty hard. I felt ashamed. I'd lived my life without God and the next minute I'm in trouble, at the lowest point in my life. I felt too ashamed to ask for help and on the third day I asked to be transferred out."

"But I talked to a couple of dudes (other inmates) and they said, give it another week. I ended up crying in my cell and writing to my aunties and family, telling them I felt ashamed and asking for their help. They said go for it, don't feel shy. I've always believed that there is a God, but I've never had a personal relationship with Him, and that scared me."

Johnny said he also felt some discomfort about making the choice to enter the unit, and become a Christian, when others in the jail saw it as a cop-out. "It was like a soft thing to do, not staunch enough."

So adjusting to the new set of values was hard, and the process of change took time. "At first it was slow as, it took me ages to get on my knees and have my first prayer. It happened gradually, learning how to pray, and then gradually the things I was asking Him for, he gave to me. Like strength to get over the shame of being in here, and what I did."

"When I first started forgiving myself, it was like being set free. It felt really good. I think that was the first time I felt that God was really working in my life. And that's when I started reading the Bible heaps and praying a lot. It's been a pretty unreal journey.

"I have never been this strong in myself ever in my life, even since I was a child. I have been given so much, more than I ever thought was possible. Now I know I'm not alone in anything that comes my way."

He says he has gained greater resilience to stress, and the confidence and skills to ask for help when he needs it. "I get my hurts out instead of holding them in. I can now do that."

Johnny contrasts the Faith Based Unit with his previous experience of jail: "It's way different. It feels free in here to talk about God or the Bible, (whereas elsewhere) people would have told you to harden up. There's a way better sense of community, like if you're feeling down there's always someone there, someone who'll pick up you, you don't even have to ask."

Johnny has done courses on "Straight Thinking" (a behaviour modification programme including anger management), parenting, and budgeting. He has worked through painful childhood incidents, including not knowing his mother, and the loss of his sister.

When he gets out of prison, in mid-2005, he plans to return to his previous job and seek legal access to his son. He understands that his girlfriend will need time to forgive him, and may never do so. He has maintained relationships with his family,

and has had four visits from them since coming to jail, even though they live in Northland. "I'm pretty spoilt really."

Johnny's strength has been appreciated by others in prison with him, and he has become an elder within the unit's community, helping to lead prayers and Christian study.

He spoke publicly at the unit's anniversary celebration: "I'd like to thank the officers - it's awesome being treated like a person, and not a number. It helps, it keeps us on track." He also thanked the tutors, volunteers and counsellor.

"While jail has been the lowest point of my life, it has also been the highest growth point. It has given me the gift of Jesus." Johnny plans to become part of a Christian community in Whangarei, with a cousin, when released from jail next year.