



Life after prison

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Getting out of prison does not always mean the end of doing time, as there is a high percentage of reoffending. Annah Stretton and her sister Rebecca Skilton are working to reduce these statistics by offering women prisoners the support to start life afresh. **Nicola Russell** went to Hamilton to find out how their RAW scheme works.

Close your eyes and imagine going to prison. You'll likely think about the bars, a cold cell, and being locked away from

family, friends and the comforts of freedom. It's unlikely you'll summon a pleasant scene, let alone imagine returning more than once – yet almost half of the women imprisoned in New Zealand are convicted again within two years of release.

Woman like Ina Pickering, a 36-year-old mother-of-four, who has been to jail seven times. Each time she was released from prison she returned to the same life she had always known.

"I would only have the \$350 'steps to freedom' payment, which you walk out of prison with – and that doesn't go far. Then you have a two-week stand down until your benefit starts. With nowhere to live, that meant buying drugs, then selling drugs to make money. Then if that didn't work, I'd have sex for money."

Inevitably she would return

to living environments where her habit was the norm. "The people that were open to taking me in were the ones that supported the habit because I was able to support their habit as well," Ina admits.

It was stories like this that led designer Annah Stretton and her sister Rebecca Skilton, a registered nurse with 25 years of experience working in mental health, to set up a new focus for their Reclaim Another Woman (RAW) organisation.

RAW now aims to reduce reoffending by placing women coming out of prison in incubator housing, away from stress and disruption, where they receive intensive support to build the foundations for a crime-free life.

The first placement was in March 2015 and there are now four incubator residences operating in Annah and Rebecca's hometown of Hamilton, accommodating 12 women. Of those 12, 11 are studying and one is now in paid employment.

When it began, RAW matched domestic abuse sufferers with successful women in the community, with the aim of supporting them to get an education and create a new life away from abuse. From that original model Annah and Rebecca found they needed a more controlled and intensive system of rehabilitation if they were to succeed in their goal of interrupting the cycle of violence and crime experienced by vulnerable New Zealand women.

"The women [in the first scheme] were still at a point of crisis and living in ongoing difficult dysfunctional environments, and commitment to growth was not a priority or a realistic reality," explains Rebecca.

From there the duo changed direction and created the incubator housing model for women coming out of prison. The programme requires robust commitment from the participants, who Rebecca works with for at least six months before their parole hearing. During that time she

“They need to be busy and education is our vision.”



creates a relationship of trust, in which she develops an understanding of the personal challenges they may face on release.

"Part of the criteria is they are not from Hamilton," says Rebecca. "They agree to relocate here and not to have any contact with their old associates. They agree initially to come to us for a year without their partners and children, so part of that process is ensuring their children are in a settled place for the year." »

Left: RAW co-founder Rebecca Skilton. Opposite page: Ina Pickering, who is making a new life for herself as a hairdresser through the scheme.

That condition is based on the notion that the women need time to focus on a crime-free path before they take on the responsibility of their children again.

RAW also offers support beyond that initial year – to help with such things as finishing their study, moving into paid employment and into their own homes with their children. Rebecca says the long-term vision is to create an alumnus of women who support each other in their new lives.

It's an idea already operating in the incubator homes, where women at different periods of release inspire newcomers – both by showing them what life can look like further down the track and helping them through the initial period of adjustment by sharing their own experiences.

“If you are bringing a woman into a house with three other women who are eight, nine months on, we find the new woman will integrate more seamlessly,” says Rebecca. “The ones who have been there longer are supportive and are grasping that pay-it-forward approach.”

“I know it is a concern, putting people with a group of convictions together, but it's a diplomatic dance and we are

structuring them sensibly. It is more effective than harmful.”

The first three months in the home have

proved the most difficult for women, as they settle into the new life and fight old temptations and habits.

“For the first 12 weeks there is a curfew, no social media and no unauthorised contact with anyone,” explains Rebecca. “Family contact is at our discretion. We need to meet whoever they are having contact with and it is positive contacts only. There is generally only supported leave in the first 12 weeks, so if there is a serious incident that a woman does need to go back to we will support them rather than letting them go back on their own.”

The rules are strict but deemed



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necessary for the programme to work. There have been four people who have left the programme and in response the 12-week rules were made tougher to reduce the risk of newly released women being distracted by old habits and associates.

Changes have also been made to entry criteria. Three of the four women who left the programme were on straight release (no parole conditions). RAW now only takes women on parole, which they believe provides greater incentives. It also only accepts women being released around the months of January and July, so they can move into an

education programme quickly.

“Routine and structure are important – they need to be busy, and education is our vision. We have scholarships through Wintec and the university. The pathways they want to take are already established, so we enrol them in study as soon as they are out and they just get into a routine of tech, their probation and treatment requirements and working at the In Excess shop [a second-hand store set up for RAW women to run].”

Financially, the women's basic needs are taken care of. They hand over their benefits to RAW and their food, shelter, clothing and course fees are paid. Funding for the programme also comes from donations and independent investors. This takes away financial pressures but means



Left: A house of new beginnings - one of RAW's incubator homes. Opposite page: Gina, the first woman to join the scheme, now gives back to the community.

some adjustment for women who are used to having a lot of money through crime.

Auckland Region Women's Corrections Facility manager Cheryl Mikaere says the programme came at a time when she was desperate for help. "I have spoken at community forums since 2013, socialising our departmental goal of reducing reoffending by 25 per cent by 2017 and emphasising 'I need your help, I cannot do it on my own'. Along came RAW.

"The progress I have seen in the women is the light in their eyes, the smile on their face and the korero coming from their mouths – somebody believes in them. Our wahine admit that without the support of RAW they would most likely have been on the road back to reoffending. Yet they are attending Wintec and university and are purposefully employed.

"We began with very modest numbers of seven on the RAW books. The numbers have increased to 50 [in prison awaiting release]."

INA PICKERING

Ina Pickering is a kindly spoken woman, studying hairdressing. She is excited about her future, wells up with tears when she talks about spending

time with her children, and giggles when she is complimented.

She is happy now, but life hasn't been kind to the 36-year-old, who suffered recurrent sexual abuse as a child.

"At 15, I was running away and became an alcoholic to try and numb the pain. I ended up soliciting to make ends meet. By 19 I gave birth to the first of four children, all of them eventually taken into CYF's care. I've been fortunate that CYFs gave me a choice about their caregivers and all are safe and doing well."

Ina, who has been to prison seven times for fraud and burglary, says going to prison was a "blessing in disguise" because she was able to break her habit.

"On alcohol I'd regularly black out, so eventually I turned to meth to stay alert. Increasingly I committed crime to fuel my addiction. Prison has been the only time in my adult life when I have been sober for long periods of time. On return to prison for the seventh time I went back to the DTU (Drug Treatment Unit). I knew I had a problem, knew I needed to change, and knew only I could do it for myself."

She heard about RAW from other

inmates. "The mentoring, support, everything was exactly what I needed. I hadn't had any really positive support in my life before."

The incubator home provided a very different prospect to Ina's previous releases. "Coming into a safe, drug-free environment, having no financial stress, being accepted and supported regardless of my past was key for me because it is not the kind of response you get from society. Sometimes you just don't bother [trying] because you know people wouldn't bother with you because of your history."

“I am in a really good space now and I love everything I have.”

She says the first 12 weeks in the incubator home were difficult – she'd never had to ask for anything before, so having someone else control her finances was difficult.

Routine, working at In Excess and going to AA got her through. As did a significant visit. "I got a visit from my mum and three daughters and for them to see me in this environment and straight and clean was just huge."

Ina has three daughters (15, 13 and eight) who live with her mother, and a five-year-old son who lives with another family member. She is now seeing her son regularly once a fortnight, a development she is delighted with.

"Every time I had tried to see them in the past I was still using and I was unreliable, and I would come into their space and disrupt them and they would become unsettled – I wanted to be there, but I wasn't there because I was still on drugs."

It has taken her son until very recently to get excited about the visits. "Up until then he would come into prison and rehab and be stand-offish and reserved but last weekend he was »

over the moon to see me – he trusts I am going to be there. It’s absolutely amazing – it has taken a long time but it has happened,” she says, her eyes filling with tears. “I am in a really good space now and I love everything that I have in my life.”

Her long-term goal is to have her son full time and to earn the trust of her mother so she can have her daughters on the weekends. “I understand her distance – I just need to be patient because she is doing it with the girls’ best interests in mind,” says Ina.

In the short term she plans to complete her two-year degree and become a hairdresser. “The education has been the best part for me. I would like to have my own salon and I want it to be booked out two weeks to one month in advance, because I am going to be that good at it!” she says.

GINA

Gina wasn’t available to meet with RAW when they first came to visit – she was at the Auckland District Court, where she worked most days in the cafeteria. Gina wasn’t afraid of hard work, she wasn’t afraid of prison either – her biggest fear was being released back to the same environment she had come from.

“The parole board look at whether you have a suitable address, where you are going to go and what you are going to do when you get out, and I didn’t have anything suitable – all I had was the same place I had been my whole life.”

The 49-year-old says despite her motivation to create a better life, the first time she was released – being paroled to her parent’s home – meant returning to the same neighbourhood she’d spent most of her life in. It was an area where her old associates lived (she acted as the middle woman between suppliers and drug dealers) and a place where she was known as a criminal. She was also returning to a dysfunctional environment.

She felt she was burdening her parents financially, and felt guilty about the affect her absence had had on her children. A stand-down period

from the benefit made contributing financially impossible and parole restrictions meant she couldn’t work. When she was approached by old associates to work for them again, she says the money and independence proved too hard to resist.

“Especially if you’ve got no income, a whole lot of financial issues going on and you are trying to buy your kids’ [respect] because you are trying to make it better. It didn’t – it actually did more damage because I was sent back to jail.”

On release from her second sentence, she wanted something different and saw in RAW the support she needed.

“I was the first one [to join the programme]. I didn’t know what to expect but I got a good feeling from Rebecca, I was relaxed with her – she knew my history and I didn’t have to pretend I was something I am not.”

Under RAW she was offered the practical support she needed to set up

a crime-free life. “There were two of us released on the same day and we were taken into WINZ, we were given bank accounts. Within the first week I could legally drive and present a licence. That was a good feeling – that gave me confidence and made me feel like I had security.”

As the inaugural member, Gina helped establish the rules in the house.

“I love working. It feels so much better than robbing.”

“I think the more rules the better, because it will protect everyone. When the new ones coming through say to me, ‘The rules are so hard,’ I say, ‘You want something different, you have got to do something different.’”

She works for RAW 30 hours a week and happily volunteers her time in the community. “Without RAW I wouldn’t have had employment. Society just doesn’t want to know you once you have a criminal history – it’s just so hard to get people to give you a chance, you are kind of scarred for life.

“I love working. I love contributing back to the community. It feels so much better than robbing. When I stood in that dock and was sentenced, there was a lot of guilt. I know how much it destroys families; it doesn’t matter which end of the chain you are at. You’ve been a cost to the community and are now asking for support and it’s great to be able to give back.”

She is now regularly seeing her sons, who are 17 and 21, and her eldest has come to live with her.

“I’m looking forward to having the boys and watching them grow. They want something different and I can give them something different now. And it is not money, it is time and guidance.” **AWW**

For more information about the RAW programme, visit their website at raw.org.nz.

THE STATISTICS

Reconviction rates of New Zealand women within 24 months of release:

ALL ages:	44 per cent
20 years & under:	80 per cent
20-29 year olds:	64-67 per cent
30- 39 year olds:	54 per cent
40 and over:	40 per cent

Most common offences leading to reconviction within 24 months (not gender specific):

Breaches:	65 per cent
Burglary:	75 per cent
Dishonesty:	68 per cent
Property damage:	65 per cent
Weapons:	61 per cent

Women in prison 2016:	620
Women in prison 2009:	493
Women in prison 2001:	234

Figures from Corrections New Zealand