Momentum growing to reopen Dorchester prison farm: advocates

BY NAJAT ABDOU-MCFARLAND

Starts the Farms Dorchester 2016 is a New Brunswick-based group hoping to reopen the prison farm at Dorchester Penitentiary, a Canadian federal corrections facility located in the village of Dorchester.

The advocacy group is promoting awareness of the positive benefits of the Dorchester prison farm. Prison farms in Kingston, Ontario, Joyceville and Collins Bay, are being considered for re-opening after being closed in 2010 by the former federal government.

Starts the Farms Dorchester 2016 is hopeful the drive to re-open Ontario prison farms will bring about change in New Brunswick.

Before the Dorchester prison farm was closed in 2010, the facility maintained several operations simultaneously. These operations included greenhouses, honey bee colonies, an egg hatchery, a dairy herd, a beef herd, a piggery, a butcher shop and a distillery for processing milk and juice out of their own harvest.

According to Mel Goodland, farmer and former mayor of Dorchester, it was quite a loss to the community when it closed. The facility employed several farm people from the community and it regularly donated some of their produce to several community functions.

For 20 years, Vince Zelazny has been involved in the Alternatives to Violence Program at the Dorchester Correctional Facility, a rehabilitative program to facilitate better relations between inmates.

Zelazny heard several positive comments about the farm from inmates during his time at the prison. The inmates told him that the prison farm helped them to achieve some of their program goals and allowed them to live a more productive lifestyle.

“Being sent to the farm was an important signpost on an inmate’s road to recovery. It demonstrated that the system was starting to trust you. The prison is a very intense, stifling, violent place. It’s not hard to imagine what a relief it would be to get outside—to get some space—and to work with your hands in the soil, or in some other way with animals and plants,” said Zelazny.

Likewise, Goodland has seen firsthand some of these beneficial effects through the interaction he has had on the prison farm.

Community-focused researcher and scholar, Hilary Lyons, has laid out the benefits of empowering, stimulating and self-fuelling labour in correctional facilities in her research. In general, growing one’s own food allows one to have agency over the nurturing, preparation and consumption of the food in their diet. This is particularly true for inmates working to achieve positive control over their lives.

Lyons and others promote rehabilitative labour. What stands out, according to Lyons, is the dramatically different from exploitative farm labour, which reproduces existing inequalities and divisions, and fails to equip inmates with usable skills post-release.

Rehabilitative labour benefits include therapeutic effects such as work satisfaction and stress release from working outdoors and developing a positive connection with other living creatures and plants. Rehabilitative labour also involves a personal work ethic of responsibility and diligence and provides inmates with work-ready skills such as problem-solving and teamwork. All of these benefits are in addition to specific vocational skills in farming and animal care.

As for the possible role the Dorchester prison farm might play in the regional economy, Goodland affirmed that there was no competition conflict with other agribusinesses in the region in the past, the majority of the produce was used to supply other correctional facilities in Atlantic Canada.

He says a number of local agribusiness stakeholders are interested in becoming involved in the Dorchester prison farm should it reopen again. He and other interested parties who have spearheaded this initiative are waiting to hear the results from two feasibility studies in Ontario.

Goodland, Zelazny, and like-minded advocates are hoping the momentum to reopen the farms will take seed as Canadians learn more about the potential of these types of farms to rehabilitate inmates’ inner and outer lives.

Najat Aboudou-McFarland writes for the NB Media Co-op and is a former editorial board member.
Journalist Kevin Donovan dishes on breaking the Ghomeshi scandal

Kevin Donovan will speak in Fredericton on Nov. 4 at 12 p.m. at the Kinsella Auditorium, McCallin Hall at St. Thomas University in an event organized by Jan Wong and supported by the NB Media Co-op.

By DAVID P. BALL

Kevin Donovan, the Toronto Star’s investigations editor, has just published a book, Jian Ghomeshi: Secret Life, and supported by the NB Media Co-op.

Donovan found himself assigned a seat beside the target of his investigations at a gala fundraiser for a prominent Canadian charity. Ghomeshi, one of Canada’s top interviewers, didn’t know how journalism works. Marie Henein, Ghomeshi’s lawyer, had previously told Donovan October 2012, effectively giving him a non-disclosure agreement that night that the radio host asked Donovan why he would continue to investigate that face of that advice.

Suddenly a gala reporter

“I was at the dinner with him trying to interview him and I found myself explaining to him how reporting goes,” he recalled. “I told him I knew how it works. Yet he didn’t understand why I’d still be asking questions after his lawyer told me there was no story. Joining Canada’s top interviewers, didn’t know how journalism works.”

But, Donovan’s forthcoming book is not without controversy. Donovan’s former investigative teammate, Brian Brown, has told him, “You’re doing something that is really inadvisable, accusing Jian of all this.” Donovan has inadvertently revealed the identity of Ghomeshi’s accusers and should have consulted them about the interview details that could be published. Others on social media have accused Donovan of lying. He is also advised by media ethics experts that the Star reporter insisted are “understandable” but nonetheless “unfair.”

“One of the people I’ve interviewed will say, ‘You don’t have the right to tell our stories,’ even though a lot of their stories have already been told in media,” Donovan said.

In an era of cuts and newspaper downsizing, Donovan said other dailies haven’t put the same kind of resources into investigative reporting as the Star. He wishes they did.

“If more people did investigative reporting, then other people will join in and do it,” he suggested. “Although I did comment, the Star published the story. If it didn’t have any constraints of law and promises not to identify anybody.”

The self-described “player-coach” of the Star’s investigative team joined in the mid-eighties when, as he puts it, there were scarcely any investigative reporters in Canadian newspapers. Today’s Star’s circulation daily paper has burgeoned to nine reporters and an analyst, he said.

Donovan, the newspaper downsizing, Donovan, said other dailies haven’t put the same kind of resources into investigative reporting as the Star. He wishes they did. Donovan, get a move on!”

According to Donovan, “The newspaper cutbacks we’re seeing everywhere, you’re either feeling declining revenue, advertising, circulation or viewership, what are you doing to do? Put more money into covering daily news or investigative reporting? It’s more likely you’re going to put it into the daily news.”

Other change in the media landscape is the explosion of investigative reporting on Twitter and podcasts doing investigative-type reporting.

In case: U.S. gossip site Gawker first revealed the attack, and Gawker’s founder, Nick Denton, apparently smoking crack. Donovan and former Star colleague Robyn Doolittle watched that video but did not publish it until they could gather more proof about the star reporter insisted are “understandable” but nonetheless “unfair.”

End of blogs and tweets

“Gawker saw us as far as the existence of the video,” Donovan said. “But the story we did alike other news. Our concern about being wrong outweighed our desire for a scoop. It was the same thing with Ghomeshi.”