

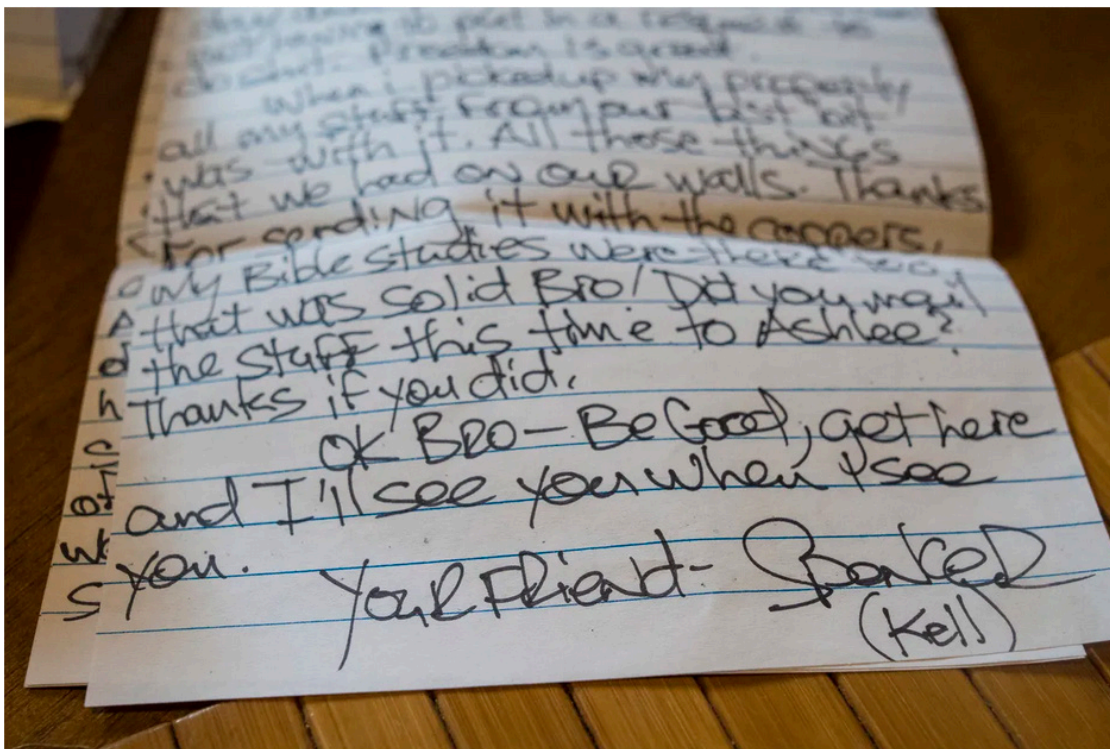
‘Write me soon. Stay safe’: A story of Canada’s opioid crisis, told in letters from prison

Sharing a prison cell made Spencer Kell and Manie Daniels friends. When one made it out and the other didn’t, they corresponded about friendship and hope for the future – until one of their lives took a tragic turn

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PUBLISHED MARCH 27, 2019

UPDATED MARCH 28, 2019



At her home in Guelph, Ont., Moira Barber lays out one of the letters between her common-law husband, Albert (Manie) Daniels, and Spencer Kell, his old cellmate at Ontario’s Maplehurst prison.

TIJANA MARTIN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

When Spencer Kell got out of jail last spring, leaving his cellmate Manie Daniels behind, the two friends started exchanging letters.

Mr. Daniels’s, written in flowing cursive script, came to Mr. Kell in Ottawa, where he was trying to stay clean and build a new life. Mr. Kell’s, in bold block letters, arrived at Maplehurst prison in Milton, Ont., where Mr. Daniels was serving out the final months of his latest stretch behind bars. Their brief correspondence shines a light on the dangers that former prisoners face in the midst of Canada’s opioids crisis.

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Mr. Daniels's full name was Albert Joseph Daniels. His Cree name was Little Buffalo that Runs Against the Herd. His mother and sisters called him Manie – little man – because he was the only boy in the family.

He was torn away from his home on Saskatchewan's Peepeekisis First Nation to be educated in church-run residential schools, emerging scarred by sexual and physical abuse. For years, he would cross the street to avoid passing a Catholic church.

A skilled outdoorsman who liked to fish for pike and hunt deer, beaver, bear and moose, he fell into a pattern of drinking, drug taking and fighting that kept him behind bars for most of his adult life.



Pictures in an album show Mr. Daniels as an adult; a tattoo on Ms. Barber's back, below, shows him as a child.



TIJANA MARTIN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Moira Barber, his common-law wife for 13 years, met him when she was dealing drugs in Guelph, Ont., and needed someone to collect money for her. She asked for the hardest, meanest dude in town.

But Mr. Daniels had another side, Ms. Barber says. He was a keen artist who sometimes drew tattoos for a living. He loved roughhousing with her grandchildren, rolling around with them gleefully until the long hair that stretched down his back was a tangled mess.

Mr. Kell grew up in London, Ont., 90 minutes down the 401 highway from Mr. Daniels. He started using drugs when he was a teenager. Before long, he was dealing cannabis and injecting hard stuff. As he puts it now, he would keep using until he ended up in the back of a police car. Between some 20 incarcerations, he tried over and over to get clean. He suffered several overdoses, coming close to death.

Mr. Kell and Mr. Daniels forged their friendship during two stints sharing a cell at Maplehurst. On the range at “the Hurst,” they won respect for their experience and toughness. Mr. Daniels had an ugly temper. He could flip on you in a second, Mr. Kell says. But he stuck up for the underdogs, especially the new guys. Mr. Kell looked up to Mr. Daniels, who, at close to 50, was a decade older. He and the other inmates called him “uncle.”



In Spencer Kell's dining room, angel and devil portraits drawn by Mr. Daniels hang behind him.
BLAIR GABLE/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

The two men read, talked about their lives and played gin rummy for hours on end. During one six-week period when the range was on lockdown, Mr. Kell says, they spent 23½ hours a day in their cell. After Mr. Kell was released from prison in March, 2018, one of the first things he did was write to his friend.

“Hey bro – I made it to Ottawa,” he said in his first letter, dated March 12. He described the shelter where he was living: the Salvation Army’s Ottawa Booth Centre, a Christian non-profit that offers help to the capital’s homeless and the addicted. Mr. Kell had started studying the Bible and going to Narcotics Anonymous meetings at Maplehurst.

Now that he was out, he was determined to avoid the relapse into drug use that, in the age of fentanyl, often kills ex-prisoners within days of release. The overdose epidemic that has swept across Canada is killing an average of 11 people a day. Ex-prisoners are especially vulnerable. If they don’t get treatment or help, a shocking number overdose and die. One Ontario study concluded they face a risk of fatal overdose 56 times that of the general population in the first two weeks after being released.

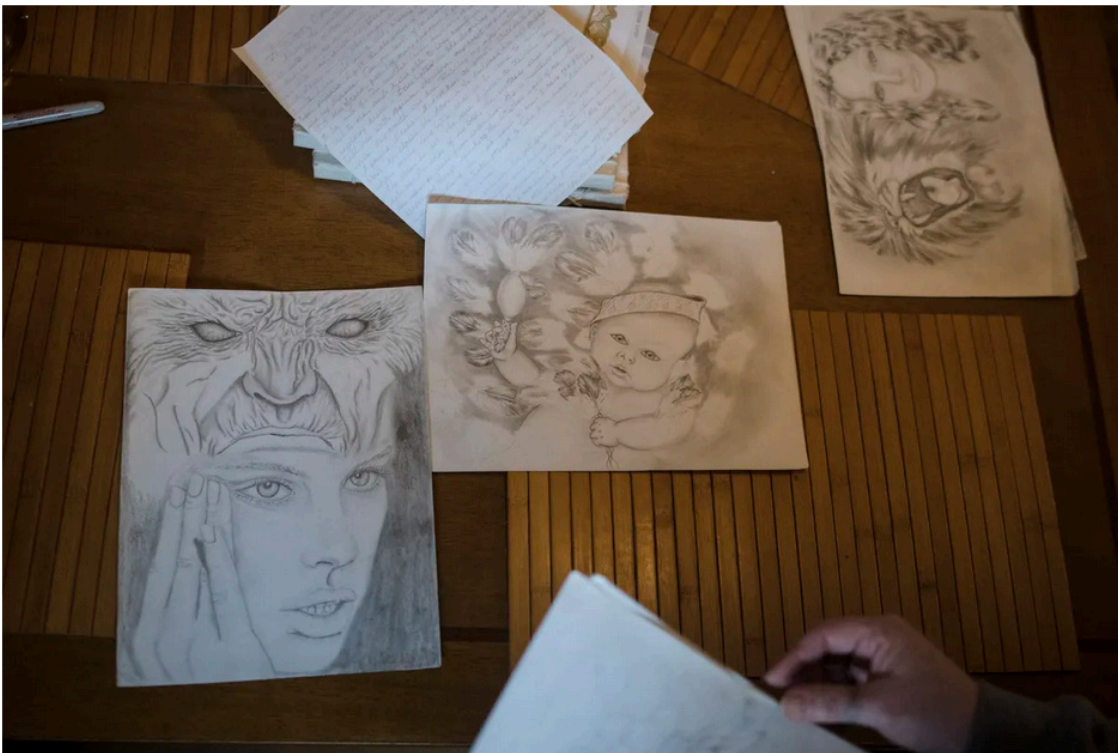
Mr. Kell had high hopes for Mr. Daniels, too, and was working on getting

him a place at the Booth centre. “I think you’ll like it,” he wrote. “Miss you bro – get your ass up here. We’ll talk then. Hurry up!!”

On March 15, he wrote again, telling Mr. Daniels, “it’s a good go up here and the city is pretty. There’s lots of help for guys who want it.” On March 24, he said was going to meetings every day, taking classes and reading a lot.

“I won’t lie,” he said, “there are some bad days too.” He was having thoughts of using drugs again, but “starting to see reasons not to use.” He was making friends who liked him for what he was, “kind of like you and me – like how we respect each other and like each other for no fake reasons.”

He told his friend he had lined up a couple of customers for tattoos. One of them wanted a full sleeve design. “I told them how amazing your art is,” Mr. Kell wrote. In prison, Mr. Daniels taught Mr. Kell to draw using stubby prison-issue pencils. They even set up a sideline making cards and selling them to fellow prisoners for their girlfriends or children.



Ms. Barber lays out some of Mr. Daniels's artwork.

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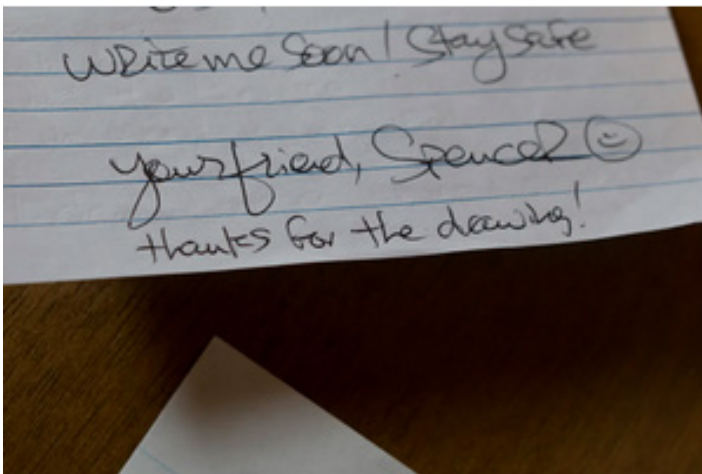
Then, on March 29, Mr. Kell wrote: “OK: You may want to sit down.” Mr. Daniels’s file for the Ottawa program had been processed. It looked as if the friends would soon be reunited. “I believe in you, Manie, and in your ability to achieve what you want ... to know how to live, beyond the wall.”

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Mr. Daniels wrote back several times, asking for details about the Ottawa program and reporting on his own progress in Bible studies. He told his friend that all the snow was gone at Maplehurst and he saw some baby geese trotting after their parents – “They look cute running along trying to keep up.” He asked Mr. Kell if he could line up some reading glasses for him in Ottawa so he wouldn’t have to rely on the “cheap cheaters” he was using in jail.

As the time of his release neared, he wrote to say he was hoping to get up to Ottawa shortly. “This place is getting pretty dark,” said Mr. Daniels, who suffered from terrifying nightmares. “Tired of it. Need to move on.”

“I’m waiting for you!” Mr. Kell replied. “Write me soon. Stay safe.”



TIJANA MARTIN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Mr. Daniels got out of Maplehurst on July 19 of last year. He went back to Guelph, sat down in a downtown bar and ended up at a party in a drug house. He overdosed on the opioid painkiller hydromorphone and died in the early morning hours of July 21.

Mr. Kell rode his motorcycle down from Ottawa for the funeral. He knew Mr. Daniels liked leather jackets, so he got him a nice new one to be buried in. He left two silver earrings in the coffin.

In the months since, Mr. Kell has found an apartment, finished a college course on becoming an addiction worker and settled into a job waiting on tables in an Ottawa restaurant. He has plans to cross the country in a camper van raising money to open a new addiction-treatment place, the Manie Daniels Centre.

In February, Mr. Kell told a Senate forum on the opioid crisis that with nowhere else to go, just-released prisoners often head “right back to the dealer’s house.” All that he got when he came out, he says, was an orange notice stapled to his release papers warning him to be careful about using drugs on the outside.

At home in his Ottawa apartment, Mr. Kell is surrounded with mementos of his friend. A photo of Mr. Daniels hangs on the wall alongside some of his drawings. A green pill bottle with some of his ashes sits in a circle of small stones marked with the words: dream, wish, hope, live, love and laugh.

Then, of course, there are the letters. In one of the last, Mr. Daniels is looking forward to his release, but worrying about what will happen afterwards and “trying not to let the stress set in.”

He is doing some studying and reading, he tells his friend, but “other than that ... just doing time. Hope to hear from you and even better to see you.” In big sweeping capital letters, he signs it: “Manic.”

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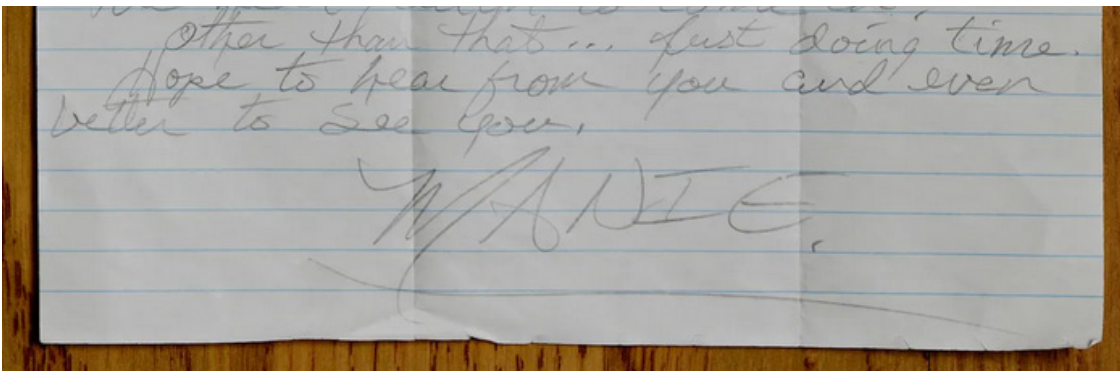
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