

# FORENSIC MENTAL HEALTH SUCCESS STORIES

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Dr. Jamie Livingston

## Challenging the Notion of Success

Statistics show the forensic mental health system plays a pivotal role in the lives of people found Not Criminally Responsible on Account of Mental Disorder (NCRMD), according to Dr. Jamie Livingston, an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Criminology at Saint Mary's University. Despite this, research is disproportionately focused on individuals whose recovery was unsuccessful. Livingston thinks the success stories need to be told. In fact, he was awarded an NSHRF Establishment Grant to do just that.

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Dr. Livingston points out that in academia and health care alike, there has been little attention paid to NCRMD people who safely return to

their communities post treatment. “We know that most people won’t reoffend, but most of the research is concentrated on those who reoffend”, he says. “I found that interesting and wanted to rectify that distortion, that unbalanced presentation of the facts of what happens in the system.”



Dr. Livingston is the creator of the Forensic Mental Health Success Stories project, a collection of 12 personal narratives from people across Nova Scotia who were found

to be NCRMD. Through in-depth interviews, he documented each participant's history of mental illness leading up to their arrest, their treatment within the system, and their experiences finding success after being rehabilitated.

Every year, roughly 850 individuals living with mental illness will be found NCRMD by the Canadian criminal justice system. These individuals are not convicted offenders and are entered into the forensic mental health system for rehabilitation. After receiving treatment in forensic mental health hospitals, Livingston says between 80-90% of them will return to their communities and never reoffended.

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Dr. Livingston believes the reason for the narrow focus on reoffenders is simple; the desire to prevent crime. However, he's concerned that researching only those who've been unsuccessful post treatment has formed a narrative that the system is largely unsuccessful, and reoffending happens all the time. “That perception can create a sense of hopelessness among people who provide and receive forensic mental health services,” he says.

Before coming to Nova Scotia, Dr. Livingston spent 15 years working as a researcher in a forensic mental hospital in B.C. It was there, while supporting a project studying those living well with Bipolar disorder, that he first experienced the importance of labeling theory

and researching the positive. “Labeling theory suggests that the information people see being presented about them gets internalized and incorporated in what they think about themselves,” Livingston explains. This philosophy has served as the inspiration for his work in Nova Scotia.

**“Imagining a future that doesn't involve crime is an important factor in recovery.”**

The Forensic Mental Health Success Stories project is designed to support patients' recovery by providing positive narratives they can relate to. “We know that being able to see yourself in a positive light and imagining a future that doesn't involve crime is an important factor in recovery,” says Livingston. With this in mind, he cleverly captured each narrative in a short film under five minutes long, so they'd be easy to share within the forensic mental hospital setting and beyond. Currently, the videos are available for viewing and sharing through his [Vimeo](#) account.



Ryan's Story

In addition to providing patient support, Livingston intends to use the films to address staff burn out. Mental health service providers, such as psychiatrists, psychologists, and nurses, experience events in their line of work that can

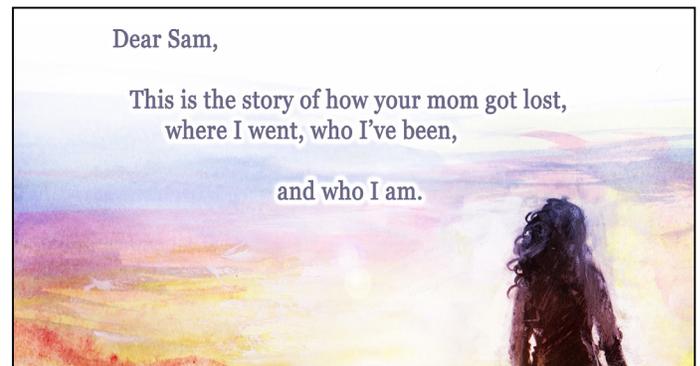
be difficult to process. On top of that, staff see people return after failing in the community, but rarely hear from people who are successful after they've moved on from the forensic mental health system. These films serve as a healthy reminder to staff that the work they do has impact. after they've moved on from the forensic mental health system.

**“Most criminologists usually understand success as just not reoffending. I thought that was too narrow.”**

Dr. Livingston wanted his project to challenge the notion of success. “Most criminologists usually understand success as just not reoffending. I thought that was too narrow,” he states. Though searching for rare cases in Nova Scotia’s sparse population took some time, he carefully curated participants with unique stories representing different versions of what success can look like. Themes explored in the videos range from managing symptoms, to parenthood and career goals. One story even details a participant’s emotional journey from patient to forensic mental health nurse. “I felt it was important to highlight individuals who are now giving back to their communities,” says Livingston.

As much as the participants’ stories differ, so do the styles in which they’ve been filmed. Livingston reached out to Halifax based artists with experience working in mental health for expertise in packaging his research for the public. Through these connections he was able to incorporate artistic elements such as spoken word, as seen in Matt’s Story, a cartoonist, as

seen in Ryan’s Story, and has even published a children’s story book that was the basis for Heather’s Story. When asked about his inventive approach to knowledge translation, he answered “I didn’t want it to be like a lecture, and I wanted them (the stories) to be presented in different ways to connect with different people.”



Heather’s Story

Dr. Livingston credits NSHRF’s Establishment Grant for allowing him to get creative with knowledge translation. “One great thing about the Establishment Grant was how flexible the funding was. I had the option to seek approval to amend my budget for spending on a children’s book and videos.” He laughs as he continues, “I’ve published a children’s book before an academic paper, that’s definitely not the norm in academia.”

As for what’s next, Dr. Livingston plans to package his videos into a curriculum for use in forensic mental health hospitals across Canada during orientation and training sessions for staff and patients.

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