

Society's 'disdain' decried by ex-con

By Craig Pearson
Star Staff Reporter

Society helps perpetuate crime by treating ex-convicts with thinly veiled disdain, a professor of criminology and former criminal told a receptive audience at the University of Windsor Tuesday night.

When offenders are branded with a label of disobedience they can't shake, they start not only believing, but acting out the title, said Brian MacLean in a uniquely candid lecture.

IT WAS THE first time MacLean — a professor of sociology and criminology at the University of British Columbia — told a public assembly about his past criminal life.

"I felt like I took my clothes off," said the 39-year-old doctorate of sociology who spent from 10 to 12 years, on and off, in Canadian prisons. "The Windsor Society of Criminology (which sponsored the lecture) invited me to give a talk and I figured this would be an excellent opportunity to talk about my past."

MacLean, a rare model of reform who started working on his first degree behind bars, said he never speaks to his classes about his law-breaking.

Yet MacLean admitted to crimes that started as a seven-year-old when he sold fake tickets to a "fun show," to serious high school trouble-making, to armed robbery of banks.

His point wasn't how he turned his life from bad to good, but how other felons can as well.

But regular citizens must help avoid committing "deviancy amplification."

"We are constructing dangerous criminality," MacLean said. "Even if a person is not engaging in anymore de-

viant acts, we still perceive that they do."

Scorn from citizens isn't the only setback to possible reformers, said the prison rights activist. Squalid conditions in penitentiaries leads to pervasive, brutal violence that leaves inmates scarred.

MacLean recalled a vicious story from his prison days when a dim-witted inmate, after unfairly being branded as a stool pigeon, was stabbed 47 times and decapitated with gardening shears before being dropped at the entrance of the prison film room. Every single prisoner — with self-preservation in mind — stepped over the headless, bloody mess without saying a word and watched the night's feature.

"How do you walk away from that scenario without thinking of yourself as cold and inhuman?" he wondered aloud.

"If I see someone who's been in prison I can spot him. And someone who's been in prison can spot me."

AS A PROFESSOR at UBC, with a BA and MA in sociology, and a PhD in sociology and criminology from the London School of Economics, MacLean said he still faces rejection from some fellow faculty members.

"I think I'm very privileged to be where I am, but at the same time I'm obliged because of my background to make others aware," MacLean said.

"The public's always concerned about rehabilitating prisoners and making them pay their debt, though they expect that they won't commit crimes anymore," he said. "But we're failing at that."

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