



PROFILE HALIFAX

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a Steady Hand

*The small but powerfull pull
away from drugs & violence*

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I WILL GRANT YOU 2,000 WISHES:
Nova Scotian Group Still Making
Dreams Come True

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KEEP FIGHTING AND HELPING:
Lukemia & Lymphoma Society
Opens Halifax Chapter



At 12:12 I receive a text saying, 'I am here'. Seconds later, Jason Mantee enters the café with his girlfriend and their baby girl. He has a calm, almost shy manner; not the tough demeanor you'd expect from an ex-gang member. He chooses an oatmeal raisin cookie for his daughter and drops change into the tip jar before settling onto the stool opposite me.

Jason Mantee can hear electricity travel. After spending most of his life behind bars- 82 convictions beginning from age 12- he began to notice the minutest sounds. "That was like my alarm clock." Mantee says, reflecting on how much time he wasted in jail.

A Cree Native from Regina, Saskatchewan, Mantee describes his community as a 'frustrating' one with little family structure and a lot of drugs and violence. He left the reserve at age 8 with his grandmother, his legal guardian, to live in the city. "One of the main things in our culture is that you have to listen to your elders." But after moving he stopped listening to his grandmother. "I became rebellious towards society and myself."

His mother, an alcoholic, was paralyzed following a serious car accident. She was pregnant with Mantee at the time and he was born via emergency cesarean. He never met his father who died from carbon monoxide poisoning during a hunting trip when Mantee was 15. Mantee confined himself to a tight social circle of four older cousins. "I never met anyone, didn't try to make new friends. I didn't care about anybody else except me and the four other guys I hung around with."

JASON MANTEE

BY ABENA AMOAKO-TUFFOUR

He occasionally glances down at his daughter who babbles as she eats her cookie. She is amused with her mother's attention and her father's voice in the background.

Mantee lost his ex-girlfriend and their two daughters to Child Services after moving to Nova Scotia four years ago. He had come to escape his tumultuous

describes as "the second most awkward time in [his] life" because he did not want to be put on a pedestal. He developed a business plan for his company 'Custom Decks and Fences' and as he builds his portfolio, is working at Subway and for the Native Council of Nova Scotia. On being asked to mentor two aboriginal youth Mantee says, "I've never thought of myself as a positive mentor. I know

staff from CEED whom he regards as fathers, he'll have some ideas on where to start. His message to wayward youth is this: "Don't postpone your success. Be positive to yourself, your family and create your own life where people don't have anything bad to say about you because it's hard to change that perspective."

Mantee speaks with confidence about the opportunities now available to him. With only a grade three education, he will be completing a GED to get transcripts for university which he plans to attend next year. He is also working to regain a relationship with the two daughters he lost.

Mantee, Samantha and baby Sierra are off to a family reunion. After listening to his story, Mantee's text message, 'I am here,' seems to say much more than it did when he sent it. It's a simple affirmation of his life after 30 years: He's alive, he's participating. He is here. ■ PH

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"I AM HERE," SEEMS TO SAY MUCH MORE THAN IT DID WHEN HE SENT IT

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life including threats from former gang members, but Mantee returned to his old ways before hitting rock bottom - living at the Salvation Army with no family and no money. "I felt like my life was done" he recalls. He began drinking and doing ecstasy every day. "I guess I was trying to kill myself like that."

He talked about the change he brought forward in his life, which was both external and internal; "I was tired, tired of looking over my back. I just turned 30 but I feel like I'm 60 from doing all that stuff. It puts your body through a lot of torture." Learning he was having another child was his further incentive.

At first, the Second Chance program at the Centre for Entrepreneurship, Education and Development (CEED) meant an easy bi-weekly paycheck for Mantee but his view altered after writing his life story. "The CEED program is phenomenal. They told me to look at my life." Sharing his story pushed Mantee out of his comfort zone. "I've never cried in front of people that live my lifestyle 'cause you're not supposed to show weakness. I said 'I don't care what anyone else thinks, I'm not here to prove anybody wrong.'"

But he has proved many wrong. He was voted class valedictorian which he

that to the police in Saskatchewan I was a negative mentor." But perhaps with the bond he's built with two of the



BABY SIERRA