

BEYOND THE FOUR WALLS

BY WANDA TAN

Ms Lisa Lim (Arts and Social Sciences '89) believes ex-offenders should not have to face the "second prison": discrimination in the community.

You have spent your entire career with the Singapore Prison Service (SPS). Did you know you wanted to do this from a young age?

My original ambition was to be a police officer. I liked reading mystery and crime stories, and the idea of fighting crime while seeing all of Singapore sounded exciting to me. But when I applied to join the civil service, I was offered a position with the SPS instead. At first, I was a little disappointed not to get my first-choice job because I thought that I would be confined to

the four walls of a prison institution. Happily, however, I was wrong.

How so? In 1999, the SPS initiated a transformation of the prison environment. The focus is no longer just on ensuring the security of prisons, but also rehabilitating and reintegrating inmates — mostly drug offenders — into society. Our hope is that they will go on to lead productive lives in the community and will not return to prison. Being able to reach out to offenders

2016: A QUICK LOOK

865

NEW MEMBERS JOINED ISCOS



116

members were placed in jobs through an ISCOS-Workforce Singapore joint programme



130

VOLUNTEERS CLOCKED A TOTAL OF

1,258

VOLUNTEER HOURS



889

STUDENTS BENEFITED FROM THE FGP



MAIN PHOTO BY KELVIN CHIA

WHO IS SHE?

After leaving NUS, Ms Lisa Lim, 50, entered the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) — and there she has remained for almost 30 years. Her first encounter with inmates occurred five years after joining the SPS, when she was posted from the SPS Headquarters to Changi Women's Prison (CWP). Since then, she has taken up roles including Superintendent of CWP (1999–2005) and Institution A5 (2013–2017), where male inmates serve the last few years of their sentence.

and make a meaningful difference in their lives is very fulfilling.

At the time of this transformation, you were Superintendent of Changi Women's Prison (CWP). What changes did you implement?

CWP was one of the first institutions to change the way housing units in prisons were run. Prison officers now supervise the inmates and engage in purposeful interactions with them to create customised rehabilitation programmes.

We also introduced a Mother's Day celebration where the children of inmates could have physical contact with their mothers instead of the usual closed visits. Our intent was to strengthen the mother-child bond, so inmates would be motivated to change for the better. Staff from the other prisons were so moved by what they saw at our event — mothers and children hugging and crying — that they started holding similar Father's Day celebrations.

How did your NUS education prepare you for your career?

I majored in Sociology and English Language. The former in particular gave me a good understanding of how societies work. For example, one module exposed me to different theories of why people commit crime and deviance, while another module examined the dynamics of family relationships and functional family units.



Inmates are just like you and me: we are all human. We all make mistakes and deserve a second chance.

What must be done to combat the social stigma against ex-offenders?

Garnering community acceptance and action is key. This is the aim of the Yellow Ribbon Project, set up in 2004 by a group of organisations including the SPS. To raise awareness for this cause, and to break the ice between visitors and inmates, I organised prison 'open houses' and public concerts. I also engaged grassroots volunteers to pay home visits to ex-offenders and their families, as part of the Yellow Ribbon Community Project.

In March 2017, you were seconded to the role of Executive Director of the Industrial and Services Co-operative Society (ISCOS). What does ISCOS do?

We provide a range of after-care services for ISCOS members (ex-offenders) after they get out of prison,

such as job placement programmes, subsidised training courses and support groups. Through our Fairy Godparent Programme (FGP) — launched together with the Yellow Ribbon Fund — tuition assistance, mentorship and student bursaries are also given to children of ex-offenders so they can achieve their academic potential.

Inmates are just like you and me: we are all human. We all make mistakes and deserve a second chance. By helping ex-offenders, we are also helping them to be better parents to their children, who in turn will avoid going down the same path. This will break the cycle of inter-generational offending and make Singapore safer. **A**



Ms Lim speaking to an ISCOS member.

HOW CAN PEOPLE SHOW THEIR SUPPORT FOR ISCOS?

MS LIM SAYS THAT PEOPLE CAN CONTRIBUTE IN THREE WAYS:

1

DONATE

Make a monetary or in-kind donation to our programmes, or come on board as a sponsor.



2

VOLUNTEER

Help out at our events, befriend our members, mentor children in the FGP, or share your expertise in web design, content creation, etc.



3

EMPLOY

Open your company's doors to ex-offenders by hiring them.

