

Let it be only once for these women

By Ann Abraham, Prison Manager, Arohata Prison

I am an extremely lucky woman. I grew up in a home where the sky was the limit – where my parents gave us time and care and supported us in everything we wanted to do. My parents were very involved in the community and as we grew older we became involved in community projects as well. I like jobs where I can make a difference and give back to the community in some form.

Working with offenders allows me to do just that. It is the Court's role to deliver punishment and it is our role to reduce re-offending and promote safety in the community. To do that, we provide safe and humane containment, and we provide care and rehabilitation.

I see my main role as being responsible for the lives of a couple of hundred people on any given day. Some amazing women enter our doors: prisoners, tutors, volunteers.

My staff put their lives on the line every day to keep the community safe. They are highly skilled and are expected to be a jack of all trades. They must perform their duties regardless of their personal views or what they have had to put up with the day before. Every one of them is there to make a difference. My job is to make sure that they receive the appropriate development and support so that they can be effective in their work.

Identifying a need and then filling it

My job is also about identifying a need and then filling it. "Can't" is not in my vocabulary so often we just have to approach things differently to make them happen.

To find ways to care and rehabilitate these women we need to be innovative and we can't do it alone. By getting to know the women and understanding their needs we can often come up with a plan for rehabilitation. But they may not have the resources.

The women come to us from the community and they return to the community so it makes sense that we invite the community in to help the women on their journey to an offence-free life.

The prison provides criminogenic programmes such as Kowhiritanga and the Drug Treatment Unit. Volunteers provide a wide range of services or donations to help the women undertaking programmes. In terms of the arts, we have found that many of the women have great talents that has not been realised or acknowledged. If we are able to find a volunteer to assist, it can make a real difference to the person's whole attitude and outlook on life.

Quilting not just about making a pretty blanket

We have a group of women who come in every Saturday to do quilting with the women. Some of these volunteers have been coming in every week for about 18 years. Quilting is not just about making a pretty blanket. It takes planning to get the look right. It takes creativity. It takes perseverance and patience. These are all things that the women need to learn and which will help them in other areas of their lives.

Then there is the self-esteem and sense of achievement that comes from completing the quilt. Following on from that, there's the knowledge that the more you quilt the better your skill becomes, and the women are able to share their skills with each other. Often we see good leadership skills coming to the fore and the women tell us that they will continue quilting when they go home to keep their children warm, and to teach their family and friends so they can also learn the skill.

As well as quilting we have kapa haka. We plan to have weaving and we provide Te Reo lessons through Whitireia New Zealand. Having an identity and knowing where you come from is an important part of learning about yourself and bringing about change.

Some of the women do a formal art course through The Learning Connexion. We have a woman who does origami. This particular woman has mental health issues and her art helps to keep her calm and gives her the skill to cope with everyday living.

Knitting for premature babies

A prisoner knits for the premature babies and teaches others to knit. The hope is that we will be able to have a knitting circle and then we can distribute the goods to other causes as well.

Until recently, Wellington writer Maggie Rainey-Smith has run a creative writing group. She is an amazing woman and the prisoners have really appreciated her group and the time she was able to give them.

Dancing and yoga classes have recently been introduced to the prison. That has been a great success.

The idea is that we understand the needs of each individual prisoner. If we can determine what the needs are we can then attempt to fill that need either by finding some funding or engaging a volunteer.

We have very skilled staff in the prison. They actively engage with the women. They pass on their own skills and they come up with the ideas to assist in the care and rehabilitation of the women.

A journey with six women and four men

Last but not least, I would like to talk to you about the 13-part series *Songs from the Inside* on Maori Television. The programme takes you on a journey with six women and four men as they learn songwriting. Maisey Rika and

Anika Moa worked with the women and Warren Maxwell and Ruia Aperahama worked with the men. They were just great.

The guiding force behind the programme was Julian Arahanga and he was ably assisted by Maramena Roderick. Julian has an amazing philosophy on life and his interaction with the women provided inspiration and continued motivation when the going got tough. Maramena is a strong woman. She is the driving force and demonstrated to the women how success might look if you work hard enough to reach your goals. The technical crew were also exceptional.

The women all loved to sing so that was a good start. It was unlikely that they realised how much hard work was required to produce the songs and then to get the recordings right.

Growing in confidence

If you follow the programme you can actually see the women's journey. They grow in confidence and they gain self-esteem. They put themselves on the line and talk frankly about their lives and their path to prison. Each of the songs is about something very personal to that prisoner.

I think participating in that programme will be just about the greatest thing any of the women have done, and they will cherish the experience and the learnings forever.

My vision is that if we have to incarcerate women let it be only once and let us provide the learnings that they need to lead a full life. That might be a bit far-fetched for the moment but if each woman learns just one thing while they are with us that is one thing that they didn't know before. Women are the key to changing the next generation so if we put our resources into the women today we will provide a better future. I sincerely thank all those who help us on our journey.