

# wear the YELLOW ribbon



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the CARE Network

The public can help ex-offenders by offering them support and aiding them in their efforts to find re-acceptance into their communities

**TO** MOST of us, a ribbon is a ribbon. But for ex-inmates who are adapting to life outside the prison walls, a yellow ribbon is a symbol of hope and acceptance.

About 11,000 prison inmates are released from Singapore's rehabilitative institutions every year. Most are repentant and hope for some way in which they can be productive and useful members of society. Unfortunately, no matter how good their intentions, the life of an ex-inmate is never easy.

According to Mr Jason Wong, chief executive officer of SCORE (Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises) and chairman of the Yellow Ribbon Project Organising Committee, the Yellow Ribbon Project has been set up to facilitate the re-integration of ex-inmates into society.

He said: "For some ex-offenders, being released from prison means re-entering yet another prison. This time, the key is not held by the prison officers but by their loved ones, whose acceptance would mean

a lot to these ex-offenders.

"Beyond that, we hope that the community would also help unlock this 'second prison'."

This is one of the motivations for the Yellow Ribbon Project, organised by CARE Network and whose members include SCORE, Singapore Prison Service, National Council of Social Service (NCSS), Industrial and Services Co-operative Society Ltd (ISCOS), Singapore After-Care Association (SACA), Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA) and Ministry of Home Affairs.

Said Mr Wong: "We also hope that the community will come forward to help ex-inmates upgrade their skills so that they can find employment and provide counselling to prevent them from going back to their old ways."

The symbol of a yellow ribbon was inspired by the popular folk song *Tie A Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree* by Tony Orlando and Dawn.

Both the project and song share a similar message. Said Mr Wong: "It is something that

I'm sure ex-prisoners can identify with, especially in that one line that goes: 'My love, she holds the key'. It's a very clear and simple message which needs no explanation."

A host of activities and events have been lined up to champion the cause. These include a charity concert with celebrity hosts such as Gurmit Singh and Sharon Au and a movie premiere starring popular personalities like Moses Lim and Irene Ang.

The concert will be held on Oct 2 at 7.30pm at the Singapore Indoor Stadium while the movie premiere is on Oct 9 at 7pm in the open field opposite Khatib MRT station (in front of block 838).

Members of the public are encouraged to participate and wear a yellow ribbon in a show of support.

With this project, CARE Network hopes to create more awareness among the public about the needs of ex-inmates. In this way, it is hoped that the community will eventually play a larger role in the



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rehabilitative process.

According to Mr Wong, this will benefit everyone.

"It creates a safer society," he explained. "We want ex-inmates to be able to see a future because, then, it is less likely for them to end up with the same bad company and commit the same mistakes."

Response to the Yellow Ribbon Project has been

extremely encouraging so far. The main activities will take place only during the first week of October, but news has already been spreading to various community and religious organisations.

In fact, the Roman Catholic Prison Ministry has already snapped up about 125,000 out of the 300,000 available ribbons, which were painstakingly put together by prison inmates themselves.

Said Mr Wong: "Response has been good, but we hope that nearer the start of the events and activities, even more people will come forward to support this cause."

If you want to show your support, wear a yellow ribbon during the week of Oct 2. It is available from the YRP secretariat (Tel: 6214 2816 or 6214 2867) at just \$1 each.

*For more information on the Yellow Ribbon Project, visit [www.yellowribbon.org.sg](http://www.yellowribbon.org.sg). This website is designed by prison inmates at the Kaki Bukit Centre (Prison School).*



## Family and public support are crucial to change

IT WAS ten years ago that Mr Kevin Lau decided to start employing ex-prison inmates to work in his car grooming company, Elite Auto Saloon.

He wanted to offer them a second chance at life and lead them towards a better future.

Initially, there were just a handful of them. But today, more than 95 per cent of his employees have once seen prison walls.

Said Mr Lau: "I've been impressed by their attitudes. They are very appreciative of the chance I give them and are very hardworking."

"My small gesture helps to prevent them from going back to their previous ways and gives them hope."

The generosity of Mr Lau is something that the National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) hopes to see in more employers.

The centre promotes volunteerism and philanthropy in Singapore, working in partnership with the public and private sectors.

It functions as a non-profit non-government organisation, with funding support from the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports.

*They are very appreciative of the chance I give them and are very hard-working.*

*— Mr Kevin Lau, owner of Elite Auto Saloon, on the ex-inmates he employs*

Said its chief executive officer, Mrs Tan Chee Koon: "If every Singaporean matters, then even ex-inmates count too. Right now, one of our most pressing goals is to draw in a larger segment of the population in helping ex-inmates gain acceptance within their communities."

The most important form of support for ex-offenders, however, comes from their own families, such as in the case of teenager, Zainol Eusoff\* who

served time for a rioting offence. After overcoming their initial disappointment, his family members rallied together to offer support. His parents made sure they never missed a single visit and even took time off work just to be with him.

Said Zainol's father, Mr Eusoff Mohammed\*, who is in his 40s: "I tried to show him that even though he committed a crime, we still loved him."

His efforts seem to have paid off. Said Mr Eusoff: "He has surpassed my expectations. Every thing has been extremely smooth sailing so far."

Due to his success, Mr Eusoff is keen to share his experience with families in similar situations. He said: "You have to pull together and show the person that you are still behind him. If he knows that he has been forgiven, it gives him motivation to change and be a better person."

*\*Names have been changed.*

*If you wish to be a volunteer, log on to [www.prisons.gov.sg](http://www.prisons.gov.sg) for details.*