

## Yellow Ribbon Poetry & Story Telling Competition; Yellow Ribbon Song Writing Competition

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IN HARMONY



# Prison Poets

By Richard Philip

"We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars," said the famous poet Oscar Wilde.

This feeling was shared by 20 inmates from Changi Prison who recited their self-penned poems which moved the audience to tears during the Yellow Ribbon Poetry Competition. The competition was organised for ex-offenders to express their thoughts and feelings about their daily quest to learn from past mistakes and become better people.

Acting Director of Prisons, Mr Jason Wong said that such competitions are a way of "looking for the sparkle rather than the flaws" in ex-offenders. According to Commander Phang Seok Sieng events like these also bring hope to inmates by helping them discover hidden talents which they can use to benefit themselves and society when they come out of prison. "We provide

skills and training so that they will be able to integrate into society," says Commander Phang.

480 inmates submitted their poems written in English, Malay, Chinese or Tamil, and 20 were selected to be read in front of the judges, friends, family and guests who were gathered in the Prison's auditorium.

One inmate wrote a poem entitled: "Longing Heart". "I was lucky to have a great wife and children. But I did not see it then. I wrote this piece as a yearning that I would get back the family I once had," he said.

A lady inmate who won the top prize in the Chinese category wrote a poem thanking her prison officer for helping her change her ways. Mr Desmond Chin who heads a company that helps ex-offenders said: "When I listened to the woman inmate thanking her officer through the recitation of

her poem, I felt some tears welling in my eyes. I looked up at the ceiling to hold them back." Another member of the audience Margaret Thomas from TODAY Paper said that the poetry recital was: "An incredible experience. I think all of us had to blink away tears again and again."

The judges were very impressed by the honesty and vigorous style of the poems.

"When we saw the poetry being performed, then the persuasiveness, the rawness and the genuine emotion came through, and then it breathed life into the poem and gave it a dimension we didn't see when we read them and that brought the standard way up to what we had thought before we come to the competition," said Jane Yumiko Ittogi, a judge at the competition.