

# A FUTURE OF HOPE

**TRISH MCBRIDE** shares her experience of seeing the transformation in women during the Drug Treatment Programme in Arohata Prison.

I can just see the late Celia Lashlie nodding in agreement: “Yes, I told you that prison could be the making of these women because it is often the first time they have been safe and nurtured.”

The Drug Treatment Programme for women in Arohata Prison, near Wellington, proves her point. Groups of 10-12 women are selected for this three-month long programme. The programme starting times overlap – group 1 is beginning as group 2 is moving into the six weeks leading to their graduation.

The women have intensive therapy from the clinical team and input and support from a range of volunteers, as well as the usual support from corrections officers, chaplains and other staff. They learn yoga, quilting (completing a quilt to take home), attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, engage in Seasons for Growth, a Catholic-based coping with grief programme and practise public speaking at the fortnightly Toastmasters meeting.

## Practising Public Speaking

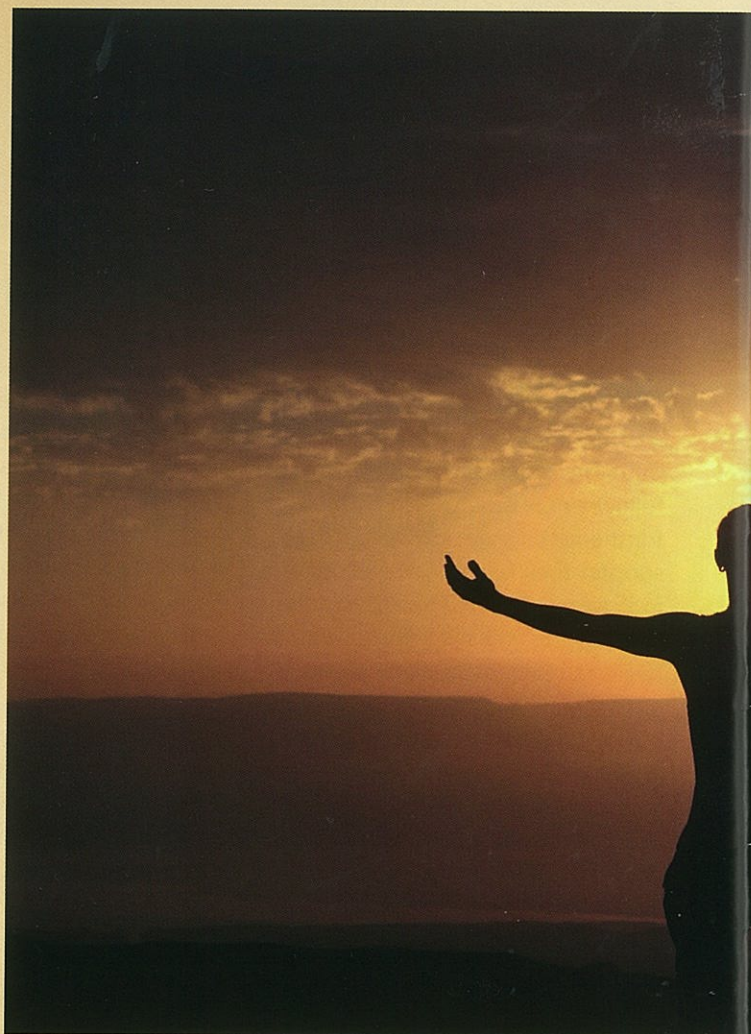
I've recently joined three others who have been offering Toastmasters in the prison for over eight years. We coach the women in listening and speaking as well as in how to manage formal meeting procedures – so “hearing people into speech”. We've found the Toastmasters dynamic works as well for the shyest and most nervous women on the programme as it does in the outside world, with lots of praise and encouragement and perhaps a suggestion for developing their next speeches.

It delights us to see the women gaining confidence and skills over the three months. We've found the women grateful for the time we spend with them and they enjoy a corrections officer or two being present as well – it's an opportunity for officers to see a different side to their charges.

## Speaking from Life

In their speeches the women talk about their lives. We've listened to heartbreaking stories – horrendous sexual abuse, violence, gang affiliation and homelessness, then

self-medicating with alcohol or drugs to ease the pain, leading to offending, and so to prison. Some begin their speeches in te reo Māori. They've given well-researched self-help speeches on topics such as co-dependence and social anxiety. They've told of supportive families, of children they will go home to as better mums now, of their hopes and plans after release. We've heard inspirational speeches and seen significant talent and wisdom emerge. We've laughed at hugely funny speeches. And, recently, we've been moved by their “letters of farewell” to the drugs that had both sustained and enslaved them.



## Claiming Life Again

Graduation ceremonies are the culmination of the course – with wonderful energy, style and mana! Volunteers, staff and clinicians are welcomed with rousing kapa haka onto their marae for the occasion.

A woman chosen by Group 1 leads the occasion, welcoming the manuhiri according to their contribution or role. She often begins in te reo Māori and continues in what is familiarly called te reo pākehā. She addresses her own group and then those graduating. This recent speech, which the speaker gave permission for me to share, epitomises the hopes and resolution:

*“He Wāhine, He Wāhine toa!*

*On behalf of Group 1, we thank you for allowing us the insight and privilege of seeing your journey, for walking*

beside us as we began ours, for imparting all your wisdom and knowledge to each and every one of us, for all your support.

You are all true role models and leaders, which leaves really big boots to fill!

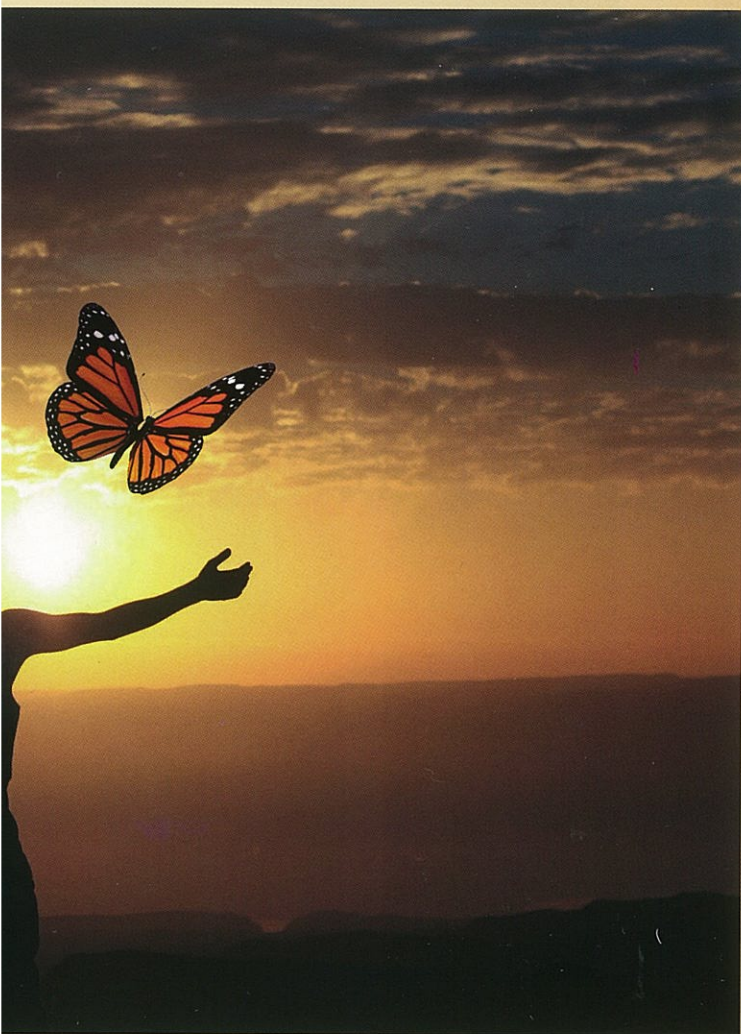
We wish you the best of luck when you leave, and courage as you further put your learning into practice.

Choose to live by choice not chance.

Choose to be motivated not manipulated.

Choose to be useful not used.

Choose to make changes not excuses.



Choose to excel not compete.

Choose self-esteem not self-pity.

Choose to listen to your inner voice, not to the random opinion of others.

Remember knowing is not enough, for we must apply it.

Wishing is not enough, for we must do!"

The wāhine toa, graduating women, then speak — frequently starting with a brief karakia (prayer). They express heartfelt gratitude to the corrections officers for their respect and compassion, to therapists and to each group of volunteers. They reflect on what they have learned — newfound self-respect, their hope and intentions for the future. They acknowledge the love and nurture they have shared together as a group.

Every speech is inspirational. Graduates and visitors

alike reach for the boxes of tissues. The women even look different, softer, more relaxed and in touch with themselves and with plans for a clean and sober future. Everyone is proud of them as they receive their certificates, often with big hugs.

Correction staff and volunteer representatives also have the opportunity to speak before the ceremony concludes with waiata and the AA Serenity Prayer in te reo Māori and English:

*"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,*

*The courage to change the things I can,*

*And the wisdom to know the difference."*

Then the kai is blessed and shared.

Each graduation has its own flavour, reflecting each unique group, but there is always an abundance of transformation metaphors: buds to flowers, caterpillars to butterflies, new life from hopelessness.

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### Giving Support

We know that not all the women are going to make it this time. Someone may not make it as far as graduation before being taken off the programme. Each group usually has one or two women going through for a second time — they really want full recovery. We also know how crucial it is that adequate support, accommodation and a job are in place when they are released so that they can continue the resolutions and learning of their course.

I'm awed by the good work being done for women in this prison. It has been a real eye-opener and a great privilege to take a small part. And I encourage employers to take a chance on one of these women. They deserve opportunities in which they can thrive and maintain their new positive ways of being. ★



**Trish McBride** is a Wellington grandmother and internationally published social justice writer.