

THE YELLOW RIBBON PROJECT STORY (SINGAPORE)

- Reaching Out and Touching a Nation -

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INTRODUCTION

The Yellow Ribbon Project (YRP) Singapore was established in 2004 as a community engagement campaign and catalyst to bring about societal acceptance for ex-offenders and their families. The YRP aims to provide a concerted and coordinated approach to create awareness, generate acceptance and inspire action within the community to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders. This is crucial to achieve a safer and more secure community for all.

2. Though a relatively new campaign, the YRP has made significant inroads in Singapore. Together with our many partners and key stakeholders, we have managed to achieve impact in our community and beyond. This paper aims to highlight our journey, how we engage the community and our progress thus far.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE YELLOW RIBBON PROJECT

The Singapore Prison Service (SPS) Visioning Exercise

3. In 1999, the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) took a bold step to transform the organisation with a new Vision, which reads:

OUR VISION

We aspire to be Captains in the lives of offenders committed to our custody.
We will be instrumental in steering them towards being responsible citizens, with the help of their families and the community.
We will thus build a secure and exemplary prison system.

4. By committing itself to the bold and noble vision of becoming Captains in the lives of offenders, the SPS shifted its mindset to being instrumental in steering inmates towards being responsible citizens. This laid the foundation for the launch of YRP in 2004.

The Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE) Transformation

5. Working closely with the Singapore Prison Service, the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE) introduced the concept of rehabilitation through work discipline. SCORE rehabilitates offenders through vocational training and work programmes in market-relevant industries to facilitate the inmates' eventual return back to society and to keep up with the changes in the Singapore economy.

Formation of the Community Action for the Rehabilitation of Ex-Offenders (CARE) Network

Community Action for the Rehabilitation of Ex-offenders (CARE) Network

Vision: Hope, Confidence and Opportunities for Ex-Offenders



6. For many ex-offenders, the move from a controlled prison environment to the outside society as a free man is a big struggle. Many would fail if left alone to do so. It is with this in mind that the CARE Network was formed in May 2000.

7. The CARE Network was formed to improve the effectiveness of the rehabilitation of ex-offenders in Singapore. Spearheaded by the Singapore Prison Service and SCORE, the CARE Network is the first formal structure in Singapore that brings together key Government and non-government agencies involved in re-entry management.

8. The CARE Network aims to improve the effectiveness of rehabilitation of ex-offenders in Singapore. It engages the community in rehabilitation, co-ordinates member agencies' activities and develops initiatives for ex-offenders. It targets to develop a concerted and coordinated approach towards supporting rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders back into society in Singapore.

Why the Yellow Ribbon Project?

9. The most significant achievement to date for the CARE Network is the development of the Yellow Ribbon Project (YRP). The key drivers of the national campaign are the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) and the Singapore Corporation of Rehabilitative Enterprises (SCORE), supported by the CARE Network agencies. It was officially launched in 2004 by the President of the Republic of Singapore, Mr S R Nathan. The YRP is an annual campaign aimed at changing society's mindset towards giving ex-offenders a second chance in life. The campaign aims to mobilize community support and prepare the community for the offender's reintegration. Our end result is to see ex-offenders reintegrated into society as responsible citizens.

10. The inspiration behind YRP was taken from the 70s hit song, "Tie a yellow ribbon round the Ole Oak Tree".

"I'm really still in prison and my love, She holds the key, a simple yellow ribbon's what I need to set me free..."

11. YRP's moniker is adapted from the 1973 hit song by the pop group *Tony Orlando and Dawn* "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree", which describes a released prisoner's desire for forgiveness and acceptance. The 3 lines above from the 70s hit aptly describe the ex-offender's desire

for the acceptance and forgiveness from his loved ones and the community to set him free.

12. There is a great need for the community to be more aware of the struggles and the plight of approximately 10,000 ex-offenders that walk out of our prisons gate, wanting to start their lives afresh. Failing to get support and losing this motivation were impetus for falling back to their old criminal ways. Such a trend would then sustain the recurring vicious cycle of crime which would harm not just the ex-offender but their families and the community at large (e.g. victims of crime).

13. The community therefore plays an important part in the creation of an inclusive social environment where ex-offenders, who displayed a strong desire to change, could find the hope to start life afresh and become contributing members of society.

14. The objectives of YRP are the 3 'A's, which are:

- a. To create Awareness of giving second chances to ex-offenders.
- b. To generate Acceptance of ex-offenders and their families into the community.
- c. To inspire Community Action to support the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-offenders.

ORGANISING THE CAMPAIGN AND ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY

Thematic Development

15. Each year, a different theme was developed for the YRP campaign to move the level of engagement upwards and build upon the successes of the preceding year. While the first few YRP campaigns focused on creating awareness, subsequent campaigns progressively widened and deepened the message by engaging the community and mobilising inmates and reformed ex-offenders to give back to society.

YRP 2004	YRP 2005	YRP 2006	YRP 2007	YRP 2008	YRP 2009
Creating Awareness	Engaging the Community	Engaging the Ex-Offenders	Giving Back	Beyond Just Words	Giving Back
Selling the Message - Help Unlock the Second Prison	Give them a second lease of life	Widening the reach, deepening the message	Extending our reach, inspiring action in inmates and ex-offenders	Going beyond awareness to action by actively engaging the community	Inmates and ex-offenders playing a role to give back to society

Branding

16. Effective brand positioning has been instrumental for the success of the YRP campaign. The simple icon of a yellow ribbon and the meaning associated with it is easily identifiable and recognisable by all strata of society. The success of the brand also lies with the consistency and discipline of the message each year. Although the events and activities may change with each YRP year, the inherent message to be relayed across remained the same - the universal values of acceptance, forgiveness and second chances.

Harnessing the Media

17. YRP leverages extensively on the media as a strategic tool for our campaign messaging. The public campaign is launched through a series of televised and printed advertisements, news and radio broadcasts, on-line mediums like internet and websites, posters placed at public locations, e.g. the public transport system. New media was also used through Youtube, Facebook, mobile phone messages and local internet forums to publicise our events.

18. YRP enjoys wide media coverage from the Singapore media. It provides the media with a fertile spread of interesting story angles ranging from human interest to ex-offender reintegration issues. The creative harnessing of the media led to the production of three local movies and a documentary-drama based on the ex-offenders and their struggles. The message of forgiveness and

second chances was weaved into stories that the man-on-the-street could understand and identify with.

Community Engagement Activities

19. Media campaigns and key community engagement activities were concentrated in the month of September each year, being designated as the Yellow Ribbon month.

20. The annual 'Wear-A-Yellow-Ribbon' activity was conceptualized to encourage the public to wear the ribbon to show their support of the campaign. Each year's campaign was kicked off with the activity; "Wear A Yellow Ribbon Activity" during the month of September.

21. An eclectic mix of activities was used each year to engage the community. These events were our delivery mechanisms to highlight the reintegration issues of ex-offenders and make the call for community acceptance and action. They were creatively organised to showcase inmates and ex-offenders' talents via prison art exhibitions, song-writing, poetry and story telling competitions, and concerts.

22. To bring together various stakeholders and partners, the Yellow Ribbon Conference was a platform for government and non-governmental organisations, academics, aftercare professionals, community partners and overseas correctional services to dialogue on rehabilitation and aftercare issues.

23. The main YRP events held were:

- a. Yellow Ribbon Concert (2004, 2006 and 2008)
- b. Yellow Ribbon Walk (2005 and 2007)
- c. Yellow Ribbon Conference (2004 to 2008)
- d. Movie Screening "One More Chance" by Jack Neo (2005)
- e. Yellow Ribbon Fairs (2004 to 2007)
- f. Yellow Ribbon Creative Festival (2004 to 2008)
- g. Yellow Ribbon Community Art Exhibition (2007 and 2008)
- h. Yellow Ribbon Job Fairs

Involvement of Inmates and Ex-offenders

24. Inmates and ex-offenders formed an integral part of our campaign. Hence, opportunities were given as much as possible to involve inmates and ex-offenders. Since the commencement of YRP, the involvement of inmates in making the two million cloth Yellow Ribbons have been central to the impact of the Wear-A-Yellow-Ribbon activity. Their effort symbolically represented their desire for acceptance from the community and their willingness to change. Inmates had also contributed through exhibiting their handicrafts or skills, stage performances, logistical support, food preparation and packing of gift packs.

25. The YRP has generated positive response from ex-offenders, some of whom were mobilised to contribute further towards the cause. They pitched in efforts by providing transportation and logistic assistance in events, distributing Yellow Ribbons, performing at events. Many were not afraid of stepping out in the open to reveal their past on national press or television to be an encouragement to others and to thank the community for the support given to them and their families.

Celebrity Engagement and Rehabilitation Ambassadors

26. Celebrities and rehabilitation ambassadors formed an important part of the engagement strategy. With their popularity and influence, they were well positioned to spread the YRP message, serve as crowd-pullers, and more importantly act as ambassadors in support of the campaign. Local and regional artistes had been featured over the past few years.

Community Partnerships

27. As the YRP was centred upon community acceptance, the community formed a significant part of the equation. The campaign was also formed with the intention of running a campaign for the community, by the community. With the iconic symbol and the strong branding, many community and corporate organisations have initiated collaboration with us. Community leaders, politicians, corporate leaders and celebrities also made time to grace the events. Community involvement and partnerships came in the form of donations and sponsorships, wearing of the Yellow Ribbons, fund-raising or participating in our YRP events.

YRP 2009 - GIVING BACK

28. YRP 2009 was a year of ‘giving back’ to the community. It was a year for inmates and ex-offenders to play an active role in the midst of a difficult global economic crisis. Inmate and ex-offender driven community service projects were planned to offer them the opportunity to contribute back to the community and help the less privileged in society.

29. Everyone played their part in helping ex-offenders restart their lives and become responsible and contributing members of society. The inmates, ex-offenders and community were engaged in the following ways:

- a. Inmates and ex-offenders making the first move - By participating actively in rehabilitation programmes and contributing to the community, inmates and ex-offenders were driving their own acceptance.
- b. Family and friends rendering supporting and encouragement - Family acceptance and forgiveness were the first steps towards the creation of a conducive environment for reintegration. A strong social support network for ex-offenders gave them the courage to move on in their lives and increased their chances of starting lives anew.
- c. Community offering a helping hand - Singaporeans working together to strengthen the social fabric of the nation. The acceptance of volunteers, employers and colleagues would help support the reintegration journey of ex-offenders back to society.

2009 Events Highlights

Yellow Ribbon Culinary Programme 2009: Tribute of Love I “Father’s Day Luncheon” (26 May and 20 June 2009) and Tribute of Love II for the Community (26 September 2009)

30. The Yellow Ribbon Culinary Programme 2009 not only provided the opportunity for inmates to discover their culinary talents, but also paved the way for a career in the Food & Beverage industry. The programme included a culinary competition where inmate finalists were selected to attend a 26-week “Certificate in Basic Culinary Skills” training by an established culinary institute, Shatec Institutes. This training was sponsored by one of our corporate partners. The inmate finalists were also given the opportunity to present their winning dishes to their family members in a special Yellow Ribbon Tribute of Love “Father’s Day Luncheon” held on the 20 June 2009. The programme culminated on 26 September 2009 with the inmates cooking for 520 less privileged elderly and children. More than 120 ex-offenders and volunteers helped serve the meals, bringing together inmates, ex-offenders and volunteers to serve the needy in the community.

Yellow Ribbon Art Competition (1 July 09) and Yellow Ribbon Community Art Exhibition (9 to 20 Sep 09)

31. Art therapy has been found to be an effective tool in rehabilitation. The Yellow Ribbon Art Competition was a platform for inmates and ex-offenders to discover their artistic talents. There were 450 artworks produced by inmates and ex-offenders along the theme of “Vision of Hope”, where participants painted their hope for a new life after release. The top 30 entries were selected for the finals held on 1 July 2009. These artworks were then exhibited at the Singapore Art Museum during the Yellow Ribbon Community Art Exhibition. The exhibition was attended by 1,300 visitors and

raised about S\$36,000 for the Yellow Ribbon Fund and other agencies as part of “giving back” to the community.

Wear-A-Yellow- Ribbon (Entire Month of Sep) / Yellow Ribbon Street Donation Day (Friday, 28 Aug 09)

32. The simple act of wearing the Yellow Ribbon was an active display of the community’s support for offering second chances and acceptance for ex-offenders. Each Yellow Ribbon was handmade by an inmate and symbolised his or her hope for forgiveness and acceptance. Our signature activity, the Yellow Ribbon Street Donation Day held on 28 August 2009 saw 1,691 volunteers coming forward to distribute Yellow Ribbon Packs and raised funds for the YRF. A total of S\$37,000 was raised in the Wear-A-Yellow-Ribbon Street Donation Day.

Yellow Ribbon Prison Run 2009 - “Beyond the Run” (6 Sep 09)

33. The inaugural Yellow Ribbon Prison Run on 6 September 2009 saw the participation of more than 6,000 runners. A contingent of 80 reformed ex-offenders also participated in the Run. Aptly themed “Beyond the Run”, runners lend their collective voice to a message of encouragement for all ex-offenders to pick themselves up after having fallen down. As part of giving back to the community, reformed ex-offender turned marathoner, Mr Hanniel Choong of 48 years of age, raised S\$35,000 for YRF through his challenge of finishing the 10km race in 48 minutes.

Contributing to the Nation’s Birthday

34. On 9 August 2009, while thousands of spectators received their gift packs at the Singapore National Day Parade (NDP), some of them were surprised to find their gift packs containing a Yellow Ribbon pack. This year, 88 inmate volunteers participated in the Nation’s celebration by packing 35,000 gift packs for the NDP. Through this gesture, they showed that they are contributing citizens of Singapore even while serving time.

Yellow Ribbon Tattoo Removal Programme

35. In July 2009, YRP started a two-year tattoo removal programme costing \$1 million. The programme, fully sponsored by our corporate partner, aimed to help inmates renounce their gang membership (often signified by elaborate gang-related tattoos) and facilitated their reintegration into society as law-abiding and gainfully employed citizens. One of the inmates who received treatment on his arm said, “Many of us wanted to stay clean of gangs. However, we are easily identified by gangs because of our common tattoos. Removing our gang tattoos is more than just a symbolic act for us - it gives us the chance at a clean slate of life.” A total of 39 inmates had since undergone the programme, with 50 more waiting to have their tattoos removed and start their lives afresh.

THE IMPACT

36. The YRP has generated a lot of interest and support since its inception. Its positive outreach and message of “*Help Unlock the Second Prison*” has permeated into all levels of society. The logo of the Yellow Ribbon is now synonymously recognized as a symbol of giving hope and second chances to ex-offenders in Singapore. The Singaporean public, community leaders, ex-offenders and their families have publicly embraced the philosophy of YRP and shown their support by participating in our activities.

37. A public perception survey was commissioned in 2007 to elicit the Singaporean public’s attitudes towards ex-offenders and their awareness of the YRP. Findings showed that 94% of the respondents were aware of the YRP, indicating that our outreach and media efforts have by and large been successful in creating awareness of the YRP cause. The findings also showed that more than 60% of respondents had generally positive attitudes towards ex-offenders, with most agreeing that ex-offenders deserve a second chance and hence were willing to accept them back into society.

38. The Registration of Criminals (Amendment) Act was amended in May 2005 to help deserving ex-offenders reintegrate into society. The amended Act would allow an ex-offender convicted of a less serious crime to have his record considered spent if he met the specified criteria and stayed clean for a five-year period. Following this, the Singapore Civil Service amended their job application form on 1 April 2006. Candidates with spent records could now indicate that they did not have any criminal records, thus increasing their opportunities in their job search. In 2006, the Ministry of Transport, Land Transport Authority reviewed the guidelines for issuance and renewal of vocational licences for drivers of public service vehicles to make it more flexible for ex-offenders to get the license.

39. YRP received an international affirmation from the United Nations Department of Public Information in 2007 when, arising from SPS's work in YRP, SPS was given an Honourable Mention for outstanding achievement in public relations campaigns which best exemplify the ideals and goals of the United Nations. Locally, YRP received the National Community Safety and Security Programme Award in 2007 and 2008 for two of our community engagement programmes. The award recognises outstanding projects and community volunteers on a nation-wide level that contributes to tackling community issues and problems addressing the safety and security of the community. It also received the Public Relations in the Service of Mankind (PRISM) Excellence Award under the Public Service Campaigns category in 2008. In 2009, the Yellow Ribbon Tattoo Removal Programme received the Ministry of Home Affairs's Operational Excellence Award.

40. The key achievements of YRP from 2004 to 2009 were as follows:

- a) 1.985 million Yellow Ribbons distributed.
- b) 313,000 Singaporeans participated in our events.
- c) 807 new employers registered with SCORE's Job Bank.
- d) 908 volunteers signed up to volunteer with us.
- e) S\$7.8 million raised for Yellow Ribbon Fund.
- f) More than 400 inmates and ex-offenders mobilised for each campaign.

41. Another significant milestone for our YRP was the initiation of the Yellow Ribbon Fund (YRF). YRF is the first national charitable fund devoted entirely towards the development and implementation of rehabilitation and reintegration programmes and services for ex-offenders and their families. Registered under the National Council of Social Service, YRF was granted Institute of Public Character (IPC) status from 1 August 2004.

CONCLUSION

42. Ex-offenders need the support of their families and the community for them to reintegrate into society successfully. Rehabilitation programmes would help to reform and prepare the ex-offender for release. However, what is equally critical is to prepare the community to accept the reintegration of these ex-offenders.

43. Recognising that a prejudiced mindset and stigmatisation of criminals are impediments to the reintegration of ex-offenders, a concerted effort is required to effect a mindset change. Only with the close partnership and commitment between the Government, community partners, companies and individual members of the public will we succeed in giving ex-offenders a second chance. The Singapore community as an inclusive society would offer support to reformed ex-offenders to become contributing members of society. Ultimately, we would achieve a safer and more secure home for all.

44. The YRP bears testament of the power of garnering a group of like-minded organisations in the form of CARE Network to bring about community transformation towards ex-offenders and committing in a common purpose to help our ex-offenders reintegrate back into society.