

Dropping off pizzas and art kits for a good cause



Free pizzas and paint-by-numbers kits were delivered to 66 beneficiaries of The Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund (STSPMF) yesterday, as part of an initiative by pizzeria Artestiq DePatio. The restaurant, which is located in Plaza Singapura, had put out a call under its Drop a Good Cause, Drop a Message, Drop a Pizza campaign, that members of the public could purchase pizzas for an STSPMF beneficiary at half the price from June 14 to 20. The restaurant matched the purchase by giving away another pizza to the beneficiaries for free. Deliveries to their homes were done with the assistance of the Singapore Convertible Club. Beneficiaries were randomly selected from those receiving monthly school pocket money from STSPMF in primary and secondary schools, as well as post-secondary institutions. Deliveries will continue today and on Saturday. Since the fund started in 2000, STSPMF has helped close to 180,000 children and youth in need. It disburses about \$6 million yearly, helping about 10,000 needy students. PHOTOS: ARTESTIQ DEPATIO

'We played football with inmates'

Former prison officer recalls what they do to help rehabilitate convicts back in 1970s as S'pore Prison Service marks 75th anniversary

Wong Shiying

When Mr A. Muthucumarasamy was a prison officer in the 1970s, he played football with inmates and even started music bands for them. Those activities fostered bonds between inmates and distracted them from their gang affiliations, he said.

The Singapore Prison Service celebrates its 75th anniversary this year and has come a long way from its days of housing drug abuse inmates in repurposed old houses and abandoned schools where gates were secured with only a chain and lock.

Today, it runs modern facilities that use video analytics to detect fighting in cells and has helped inmates apply for HDB flats or deal with marital woes as they prepare to be reintegrated into society.

Mr Muthucumarasamy, 89, said he used to worry about inmates escaping as some prison facilities then were not designed for incarceration.

He recalled an inmate escaping by climbing the chain-link fence of the now-defunct Medium Security Prison in the 1970s to visit his sick brother in hospital.

The inmate was eventually

caught several days later.

Mr Muthucumarasamy said group activities were part of the inmates' daily routine to keep them active and occupied.

He said: "When they are playing games, they don't think about being in a gang because they're playing for the team. These activities also sharpen their abilities and give them something to look forward to."

Now, prison officers do not have to physically conduct headcount checks of inmates in their cells as chip-embedded wrist tags automatically track their movements.

These tech advances have given prison officers more time to engage inmates and understand their needs, said Assistant Superintendent of Prisons Loh Kee Wei, 54, who is a housing unit officer.

He said: "When we know the inmates well, we notice when their behaviour changes and try to find out what happened. If an inmate's wife is asking for a divorce, for example, we can put in a request for him to call her."

For inmates whose families have cut ties with them, senior reintegration officer Ponnarasi Gopal Chandra, 38, tries to help them mend relationships. She said: "Family support is very important because prison officers cannot be with them all the way. We try to help families see how much they have changed and also encourage inmates to open up to them."

If reconciliation is not possible, the prison will help the inmate apply for a flat or secure a place in a shelter before he is released.

Volunteers known as befrienders are also attached to inmates to give them emotional support and practical advice when they leave the prison.

Inmates today are offered a range of rehabilitative programmes including skills training - like culinary or video production classes - and parenting courses.

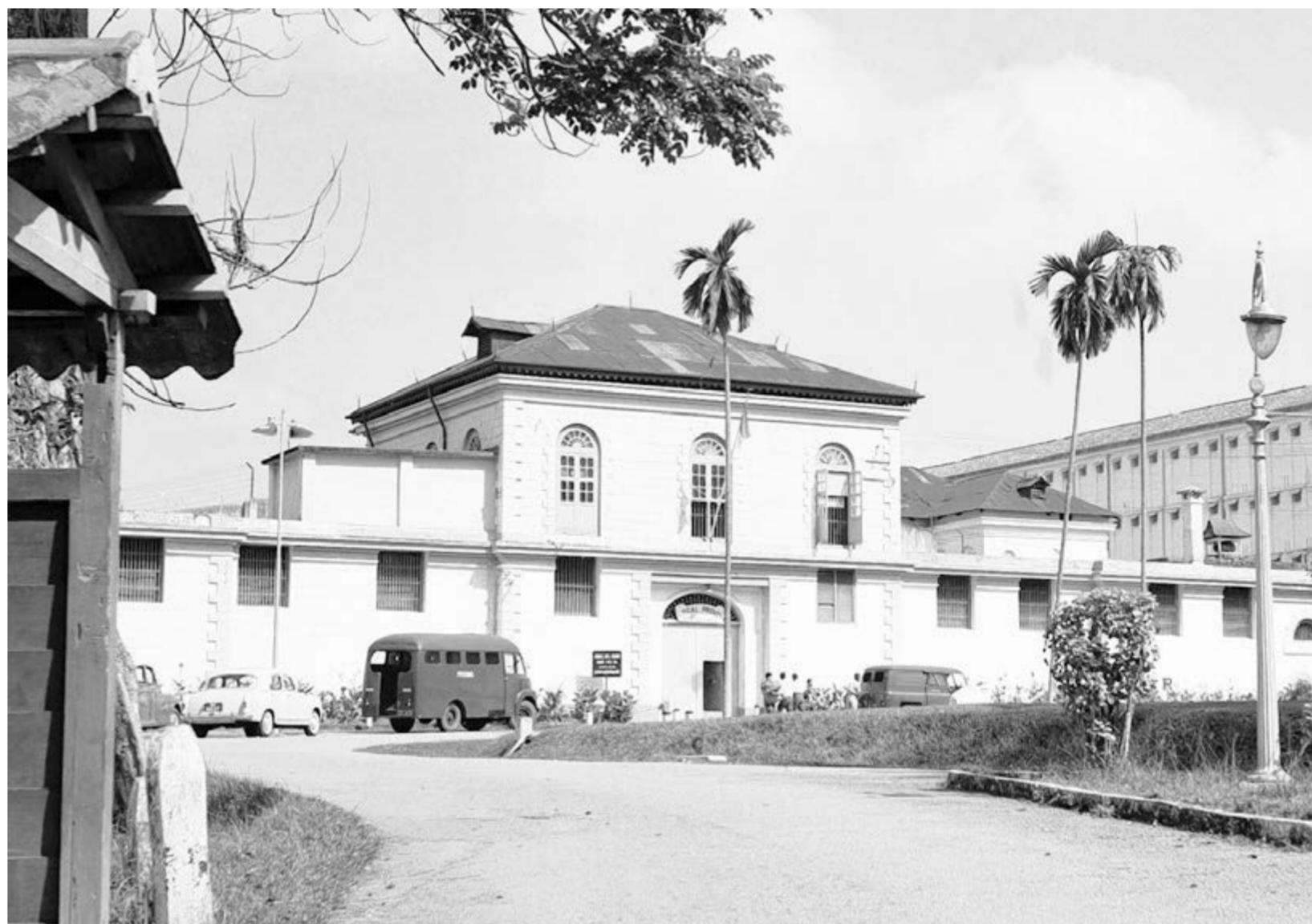
Ms Chandra said: "We encourage inmates to take ownership of planning their future, like (deciding) what kind of courses they want to attend. Most of them would have secured a job before their release."

As the prison service takes on a bigger rehabilitative role, society has also become more accepting of ex-convicts over the years.

The Yellow Ribbon Project Singapore said it partners 5,974 employers that offer job opportunities to ex-convicts as at March, up from 5,895 last year.

Said its spokesman: "The public is becoming more sophisticated, taking an active interest in social issues and understands the importance of offering second chances for a more inclusive society."

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THEN Outram Prison back in 1963. The Singapore Prison Service has come a long way from its days of housing drug abuse inmates in repurposed old houses and abandoned schools where gates were secured with only a chain and lock. ST FILE PHOTO



NOW Changi Prison Complex (above). The prison now uses modern technology such as video analytics and chip-embedded tags (left) to track inmates. ST FILE PHOTOS

Pioneer officers help set up new DRCs

Operation Ferret, a nationwide exercise in 1977 to contain Singapore's heroin epidemic, remains etched in the minds of pioneer prison officers of the Singapore Prison Service (SPS).

Under the operation launched by the Central Narcotics Bureau on April 1 that year, anyone suspected of having consumed a controlled drug would be taken to a police station and subjected to a urine test.

If he tested positive, he would be sent to a drug rehabilitation centre (DRC) for six months without needing to go to court. Within seven months of the operation, 5,100 addicts had been put into DRCs.

There was a rush to set up centres to house new inmates, a burden which fell on pioneer SPS officers.

Mr Elendrus Hj Osman, who worked with SPS for over 30 years, said there were days during Operation Ferret where over a hundred inmates would be brought in but there was no space to house them.

To ease the overcrowding problem, old houses and schools were turned into prison quarters and inmates were roped in to help with the renovations.

Said Mr Osman: "In the 70s and 80s it wasn't easy (to get contractors) so we had to do some of it 'in-house'. They were trained. They may be secret society members but they were contractors and did all sorts of jobs."

Wong Shiying



PLAY AS A TEAM, NOT GANG

When they are playing games, they don't think about being in a gang because they're playing for the team. These activities also ... give them something to look forward to.



MRA. MUTHUCUMARASAMY (above, in a photo from 1982), who was a prison officer in the 1970s, on the prison service getting inmates to do group activities such as playing football as a way to keep them active and occupied.