

# #EVERYONE'S COLUMN

ISSUE 1: FRIENDS



'As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.'

When I think of friendship, this is the saying that comes to mind. There are many reasons why people become friends – due to common interests, to not be alone, to receive help from, etc. They are not bad motivations. However, as people get older and we become more selective of the company we mix with, how do we decide which friends are worth keeping? Especially for those of us who want to be a better person and get out of the old lifestyle, we would like friends who can encourage us and spur us on during challenging times. **Sometimes it may even be beneficial for us to hear words that are true but difficult to accept.** Such treatment is sometimes known as 'tough love'. For example, I have a group of long-time friends who will not hesitate to tell me if I'm not being wise with my money or if my diet is unhealthy. I may not always be very enthusiastic about their advice, but it does make me think about my life choices and I start to make little changes later on.

In order to have friends who can 'sharpen' us, I would like to encourage us to be open to people who are not very similar to us, those with different opinions and experiences. That's when we can hear and learn new knowledge that can be helpful to us, and may even challenge old unhelpful thinking. Being open does mean that we have to actively use positive communication skills to avoid any misunderstanding and show respect for one another. Last but not least, I encourage us to be aware of who we want to be before we even think about who we want to be with. **I believe who we choose to be will naturally help us choose the kind of friends we want to be close to, the ones who will sharpen us to become the person we want to be.**

## About #Everyone's Column

The column is made up of submissions from inmates (S1 & RCU\*), desistors, and staff. The purpose of this column is to allow you a space for reflection, as well as to provide a sense of community. We hope that you will be able to inspire and be inspired.

\*RCU is a transformational environment that supports and strengthens renounees' prosocial identity and their resolve towards a gang-free lifestyle. They will be living as a community with a shared purpose, and there will opportunities to learn to strengthen their prosocial identity through a series of programmes and practices.

Friendship to me is a relation between people who are willing to share the time, space, ideas etc with one another other to a certain extend but not wholeheartedly. So what makes someone a wonderful friend? A wonderful friend to me is someone who **SMILES**:

**S**tay with me when I am in sorrow, not necessary physically but be an emotional support to me (verbally or non-verbally)

**M**akes my problems his/her problems so that I do not have to manage them on my own

**I**nvites me to his/her party and misery to celebrate his/her joyous movement or share his/her pain

**L**augh and celebrate with me during good times

**E**mpower each other with affirmation and support

**S**peak his/her mind or views to me in full confidence even if we see or view things differently

We should not walk alone as our journey in life is long and uneven; we need someone who is able to be there to give us a lift when we are down and in need of help. A wonderful friend will hope that we are safe and happy, regardless where we are; if need be, he/she will be by our side to ensure our are safety and happiness. Therefore, be grateful when you are blessed with a wonderful friend; treasure this special relationship!

A friend that is a must  
Is a friend that you can trust  
They are always there in times of need  
Only a phone call away, a friend indeed  
To a friend that deeply cares  
All my woes and troubles I can share  
For when all is not well  
And life gives you hell  
A person I can turn to is a friend that is true  
A friend that you must find  
Is a friend that is honest and kind  
They will not judge nor criticize,  
But will give a sound and candor advice  
They are the first to cheer  
When success they hear  
They pick me up when I am down  
They rescue me when I am about to drown  
A friend will not betray  
They are by your side night and day  
They are quick to heed your call  
Ready to help when your back is against the wall



When I was 16 I started joining gangs and taking drugs, I thought this kind of life is enjoyable and fun. I continue this kind of lifestyle for a couple of years until one day I found out this is not the life I want. When I was sentenced in 2022, I realized all those 'friends' were not real and I started feeling lonely and missing my family. I did not receive any E-letter from any of my friends nor family. This served as a reminder and wake up call for me.

Nothing is permanent. Enjoyment won't last while doing illegal stuffs. Enjoyment come when you have good family bonding and good friends who will be by your side when you are nothing.



A friend is someone who truly cares,  
And stands by you when no one dares;  
A friend never leaves you but stays,  
Both in sunny and runny days.  
A friend can keep any secret,  
Like a code kept in a locket;  
A friend feels good when you are glad,  
And cheers you up when you are sad.  
A friend calls out your mistakes,  
And tells you the right road to take;  
A friend will never stab your back,  
But confronts you on what you lack.  
A friend hones your full potential,  
Not someone who is judgemental;  
A friend does not give Judas' Kiss,  
And when gone you will surely miss.

Friends play an important part in our lives. It is good if we value friends who show care and concern for us, think about our likes and dislikes, are sincere with their actions and have integrity and honesty. Friends have the power to impact us either positively or negatively.

Positive friends will render us morale support and timely assistance when we are in dire need of help, while negative friends will give us excuses, empty promises but disappear after that. All friendships, at certain points will face challenges. We will need to learn how to compromise. Sometimes, a friend might be having a bad day or going through a tough time. This is when we need to be more sensitive, understanding, and empathetic. Think about how you would personally like to be treated in a similar situation and behave in that manner towards your friend.

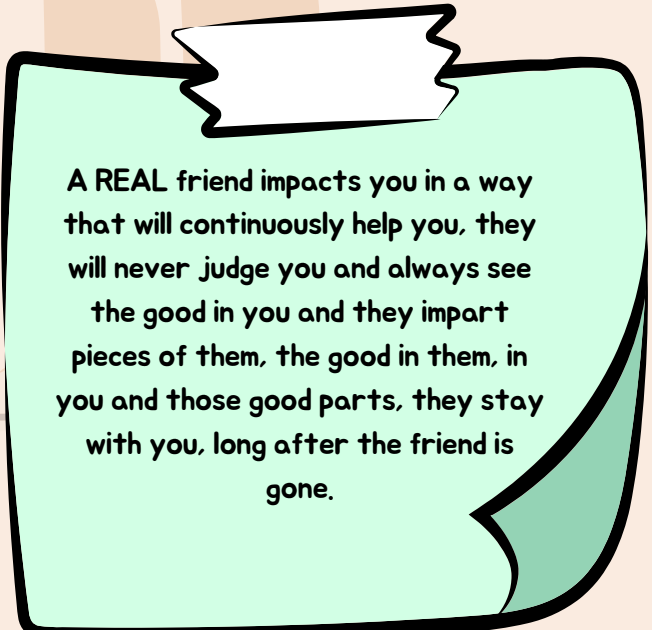
Distancing oneself from antisocial friends is a challenge. Interactions with these friends tend to be unpleasant, demanding and demoralizing. They will most likely drain away your energy and seldom make you happy. Such friendships tend to be toxic, and it is advisable to minimize interactions with them. You may come up with excuses, such as being busy with errands whenever they contact you. Eventually, they will cease contact. I hope you will embrace good friendships.

I don't want to imagine what I would have become if I had not met my best friend, my coach. I was put on a boxing program because I was getting into fights at school and that is how I met Coach Bala. Initially, it was just a way for me to not get any real punishment for my misconduct in school. I did it as a chore and had never thought that this man would have such an impact on me. He definitely made an impression on me when I once vomited in the ring after a sparring session and he nursed me back up to my feet and then tossed the mop into the ring and asked me to clean up after myself. I was not sure if I liked or disliked him but something about him drew me to him. I started attending trainings with much more eagerness as time went by. I enjoyed being around him. He usually felt more like a peer, a friend rather than a coach, but when it was time to get serious, the man had no mercy.

He grew to be more and more of a mentor to me. He would relate everything to boxing. He made me understand that boxing and life were parallels. 'The way you fight is the way you live', he'd tell me. After my first loss in the ring, I was heartbroken. I had never considered the possibility of losing and when it inevitably happened, I was devastated. I was in the locker room crying like a brat when he told me 'If you don't know how to lose, you'll never know how to win'. He gave me the confidence to take up another fight in the following months after my loss. He would tell me stories about all the great fighters who came back from a loss. He told me losing was the first step to learning: learning how to win. Right before my next fight, he'd tell me 'don't ever stray away from the strategy but be prepared to adapt as the fight goes on!' Everything he said was a parallel, it always applied to real life outside of the ring.

There came a time where I was drifting from him and the gym, around the same time I started doing drugs and mixing with bad company. When he found out about my activities outside of training, he did not scold me. Instead, he asked me to bring my friends along with me for trainings. He said he would train them for free. That is the kind of man he was, boxing was a universal solution to him. However, I was at a rebellious phase in my life so I did not listen to his advice. My 'friends' at that time did not want to spend their free time running rounds or doing pad work with an old man. So when it came down to making a choice about how I was going to spend my free time, I chose my 'friends'. I slowly stopped committing to boxing and eventually completely stopped contacting coach.

Coach Bala passed away earlier this year. I will always live with the regret of not attending his funeral because I felt like he would have been disappointed with who I had become. Shortly after his passing, I started boxing again and was working towards the Nationals. Upon my release, I will visit his grave and catch up with him. God bless his soul. Rest in peace, Coach.



A REAL friend impacts you in a way that will continuously help you, they will never judge you and always see the good in you and they impart pieces of them, the good in them, in you and those good parts, they stay with you, long after the friend is gone.

With honesty comes trust,  
Once a social outcast,  
I turned to anti-socials,  
Unknownst of my true vocals.

They shared their sadness and despair,  
In a life no one seemed to care.  
Happiness they tried to achieve,  
When thugs were up to mischief.  
But it was change that I wanted,  
To avoid a life of the haunted.

Loneliness I faced at night,  
But never losing my one true sight.  
I had to enjoy this beautiful life,  
In order to do so, I dropped the knife.

New friends I went to pursue.  
But the social stigma was too true.  
Inferiority I faced,  
Whenever I tried to avoid their gaze.

However, through darkness I rose,  
Discussing topics they choce.  
Adversity and change I learnt,  
For my family and child I earned.

Perspectives found anew,  
The more and more I grew.

With honesty comes trust,  
With you, I face my past.

People we know come from different walks of life and each one possesses a varying degree of influence in our lives. Studies have shown that we are the average of five people we spend most time with. These people may be school mates, army buddies, religious influences, and others whom we give more validation and recognition. Influential people who are strong believers of this theory have attributed their success to positive influences they immersed themselves in. Conversely, **being among troublemakers would only lead you down the narrow passage of trouble.**

This belief forms the basis of the types of friends I want to assimilate with. I hope you too see the importance that positive influences have in developing a good and successful life. **So, moving forward, who are the five people you want to be closest to?**

### Food for thought:

"I'm going to be gone one day, and I have to accept that tomorrow isn't promised. **Am I OK with how I'm living today?** It's the only thing I can help. If I didn't have another one, what have I done with all my todays? Am I doing a good job?"



I started joining gangs when I was 14 years old. It felt cool to be part of a gang and to have people back you up whenever you got into trouble. I started smoking and had to work to earn money for my cigarettes. Soon I started to drink alcohol so I had to resort to selling illegal VCDs to earn money for those things. When I was in Secondary 3, I was expelled from school due to misconduct and my involvement in fights. I still did not feel remorseful. After my expulsion, I had more free time to earn money and spend time with my brothers. At the age of 17, I started selling and consuming drugs. I went to serve my National Service (NS) when I was 18 years old and met more 'brothers'. I spent every day with them and ended up absconding from NS. I was sent to Detention Barrack for 11 times and imprisoned for five times.

With God's grace, I got married at 23 years old, to my wife whom I've known since I was 14 years old. She was the opposition of my dark shadow. Something just hit me during my incarceration in 2019 that made me think hard about my life. **'Was it worth being in a gang and leaving my beautiful family behind?'** They still waited patiently for me and have always strongly believed that I will change for good someday. My wife said something that was a wakeup call for me. **'Where are your brothers when you were incarcerated? Wake up dear, they are still out there with their families and loved ones. But you are away from us, for years.'** So I asked myself again, if it was worth being part of a gang. I finally found the answers to my questions.

The truth is, family is everything. My family was my pillar of strength during my difficult times, not my 'brothers'. My family has been the ones who motivate me to change. I have two sons aged 10 and 12, and they are soon becoming teenagers. I don't want them to follow in my footsteps down this diabolic route. My sons have always seen me as a role model in their life and if I am not on the right path, so will my sons. I took the courageous decision to renounce from my gang in 2019. A quote that strongly motivates me to change to be a better person is, 'The best way to predict your future is to create it.' And I've taken the first step to create mine.

When I joined the Secret Society (SS) in 1987, it was mainly for protection. Back then, there were a lot of fights and gang activities in the area where I lived. The only way to get to work was by walking over to the interchange – whenever I did so, I'd have to cross these gang territories. I got battered so many times.

Everyone knows that there's nothing good in the SS. Once I was in the ring, I was exposed to all kinds of vices. Somehow, one thing led to another, and I learnt how to get drugs, take drugs and earn a living from transporting drugs. Choosing that path led me to jail many times. In 2006, I was sentenced to eight years in prison for housebreaking. I needed money for drugs because I was juggling many odd jobs and doing lots of night shifts. The drugs would help keep my energy level high at work at first; over time it backfired as I became dependent on them. My friends provided those drugs in the beginning, but once they knew I had become hooked, they stopped supplying them and started asking me for money. That's how things work in the drug supply line.

Going to jail in 2006 felt different compared to the previous times I went in – I was already a father, and having a son really impacted me. He was only eight then, and when he visited me one day, he said that the other kids' parents showed up at his school on Children's Day. He asked, 'Why are you not there for me?' That moment really saddened me. It made me reflect on how much I had lost because I had spent 16 years of my life in prison. What have I gained from committing crimes? I decided there and then that enough is enough: it's time to turn over a new leaf. The first thing I did was to leave the Secret Society while still in prison, but that was not easy. There were many objections from other members, especially those who were also inside [the prison]. But at the end of the day, it's my life and I needed to make the right choice. After overcoming a lot of hindrances, I managed to get myself out.

I think the biggest challenge I faced was the negativity from the people around me. I wanted to change and become a better person, but some of the remarks I got while still in prison were demoralising at times. Even my family didn't trust me fully after my release in 2014. There were days where I felt stressed, depressed and really broken down. Why was I still being labelled? Why were they still thinking of me in a negative way? That was a real struggle for me, but I used their words as my motivation to turn over a new leaf. Whenever they said I couldn't make it, I took it as a challenge to become a better person. If I didn't reflect upon their words, I'd still be the same person today, so I have to thank them.

I am currently an ISCOS Titan, which is a title given to ex-offenders who have properly reintegrated into society and are now actively helping others. Today, my wife and I also do overseas voluntary work that was introduced to me while I was with a halfway house called The Helping Hand. We visit Malaysia once a month to talk to troubled youths who were sent to homes for corrective training. They're mostly juvenile boys who committed various crimes, so I try to keep them out of trouble by guiding them spiritually. Some of these boys were abandoned and have no one in their lives, and I know what it's like to be in their shoes when I was young. That's why I want to help them. I can't undo the past, and I don't know when I'll draw my last breath, but now that age is catching up with me, I want to help others as much as I can.'

– Muru, 45

Thank you ISCOS for sharing this story with us!

Thank you Mr. Chua (Supt S1), Ms. Lau Kuan Mei (SAD CRS DRC), Mr. Muru, and all inmates for your submissions and for reading this issue. We hope it has been meaningful for you. You may jot your reflections down in your MAP planner.

If you would like to share your stories in future issues, do keep a look out for the next poster!

This column is brought to you by S1 CRSes.

