

#EVERYONE'S COLUMN

ISSUE 6: THE FRIENDS I CHOOSE



#Everyone's Column is made up of submissions from inmates, desistors, staff, and volunteers. It aims to allow you a space of reflection and promote a sense of community. We hope that you will inspire and be inspired.

TAKE #1: WHAT A GOOD FRIEND LOOKS LIKE TO ME

As human beings, we want to feel like we belong and we want to feel like we matter, which are done by cultivating friendships. Forming friendships is not difficult, but the challenge arises when we talk about forming healthy and beneficial friendships. Good friends are not easy to come by; They tend to stay the longest in your life, riding the waves together with you. These friends are not easily deterred with the changes in your life and they do not abandon you in your times of need. As you grow older, it will dawn on you that the importance lies in quality and not the quantity of friends. I believe the most basic of qualities that a healthy friend should possess are kindness, maturity, and versatility. S/he should be able to hold his/her own ground and correct you should you stray away from the right path. A healthy and functioning friendship requires the individuals in them to be tolerant of one another's idiosyncrasies and be accepting of each other's flaws. At the end of it all, a healthy friendship should make you a better person.

MY JOURNEY, GROWING UP

They say the friends we choose determine our future. I came from a neighbourhood which people call the "ghetto" part of Singapore. I am the only child of my parents, and we are neither rich nor poor. As the only child, I was doted on constantly, having the latest gadgets and all, but that was all they could do – provide for me materially. I was constantly looking for attention from my parents but received none, I had everything but at the same time I had nothing. The loneliness at home was very consuming, and it led me to look for attention externally – on the streets.

I started to mix around with boys around my neighbourhood, not realizing I was mixing around with bad company. Back then, I was young, adventurous, and extremely rebellious. As time went on, I got into fights, theft, glue sniffing, and ultimately ended up joining a secret society. My life went downhill from then on, but I didn't mind as I was accepted and felt a sense of belonging. I was caught with the law again and again, from Boys' Home, hostel, to DRC. After every incarceration I would go back to my "brothers". I never thought they were bad, I felt a sense of belonging with them.

As I got older and after numerous recalls and incarcerations, I started to realize that I must try to cut ties with these "brothers", or I would continue to come back in. It was hard as they were my childhood friends, but I also knew that they were not influencing me in positive ways. I was trapped in the mindset of wanting to do things to get the recognition from my peers. After detaching from them, did I start to realize my real potential and how much opportunities I had wasted. I also realized there were different types of friends that could influence me positively and support me in my journey to success.

THE DEVIL

vs.

THE ANGEL

The drugs your friends passed you can black out the emotional pain. You can enjoy your “bliss” in solitude. Isn’t it your right? You did not harm anyone else.

Being the sole breadwinner of your family, you deserve your time with yourself and with your friends. What’s wrong with taking a “breather” after a hard day’s work? Surely you’ve earned it!

Your friends are the only people who can truly and fully understand your predicaments with your addiction. No one else can. You are forever bound by the brotherhood in good and bad times.

Is this “bliss” permanent? Do not be fooled by the temporary relief. It comes with a heavy price. You have sacrificed your time, health, wealth, career, and caused immense hurt to your loved ones.

You have a loving wife and two beautiful children. Go catch your breath of life with your family, is that not enough for you?

You can never force someone to meet you at the same place, but you can let them know where you will be. Which family members and friends will be there to meet you at the end of the journey?

SAVING MY BEST FRIEND

Aaron stared at me in disbelief. “How could you?” he repeated. We have been friends since childhood. I crushed the packet of crystals before emptying it into the toilet bowl, quickly pressing the flush. I was determined not to let Aaron slip this time. I made a promise to his mother that he would complete his O’ levels this year.

“I am not going to lose you again Aaron”, I retorted. I was too weak to stop you last time. You managed to convince me that you were in control of your drug use – “my exploratory phase”, as you called it. Then you were caught and sent to DRC, ruining your O’ levels. I was utterly devastated because we had planned to take up the same course in Polytechnic.

Aaron’s eyes softened and started to glisten. He sat in his chair, dejected. He turned his head away to face the mirror. Slowly, he took out the makeshift apparatus that fed his addiction. His hand reached for the lighter from his nightstand. “You are right, I need to do this.” Aaron spoke with conviction. The sound of broken glass filled the room as he tossed the items into the bin.

“Is everything alright, Aaron?” His mum’s concerned voice cut through from the kitchen. Both of us locked gazes. He took a deep breath and replied, “Yes mum! Everything’s OK.” I was absolutely thrilled to have my best friend back.

TAKE #2: WHAT A GOOD FRIEND LOOKS LIKE TO ME

Most people consider themselves lucky if they have one or two friends they can count on. There is no need to have a huge circle of friends, but we must be careful of who we choose to be friends with. This is my own guide to choosing my closest friends: The people I want to keep close and trust are those who make me want to be better, smarter, more loving, more open minded, more collaborative, more trustworthy, more empathetic, more faith-filled, more grateful, and more forgiving. Sometimes, we fall into comfort zones and hold on to relationships that don't serve us well, or may even be harmful.

Change is the only constant in life, and changing our friends means setting healthy boundaries for yourself too. I would only want to make friends whose values align with mine.

FROM THE RESOLUTE CORRECTIONAL UNIT (RCU):

My parents have always taught me since young to choose my friends wisely as who I mix with would shape the person I become. However, I wanted to be recognized and started mixing around with the well-known gangsters in my area. It made me feel good as I was accepted by them and a part of the group. They taught me how to consume drugs, alcohol, and many other negative things. Once I got into trouble with the law, they ditched me and sold me out to the police. I was disappointed as I thought of them as my true friends who would stick by me through thick and thin. This incident left a big impact on me and since then, I decided it was important to choose my friends more wisely.

Eventually, this group of friends tried to come back into my life and tried hard to lure me with different types of temptations like drugs and alcohol. I almost stumbled and gave in to them but thanks to my new group of friends whom I met during counselling sessions after my first case, I managed to avoid their temptations. My dear friends, remember that your antisocial friends will find all ways to get us back into their circle and lifestyle. Do not forget who stood by you during your low moments.

Who you mix with is who you become. While it is important to have friends, there is no point becoming a different person in order to fit in with a group of people. To find people who truly like you for who you are, you need to first be yourself.

WHAT IS RCU?

*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 be opportunities to learn to strengthen their prosocial identity through a series of programmes and practices.

"if you really want to learn Mandarin but you hang around people who speak Spanish all day, which language are you more likely to pick up?"

A BEAUTIFUL SOUL IN A FOREIGN LAND

The true definition of a friend is a person who will genuinely be there for you in times of need, support you through thick and thin, and face the music together in good and bad times. In spite of being in prison, life has not been the same, especially when it is my first time.

Being in a foreign country, isolated away from my loved ones, being away from home is a great challenge for anyone to endure. This hardship is something I'd never encountered before in my life. However, a miracle struck me in my darkest hour and suddenly, the tables turned. My dear friend had helped me during my incarceration. He was there with me at court, at the police station, finding a good lawyer to assist me on my case, and arranging my belongings to be sent back home. He contacted my family and told them that I was coping well despite adversities. He shared with me this powerful phrase, "In every hardship, there is relief." That message had impacted me and inspired me to persevere and maintain resilience by looking at the brighter side of the picture.

His beautiful human soul is the sole reason that I am still standing strong on my two feet until this very day. His constant communication has made me persevere and continue to have faith. A wise man once said, "When the going gets tough, the tough gets going." This friendship and solid bond between us will always remain a special place in my heart. Upon my release, I look forward to building many more memories together with him.

TAKE #3: WHAT A GOOD FRIEND LOOKS LIKE TO ME

As someone who grew up without family, my friends have been the greatest influence on the person I have grown to be today. I realize that I am drawn to people who know how to have fun, but also exhibit qualities I aspire to have as a person. When you hang around someone enough, you adopt some of their qualities, both good and bad. Hang out with driven and disciplined people, and I become more like them. Hang out with messy and dramatic people, and I attract mess and drama into my life.

Discipline, consideration, and kindness are just some of the qualities my friends have, but what we all share is our desire to grow as individuals by lifting others up, value-adding to each other's lives and celebrating milestones together.

Life is meaningless if you cross the finish line without anyone to share your success with.

When I was incarcerated, I had friends who left and friends who stayed by my side. Those who stayed loved me more and showed me grace and compassion, yet never once condoned my actions. In the words of author C.S. Lewis, "Hate the sin, not the sinner."

IT TAKES COURAGE TO CHOOSE OUR RELATIONSHIPS

The friends we surround ourselves with greatly influence our choices, values, and sense of self. The friends I choose are not just companions; they are mirrors reflecting the person I aspire to be. I value qualities like honesty, empathy, and a shared sense of purpose in my friendships. These traits create a bond and inspire me to be a better person. My friends have challenged, supported, and sometimes held me accountable when I strayed from my path. They have played an important role in shaping who I am today. As I've grown, I've realized that not all friendships are meant to last. Distancing myself from friends who no longer align with my values has been one of the most difficult challenges I've faced. It's not just about letting go of the past, but also embracing the discomfort that comes with change. A deep sense of loyalty often makes it hard to walk away, even when I know it's the right thing to do. Yet, when I have successfully distanced myself from such friendships, I've done so with a heart full of gratitude for the memories and lessons learned. Moving forward, I've become more intentional in choosing the friends I surround myself with. I seek those who uplift me, challenge me to grow, and share a vision for the future. Making good friends is never easy, especially as we grow older. It requires vulnerability and the courage to put oneself out there. But I've learned that the effort is worth it. By being open and seeking out communities with shared interests, I've formed meaningful connections that enrich my life in ways I never imagined. In the end, the friends I choose make life's hard times more bearable and the good times even better. They are the people who walk with me through all seasons of life, and for that, I am deeply grateful.

DEAR BELOVED FRIEND,

Roses are red
Violets are blue
It's been some time my friend
How are you?

I know it's because of me
Your advices I didn't heed
To land myself in prison
For doing what I deemed fit.

The minutes turned to hours
The days start to sour
The months feel like forever
But I'm slowly getting closer.

I'll change the ways
Of my olden days
To stay out of trouble
And spend time with you, I'd rather.

An abundance of friends
Is a joy indeed
But just one good friend
Is all we need.

So everyone, please heed my call
We'll be out of here after all
Be a contributing part of society
Peace and happiness comes eventually.

REFLECTION CORNER:

- Are you choosing your friends with intention?
- In what ways are your friends inspiring or supporting you to be a better version of yourself?
- Are there any friendships that you have been thinking of walking away from? What is stopping you?

THANK YOU ALL FOR YOUR SUBMISSIONS AND FOR TAKING THE TIME TO READ THIS ISSUE!

THIS COLUMN WAS BROUGHT TO YOU BY S1 CRSES.