

Stories from the FBU - Brenda's Story

Singing tutor Brenda Shearer is delighted with the sense of community she experiences in the Faith Based Unit at Rimutaka Prison. "It's very special," she says.

She had taught music in prisons before and was used to an atmosphere of hostility, bitterness, anger and hopelessness which she does not experience in the FBU. "It's completely different," she says. "There is a strong sense of community, forgiveness and hope for the future."

While some prisoners in the Faith Based Unit still experience aspects of that "prison culture" which views singing as "soft", the atmosphere in the unit is generally "lighter" and more supportive and hence most potential musicians learn to overcome the negativity and enjoy the opportunity provided.

With sixteen years experience in the music industry, Brenda and her husband Marcus Wilson, who owns a recording studio and sound company in Wellington, offer a high standard of tuition. They come to the prison without financial reward once a week to pass on their skills and talent, as an expression of their own Christian faith.

"We're doing it because we really want to be there and share our experiences of God and music with theirs. We're helping and learning from each other; they bring a lot of blessing to our lives."

Brenda and Marcus are rewarded by the appreciation and commitment of the inmates they teach. "Their attitudes are so lovely - they work so hard, they want to do well and behave beautifully. It's the easiest group I've taught out of any institution including schools and Polytechs," says Brenda. "It's like hanging out with friends. There's no sense of us and them."

Next year Brenda hopes the choir will be able to take part in a national competition of prison choirs, which is being organised by Arts Access Aotearoa. "Music is very powerful in promoting spiritual growth and unity," she says.