

Big 'A' Prison Arts Leadership Award 2011

Winner: Sharon Hall, art tutor, The Learning Connexion, Hutt Valley

Judges' comment: "All the nominees in this award have made outstanding contributions in passing on their artistic knowledge and skills to prisoners. This nomination had the wow factor! It demonstrated an infectious passion, and articulated clearly Sharon's achievements and the impact of her work with prisoners undertaking study through The Learning Connexion. The opportunity to gain qualifications, participate in exhibitions and receive ongoing mentoring can make a real difference to the lives of these artist prisoners."

Some background: Sharon Hall has pioneered the development, growth and success of an art programme that now involves more than 80 students in prisons throughout New Zealand.

Her role includes co-ordinating a small but dedicated prison programme team, preparing lessons for tutors teaching in the prisons, and editing the programme to meet Corrections' guidelines. She makes regular visits to prisons to teach classes and mentor students, as well as organising graduation ceremonies, co-ordinating student exhibitions and an annual Corrections Christmas card project, and supporting released prisoners to complete their studies.

The nomination describes Sharon's passion for supporting prisoners to make art as "contagious".

"In line with The Learning Connexion's philosophy of drawing out and not stuffing in, Sharon is adamant the process of being creative is more than acquiring technical skills. The act of making art can facilitate a change in thinking."

The art courses are very popular with prisoners, says Velani Bernard, Manager, Contracts and Services, Manawatu Prison. "They gain so much from the programme. For some, it is the first time in their lives they have achieved academically, and this inspires and encourages them to move into other educational areas."

The tangible results of Sharon's efforts are the number of students graduating with the NZQA Certificate of Art and Creativity, says Alice Wilson Milne, Director of The Learning Connexion.

"The retention of students under this programme is very high, in part due to Sharon's dedication and focused, unstinting support. She is helping to build resilience in each student."

Finalist:

The other finalist was **Libby Patterson**, an art tutor at Mt Eden Prison. The judges were "impressed by her vast art knowledge, and her passion, positivity and commitment. Libby has built strong relationships with the community, enabling exhibitions of prisoner art in local galleries and spaces."

