



CELLBLOCK *massage*

For many massage is seen as a means to relaxation, but as **Vivienne Chen** discovers, for a group of Chiang Mai convicts, it can become a pathway to a new life.

Photo by **Nick McGarth**.

Dow was 19 when the police caught her selling drugs on the streets of Chiang Mai with her friends. Sentenced to the city's women's prison, what for many would have been a process of just doing the time, instead opened up a new career, through a chance encounter with the prison's director, Naowarat Thanasrisutharat.

"I was cleaning her front yard," says Dow. "I told her I only had one week left and had no idea what I was going to do after I got out."

As director of the prison, Naowarat put Dow on a 180-hour crash course in massage – the only reform programme of its kind in Thailand.

Now 26 and sporting a spunky, black-haired pixie cut, Dow still works at the Chiang Mai Women's massage programme just across the street from the prison proper.

The programme attracts travellers from around the world, who flock for the unique experience of getting a traditional Thai massage from these female inmates.

"We were surprised," says Qinqi from Nanjing, China, who had learned about the programme online and decided to visit while on holiday. "We weren't sure if they were real inmates or not. In China, prisoners must cut their hair short and cannot wear makeup. But this place was interesting because it was like all other massage places. The women are

not treated differently at all."

It is this imperceptible difference that makes the programme unique, and not just to Thailand. While many prison systems around the world grapple with recidivism and rehabilitation gone wrong, the Chiang Mai women's prison seems a striking example of a situation gone right. There are no locked doors between the massage parlour and the main road, and the women wear no shackles or restraints as they walk across the street from their cells to work in sea-green mas-

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seuse attire. The only noticeable difference is the tan uniforms of the prison officers who staff the desk where appointments are made.

Much of this success can be credited to Naowarat, who founded the programme in 2001. She believed her female inmates, many of whom were serving short-term sentences for low-level crimes such as selling drugs or shoplifting, would benefit from developing vocational skills that empowered them financially.

The massage programme is

just one of the many training options at the prison – inmates can also learn skills such as cooking, sewing, or hairdressing. They keep 40 percent of their earnings, set aside for them in a savings account until they complete their sentences.

Now a grandmother at the age of 65, Naowarat has retired from the prison, but she has not moved far. For despite the successes of the women's massage programme, Naowarat's former inmates returned to her saying that potential employers refused to hire them.

"Many massage parlours do not want one of their employees to be an ex-con," she says. "They still face discrimination from the public for their past."

Thus, in 2006, Naowarat founded a new chain of parlours called Lila Thai Massage. The work force comprises of 90 percent former inmates from the prison. There are now four branches in Chiang Mai – two new within the last year.

Known fondly as "Mama" by her former inmates, Naowarat treats the staff as family – in fact, some of them are. Her

son-in-law, Piyapong Chutivongvivate, works in the office, helping translate for Naowarat.

"There is a reason everyone calls her 'Mum,'" Piyapong says of his mother-in-law. "She is always there to talk to them when they have problems, like trouble with their family."

Naowarat's goal is to help break the cycle of crime and give these women greater opportunities in their new life.

For some of these women, such as Dow, Lila Massage was that opportunity. After her release, Dow began working for Naowarat's massage parlour. She eventually became tired of massage as a profession and asked to be moved to Lila's management, which she finds more interesting and gives her a steady career path. She now helps manage the shopfront of Lila's Ratchapakinai branch

The reason why Dow fell into crime in the first place sounds familiar. Spending too much time on her own due to her parents going off to work, she fell in with a group of girls that sold drugs (usually methamphetamine) for extra money. Now, thanks to the prison programme, she has a chance to rebuild her life.

"I am happier," Dow says comparing her life now with what it was before she her incarceration. She hopes one day to open and manage her own massage store – a long step from peddling drugs on street corners. **A**