

Facility: Junee Correctional Centre
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Polyfest empowers Junee inmates

EMPOWERING, humanising, humbling and inspiring are four words not commonly associated with a medium security prison.

That is until you witness the unique cultural event Polyfest, one the most important events on the Junee Correctional Centre's calendar.

Polyfest is an uplifting celebration which recognises the diversity of the islands in the South Pacific, and highlighting the languages, traditions and beliefs of the Polynesian people.

A large crowd packed the centre's beautiful Cultural Centre to watch Polynesian inmates and staff members perform a variety of songs in Maori, Samoan, Fijian and Tongan and demonstrate the ancestral war dances or haka of different South Pacific nations.

One of the memorable moments of the morning's celebration was the performance of New Zealand music sensation Stan Walker's stirring Maori ballad *Aotearoa*.

"Culture is bigger than me or anyone else in this room," a Tongan inmate said.

"It is a bond that can't be broken no matter what happens." The same inmate went on to reveal how the enduring event had provided a rare opportunity for him to better connect with the proud traditions of his Tongan heritage.

"Up until today my family had never seen me do a Tongan haka or even attempt to do one," he admitted. "I had never done one before.

"I realise now how important culture is, especially in a place like this where it is easy to forget who you are."

Popular Fijian-born inmate Jeremy not only spoke of the passion shared by inmates for the showcase event, but of the pride felt by the families of the men involved in Polyfest.

"My mum, who is here today with my aunty, they travelled down from Sydney to be here, once said to me on the phone that Polyfest is like Christmas and birthdays all rolled into one," he said. Junee Correctional Centre offender services manager Trevor Coles applauded inmates for the dedication, commitment and effort they have shown towards Polyfest.

He revealed inmates have been "rehearsing for months" in preparation for the event, which he believes is an invaluable and rewarding experience for all the men involved.

"These men are going home eventually... what this does show is they still have a connection to their culture and communities and a support network waiting for them," he said. "When they come in here they can come in and feel isolated and alone... but this gives them a sense of purpose, a feeling of inclusion and an opportunity to express themselves."

Visitors, inmates and staff also enjoyed a lunch of traditional Polynesian dishes following the performances.



MEMORABLE PERFORMANCE: Junee Correctional Centre staff members (left) Sione Fekeila, Georgina Nathan, Olio Hiliate, Jermaine Tuua, Harley Nathan, Tolu Tulaga, Patrick Tulaga, Raewyn Withers and Gerome Brodin perform during Polyfest. The staff participation in Polyfest in one of many aspects of the event that make it unique.



(Left) MUSIC MAN: Gerome Brodin adds to the atmosphere inside the Cultural Centre.