

Feelings behind bars become stories and paintings

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Prison and affection. Two worlds that are necessarily separated, or not? This is the theme that, for its 2nd edition, was tackled by detainees in Lombardy for the artistic-literary competition entitled “**Mi si è ristretto l’affetto storie di sentimenti tra le sbarre...**” (A competition about affection and stories about feelings in prison). Organised in May, the competition could be entered by all detainees in Lombardy and featured two sections, either a short story or a painting/drawing, both expressing the theme of affection behind bars. The prize-giving will take place **Thursday 1st December at 17.00 in the offices** of the Province of Varese (Villa Recalcati, Piazza Libertà 1). This initiative was created, promoted and organised by the administrative department of **Varese’s District Penitentiary, the Sol.Co. Consortium and AUSER** – the Association for the self-management of services and solidarity – of Varese.

Affections are a touchy argument, and they unite all detainees from their first day in prison; for example, they unite those – both Italian and foreigners – who are sentenced to long prison terms and who often have **loved ones who are faraway and can be reached only via letters, but without that human contact** that makes the sentence more bearable. Therefore, through the experience of writing and artistic expression, the competition wanted to give a voice and to try and find a place for the emptiness and the lack of these feelings. Affections are expressed through the drawing of a family, through the light filtering through the bars and the stories reconstructing the birth of a love that still endures. Names between lines can be sensed, habitual gestures and words linked to love, as well as new terms that can be reproduced in the richness of a piece of paper, can be found.

“Mi si è ristretto l’affetto” is the second time this artistic-literary competition for detainees has been organised; in 2010, the first theme had been “Towards Italy, Experiences... Emotions... Episodes...”, which focused on foreign detainees, and was about emigration and immigration. This year, the organisers decided to open the competition to all detainees, both Italians and

foreigners, and to “do it again”, in the wake of the interest for the previous initiative, stressing the importance of continuity and of the sedimentation of positive habits. **Similarly, the “network” organisation was important;** the historic group of the organisers became stronger, and the net of institutions, cooperatives and the third sector, who all gave their contribution and support to the initiative, was extended.

Like the organisers, the Province of Varese gave a strong incentive and a strong support, by sponsoring the event and allowing the utilisation of the prestigious offices in Piazza Libertà. Also the **Commune of Varese, Confcooperative Varese and Cesvov sponsored the event.** The competition was also promoted and supported by **Regione Lombardia Famiglia e Solidarietà Sociale** and by **Varese’s ASL (Local Health Agency)**, as funders of the “Fuori di Cella” project; the Sol.Co. Consortium is the head of the project.

Once again, several cooperatives and associations of the third sector participated by supplying economic resources for prizes: the YWCA – UCDG association, the “Valle Olona” and “Biumo Inferiore e Belforte” social cooperatives, and Coop Lombardia.

Thursday 1st December, the first three of each category will receive a cash prize; there will also be specific mentions for certain presented works. The Jury of the Competition is composed of President **Margherita GIROMINI**, member of AUSER, and by jurors **Maria MONGIELLO** (head of the Education Area of Varese’s District Penitentiary), **Gisella INCERTI**, **Elvira NIDOLI**, **Claudio BENZONI** (all three members of AUSER) and **Anna BONOMI**.

The event will also feature, in addition to the Province of Varese, the participation of the prison’s director Gianfranco Mongelli, of the Commune of Varese, of the ASL, of operators and also of detainees who, for the occasion, will benefit from special permits.

The prize-giving is open to the public, and aims to be a moment of reflection and a moment of gathering. The prison will also be able to “occupy” for some hours another place in the town, a very different environment from that of prison cells and narrow spaces, and will therefore be able to show itself to the people in a fresh way.

Redazione VareseNews
redazione@varesenews.it