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Caring author honored

Maria Garriga , Register Staff

NEW HAVEN — There was some measure of satisfaction in author Wally Lamb's voice as he told how the tough-on-crime Gov. John G. Rowland went to prison.

Lamb spoke as he accepted a Communitarian Award from Fellowship Place for reaching out to marginalized people behind bars. He started a creative writing program in a maximum-security prison for women and when prison officials tried to shut the program down, fought to keep the program going.

Fellowship Place is an association for people suffering mental illnesses. Every year at a colorful arts festival called "Street of Dreams" Fellowship Place presents Communitarian Awards to people who have built community and reached out to people on the margins of society.

The Jewish Community Center of Greater New Haven won an award for giving a free home and support to Fellowship Place 46 years ago when most people shunned the mentally ill and many agencies declined to give them a meeting space.

With a sharp, crisp tone, Lamb told the packed audience at Fellowship Place how Rowland's prison administrators had suspended a creative writing program at the York Correctional Institute in East Lyme after the inmates sold a book about their lives to Harper-Collins for \$75,000. Lamb took it hard. He had taught the writing class. He had nurtured these imprisoned writers daily. He had shown them how to open their memory banks and withdraw the sorrow, pain and raw deals life had given them.

They wrote about child abuse, rape, domestic violence, the victimization that comprised their lives. Once they put their stories on paper, their teacher made them revise, revise, revise. He strung the stories together in the anthology "Couldn't Keep It To Myself," and the inmates won renown as creative writers. State Attorney General Richard Blumenthal sued the women to force them to pay the state for their time in prison at the rate \$117 a day. One woman received a bill for more than \$900,000.

The accusations stung but the writers persevered. On April 19, 2004, Blumenthal announced a settlement in which the state would preserve the writing program and the women agreed to give \$500 each toward the operation of the writing program. The following April, three-term Republican governor Rowland started serving a 10-month prison sentence for corruption at the Loretto Federal Correctional Institution in western Pennsylvania.

Lamb relished the irony. One of the audience members, Mark Griffin of New Haven, said he found their words moving and Lamb's award meaningful. "It teaches the state of Connecticut that inmates are human beings, too. We can't forget about them," Griffin said. Maria Garriga can be reached at mgarriga@nhregister.com or 789-5726

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