FROM THE ALTERNATIVES LIBRARY

BOOKS IN PRISON

by Lynn Andersen

The United States has recently had the dubious honor of surpassing all industrialized countries in the number of people imprisoned. Sadly, a significant number of juveniles are caught up in the justice system. Data from the Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report show that nationally 363 juveniles were in custody for every 100,000 in the population as shown by the 1997 juvenile justice census. From the same data we learn that 106,000 juveniles were being held in residential facilities as of October 29, 1997. Facility administrators have indicated that the recidivism rate in New York State for youth offenders is nearing 85 percent. Many of these young people have dropped out of school before the age of 16 and are incarcerated at a younger and younger age, some as young as 13 are convicted and sent to maximum security residential facilities. Among the bleak statistics are the more positive results of studies indicating a direct correlation between education, enrichment, literacy and mentoring programs and the reduction in rates of repeat incarceration for youth who are offered such programs. Unfortunately, because of a lack of vision and commitment by government agencies to providing equal educational and enrichment opportunities to all youth, it is often necessary to address these issues by the back door after young people are incarcerated. Once a juvenile is locked up, government funds only provide for a basic education with the number and quality of enrichment programs being dependent on the work of volunteers.

Though operations at juvenile facilities include a teaching staff and in house mentoring, it is crucial to the well being of incarcerated youth that they have contact with members of the community outside the facility. As librarians, we have the resources and status to be leaders in working with community volunteers to fill the gaps in the educational needs of these young people. The Durland Alternatives Library (DAL) Advisory Board and Staff is involved in the ongoing development of the Books in Prison project designed to serve the particular needs of locked-up youth. The following is a description of what we have tried, what has been successful and what is still in the “let’s see if this will work” stage. It is our hope that we can develop some sort of model that other groups could adapt and use in communities where youth, as well as adults, are incarcerated. I would like to present this material as the beginning of a conversation that we librarians can continue through this publication and other means available to us. Let’s share our ideas and activities that address the issues of at-risk youth both in and out of detention and strengthen our presence in these areas.

In the summer, 2001 issue of Progressive Librarian, I gave a summary of some basic programs the DAL board and staff introduced to the residents of a maximum security youth facility in our area. A few of us began our work by becoming members of the Citizens Advisory Board of the facility. In that way, we were able to work from within to gain the trust and support of the administration. It also smoothed the way for the implementation of all the programs that followed and made it possible for us to spend time with the young men at the facility in order to find out what interested them and what particular needs they wanted addressed. From our initial contact, we slowly began to focus on the types of activities that would be of most interest.

There were requests for more books — music to a librarian’s ear. Our first move was to donate books from those we had collected for a library book sale and, as a supplement, to offer the facility librarian a rotating collection of books from our shelves. We then applied and received a grant from the Tompkins County Friends of the Library to purchase specific books requested by residents and the librarian at the facility. In addition, we provided four one-time programs — two on African cultures, Kenya in the east and Senegal in the west, and two on poetry writing. It was a start, but we felt a need for more in the way of ongoing programming in order to have a long-term and positive impact on the young men at the facility. Two programs developed out of our beginning work.

One member of the library advisory board took it upon herself to create an offshoot to Books in Prison. Marjorie Olds developed the Teach in Prison project that involved getting professors at Cornell University, Tompkins-Cortland Community College and Ithaca College to teach courses to residents who had passed their GED exams. It has taken some time and doing to organize an ongoing cycle of classes that could be taught at the facility, but in spring of 2002, a computer design class was offered as the first of the project’s college credit classes. Following that, a summer session course in
civil law was begun and is continuing as of this writing. Upcoming in the spring will be a second class in computer design using the students who completed the previous class as teacher’s assistants. There will also be a class offered in African Studies as well as a summer session class in Spanish. Non-credit classes and workshops will be given throughout the fall and winter on a wide range of topics — contemporary music history and language, anatomy, and debate are a few that are planned. If there is interest, full classes will be developed for the topics. Taking these classes offers residents an opportunity to begin work on college degrees while incarcerated and gives them confidence to continue their studies upon release. That in turn gives them a better chance at early release when appealing to the parole board.

Another initiative started by Marjorie Olds is the offering of parole board practice sessions for residents who will be called to appear before the board. It is hoped that we can work with them to help them make their best possible appeal for release. A series of questions has been provided by residents who have already experienced going up before the parole board. Our first sessions began in October of this year. The ad hoc group will be comprised of citizens’ advisory board members, Alternatives Library board members, local college students and facility residents. We have been helping residents informally over the past several months and have found that the coaching really does make a difference.

Another long-term project undertaken is a follow-on to the poetry workshops. So much interest was generated by the workshops we felt it imperative that we continue working with the poets of the group. The young men were asked if they would like to create an anthology of their poetry to be published by the Alternatives Library. The response was one of excitement and immediate offers of poetry. Since I am at the facility on a regular basis, I became the project poetry collector. The poetry collection and the computer text entry took about six months. Then a local computer designer volunteered to lay out the whole project and prepare it for a printer. In the meantime, one of the residents finished the cover art. Once we had copy that was satisfactory to the artist, writers and to us, we sent the disk and hard copy to our printer and had the proofs back in two weeks. It looked good, so we went to press. In another two weeks we had 500 copies of our book, Inside Coming Out: Incarcerated Youth Express Their Feelings. But we weren’t finished yet. In spite of having gone over every page of the manuscript, we missed some last names that had not been changed to initials only, and that’s a no-no. Because the records of juvenile offenders are not available to the public, and the names are protected, before distributing the books to the contributors and letting them out to the public, the administrative staff had to go through every book and black out any reference to last names. By early summer, all participants in the project had been given five books and the rest are being offered as thanks to anyone donating to the project. The money is put in a special account and is used to continue the writing program. We started the second book on 9/11.

Through all the time that volunteers and residents have spent together, it is clear to everyone that the individual projects are not the most important part of our work. They are the vehicle we use to be with each other, to build trust, to offer and receive advice, to gain understanding of each other and our oh so different worlds, and to find common ground where we can share knowledge, experience and ways of helping each other. It is the work of mentoring and commitment, teaching and listening, and fighting for the rights of young people to get the support they need to break out of the cycle of incarceration.

Footnotes

2 Poetry workshops presented by Ken McClane, a writer and resident of Ithaca, and funded by a grant from Poets & Writers, Inc. of New York City, NY.
3 Marcel LaPow Toor, Graphic Designer, Ithaca, NY.

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