

FROM THE ALTERNATIVES LIBRARY

EXPANDING OUR WORK WITH PRISONERS

by Lynn Andersen

Over the last three years, the Alternatives Library Books in Prison project has focused on residents at one of the juvenile correction facilities in the Ithaca area. In fact, the cover of the last issue of the *Progressive Librarian* was done by Marc Anthony S., one of the young men who contributed to our first poetry book, *Inside Coming Out*.

As I write this article, we are finishing a second book of poetry written during weekly sessions with the residents of MacCormick Secure Center. This latest edition has created a great deal of excitement and enthusiasm because of our inclusion of a CD of original music, written and performed by some of the residents. The music was recorded on computer by Shaun Fyffe, one of our student staff. Being a rapper himself, Shaun was able to connect via the internet with his musician friends who kindly donated samples—the music background for rap—to our project. Once we do the final layout for the book and design the packaging, we'll be ready for the press. The working title of the new book is *Another Sad Inning: Incarcerated Youth Reveal their Trials, Tribulations and Loves*. I have been working with many of the same young men for the last two years and am happy to say that, as of this week, all but two have been released and are either home or in school.

A little over a year ago, we began working with the local Books Thru Bars group, volunteers who send books to prisoners in New York State. The group facilitator, Jurden Alexander, mentioned that he continually receives a number of letters from prisoners out-of-state and wondered if we would be interested in receiving and responding to them. Of course, we said yes.

The letters started coming in. At first we received just a few each week. Gary Fine, Assistant Director of the Alternatives Library, began answering the letters and sending out boxes of books. By the end of 6 months, we were getting a dozen letters a week, and now the number has almost doubled. Many of the prisoners write to the library on a regular basis and share their stories and thoughts regarding their lives and many other issues. The letters

are very moving and have inspired us to do something that would enable these prisoners to be heard. We decided to send a form to all the regular writers seeking permission for the library to publish their letters, and we have gotten the go-ahead from most of the prisoners who write to us. Over the next few months we will be organizing the letters and starting the preparation for our first prison letters publication. The following two pieces are excerpted from two letters:

You asked me what my plans were if I get out . . . I'm never getting out. I'm on death row. I will most likely be executed next year. . .

I'm on death row for killing a kid because he stole some drugs that didn't belong to me but that I was responsible for. That's why I am not putting up a defense. What for? What possible excuse could there be that would condone what I did? That I was high on drugs? That I was scared? Nobody forced me to get high or do drugs. Nobody forced me to be a drug courier. I made the choice, even knowing how violent I become on drugs. Anyway, I don't mean to sound angry or come on too strong. Everyone here keeps telling me I should fight it.

What is my life like in here? Very, very, boring and monotonous. My cell is big by normal prison standards I guess. Just picture a bathroom with a bathtub, toilet, sink. I'm not a good drawer but I think you can see what I mean. It's all metal and concrete. The door is solid still [steel] with two small slots for windows with reinforced steel mesh. I'm allowed out of my cell for one hour of recreation per day but I don't usually go. There's nothing to do in the day room except walk around in circles. There's no television. They let us buy radios. Small AM/FM clock radios. There is a unit library here but it stays closed most of the time (for us anyway), and now they're only letting us check out one book per week. Unless a person has a lot of money or people out in the world to help out, a lot of guys rely on organizations like yours for their reading materials.

from P. A. Austin, Polunsky Prison, Livingston, TX

You would think, it being the 21st century, we would be beyond race. Since we are all part of the same human race, this should be where we find our pride. Admittedly there is often little to be proud of in our common race. We must all admit to some small part in the failure to produce a generation capable of transcending skin color.

from an article by D. H. Harris, Huntsville, TX

The letters have inspired Gary and me to expand the library's Books in Prison program to include inmates like the two above who are doing life sentences or are on death row. We are also trying to identify groups who want to correspond with prisoners. At the beginning of the new project, Gary was writing personal letters to the prisoners, but we are now overwhelmed and can barely keep up with reading all the correspondence.

We are excited about the new book possibility. Every day is a delicate balance between keeping the library vital and active in providing an alternative to corporate news and keeping the prison projects going. But every jam-packed minute is more than worth the effort when we read and hear from patrons and prisoners who appreciate what we are trying to do.

DOCUMENTS

HISTORICAL ACCURACY AND THE WEB: A PLG-NET EXCHANGE

The following documents are the primary texts of an exchange on the PLG-net list concerning a perhaps-too-timely quote from Herman Goering on the nature of public/political persuasion and war – a topic with which many of us are engaged at present. It took place primarily between April 7th and April 9th, 2003. In all, there are nine parts to this “conversation” – which has been only lightly edited for flow, misspelling, taking out the notations peculiar to e-mails (like the address string, an occasional representation of a frowning face, etc.), and the lengthy repeating of attached messages when an item is being replied to. Thanks must go to Kathleen de la Peña McCook who wrote urging us to publish the exchange on the quote and Snopes, etc. in *Progressive Librarian* because she thought “it captures with clarity a critical point” for her M.L.S. students.

introduction and editing by John Buschman

I. From: Bill Shakalis
Subject: Quote sent around the High School List

Here's a great quote sent to a Boston area h.s. peace list. Anyone got a Ready Reference file on Herman Goering? Really: it would be best to have this quote authenticated.

Attached message:

I found a great quote and I made it into a flyer and am putting it in my school. I thought others might want to do the same:

“Of course the people don't want war. But after all, it's the leaders of the country who determine the policy, and it's always a simple matter to drag the people along whether it's a democracy, a fascist dictatorship, a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack