In the Field

Beyond the Sentence: A Books-to-Prisons Initiative

As I progressed through my MLIS degree at the University of Western Ontario, I grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of social justice courses offered in the program, particularly regarding corrections librarianship. As such, advocating for literacy support for incarcerated people has become a passion of mine. As a former teacher and child youth worker, my previous work with homeless and at-risk youth opened my eyes to the lack of support around delivering literacy-based programs to underserved populations. Utilizing my teaching background, my training in mental health, and my soon-to-be-completed MLIS degree, during the summer of 2020 I created *Beyond the Sentence* - a non-profit books-to-prisons project.

Since I am still developing this initiative, coupled with the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has made it difficult to connect with various correctional institutions due to lockdowns and temporary job reassignments, I chose to focus my “outside the classroom” education on the rudiments of corrections librarianship as well as exploring the types of literacy-based programs available to the incarcerated. To date, my information seeking pursuits have involved participation in the American Library Association’s webinar, “The Prison Library as an Agent of Rehabilitative Change”, literature reviews on literary services for the incarcerated¹, and, where possible, informal conversations with librarians currently working in correctional facilities throughout Ontario.

¹ See Appendix A for reading list.

During my first semester of library school I read *Solitary* by Albert Woodfox (2019); his story positively shifted my perspective on how valuable reading material is to the incarcerated. Albert served 40 years in solitary confinement for a crime he did not commit. While many of his experiences behind bars were harrowing, it was the story he tells regarding the power of books and turning his cell into a university that proved most inspirational. One chapter in *Solitary* is entirely devoted to the escape Albert found within the pages of books. He explains, “I...became something they didn’t want or expect—self-educated. I could lose myself in a book. Reading was a bright spot for me. Reading was my salvation” (p. 161). Albert’s appreciation for books resonated with me and I soon found his words surfacing in my mind during my classes. In response, I unintentionally turned myself into “that person” during my library courses by questioning my professors as to why there was a noticeable absence of discussion around correctional facility libraries when they seemed to have such a great impact on those who use them. In short, the answer I routinely received was that there was only so much the curriculum could cover.

In order to gain experience in supporting literacy programs within correctional facilities, I became a volunteer reader for *Book Clubs for Inmates*, a charity that organizes book clubs in federal correctional facilities across Canada. The mission of the program is to facilitate literacy for those who are incarcerated, so that “inmates develop empathy, listening skills, and self-awareness” (Book Clubs for Inmates, 2021). As a volunteer, my role is to select high-interest books for the program and to screen them for potential triggers and/or concerning content (e.g., references to self-harm/suicide, abuse, drug use, violence, etc.). The challenge of selecting material that will generate

reading interest and offer meaningful points of discussion for the book clubs without directly interacting with the intended reader(s) has taught me a lot about readers' advisory. In this situation, feedback from book club leaders is key, as they are the ones communicating directly with book club participants. Currently, the books most frequently requested for the program relate to sports, politics, and self-help, so I try to review recently published material that fits within these categories. My experience with *Book Clubs for Inmates* served as the springboard for my creation of *Beyond the Sentence*, which I officially launched in July of 2020. In choosing this name for the initiative, I hoped to convey the fact that literacy support is lifelong and goes beyond the timed correctional sentence of a person behind bars, and that its impact extends far beyond the words or sentences written on the physical page.

For the purpose of determining the best way for *Beyond the Sentence* to be of support to corrections libraries, I reached out to several librarians currently working in the field. During my informal discussions with them, I learned that resources and funding for library materials were very limited or non-existent. Almost all with whom I spoke relied upon private donations or partnerships with public libraries to provide materials for their library collections. A frustration that I heard repeatedly was that many of the donated books were out-of-dated and featured white, heterosexual characters and Christian-based narratives that were of little interest to the majority of the corrections population. In these conversations I also discovered that the most requested materials included works pertaining to Indigenous spirituality, LGBTQ2S+ stories, works by authors of colour, graphic novels, and dictionaries—which were by far the most sought out material. This is where I hope *Beyond the Sentence* can be of help; as a

filtering system for donations, the project will only send relevant, undamaged, and high-interest books to libraries within correctional facilities. Such support should significantly reduce the time corrections librarians spend sorting through donations and enhance these libraries' collections by providing reading materials free of charge.

Shortly after launching *Beyond the Sentence*, I hosted the project's first book drive campaign. I put a call out for book donations, highlighting specific requests and a guideline for donations.² The response was overwhelming; I collected approximately 400 books over the course of a month. To streamline the donation-to-prison library process, I am currently working on building a detailed inventory of what was collected and flagging any books that could fill common collection gaps. To achieve this goal, I am experimenting with the Libib app with the hope of creating an exportable spreadsheet that can be sent directly to corrections librarians. This will give each institution the opportunity to select books that will best enhance their in-house collections, replace lost items, and/or address specific reader requests. Moving forward, I plan to explore opportunities to generate funds for mailing books directly to the institutions. Currently, these expenses either come out of my own pocket or I arrange a drop-off with the librarian.

Through ongoing collaboration with correction librarians and community donors, I hope to provide the reading materials most in demand by those in correctional facilities throughout Ontario. As both educators and librarians well know, the literary experience goes well beyond recreational pleasure or a way to "pass the time." As a former teacher, I have seen firsthand how reading promotes self-identification, empathy

² See Appendix B for donation guidelines.

building, and personal reflection, not to mention the development and enhancement of individual literacy skills. Ultimately, my aim is for *Beyond the Sentence* to play a role in both advocating for literacy support to the incarcerated, and in supporting corrections librarians who have very few resources or organizational funding available to them.

Erica McKenzie

McKenzie, E. (2021). Beyond the sentence: A books-to-prisons initiative. *Emerging Library & Information Perspectives*, 4, 186-192.
<https://doi.org/10.5206/elip.v4i1.13478>

References

Book Clubs for Inmates. (2021). *What we do*.

<http://www.bookclubsforinmates.com/what-we-do>

Woodfox, A. (2019). *Solitary: Unbroken by four decades in solitary confinement. My story of transformation and hope*. HarperCollins Publishers.

Appendix A: Reading List

Appleman, D. (2019). *Words no bars can hold: Literacy learning in prison*. W.W Norton & Company.

Brottman, M. (2016). *The maximum security book club: Reading literature in a men's prison*. HarperCollins Publishing.

Clark, S., & MacCreaigh, E. (2006). *Library services to the incarcerated: Applying the public library model in correctional facility libraries*. Libraries Unlimited.

Freire, P. (2011). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Grunenwald, J. (2019). *Reading behind bars: A true story of literature, law, and life as a prison librarian*. Skyhorse Publishing.

Heathcote, I.W. (2018). *Book clubs at the big house: The story of book clubs for inmates*. Wyndham Research Press.

Walmsley, A. (2015). *The prison book club*. Penguin Random House Canada.

Appendix B: Donation Guidelines

Books most needed / requested:

- Fiction books at various reading levels
- Large-print fiction and non-fiction books
- Graphic novels
- Grammar books
- Dictionaries (including multi-lingual and picture dictionaries) and thesauruses
- Recent legal reference material
- Formal skill mastery and learning materials
- Popular learning materials such as “For Dummies” series
- Magazines no more than two years old

Book donation guidelines (This list is based on Book Clubs for Inmates’ guidelines for book donations):

- Not be markedly old (with the exception of classic literature)
- Be in good condition (e.g., no missing pages or covers, no mould, not falling apart, and not excessively covered in writing or highlights)
- Have no attached CD-ROMs
- Not be textbooks

Policy prohibits access to certain materials, such as books that involve the construction of weapons or sexually-explicit materials involving violence or children (collected in an email from the Book Donation Coordinator at Correctional Services Canada).